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The Battle for Kirkuk: How to Prevent a New Front in Iraq

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On January 14, in a rare show of unity, Sunni and Shiite Arab, Turkmen, and Christian Iraqis gathered at a conference in Ankara to denounce Kurdish plans to incorporate Kirkuk, the capital of Iraq's at-Tamim province, into the Kurdish region. This comes after recent violence in Kirkuk, including a December 26 roadside bomb that killed three and wounded six. Between December 2005 and July 2006, the number of reported violent incidents in Kirkuk increased by 76 percent, ending the city's previous status as a relatively safe area. With tensions in Kirkuk rising, how can violence be countered?

Background

In 1957, the last official census not distorted by the Baath party, Kirkuk's population was 113,989. Turkmens predominated, making up 40 percent of the population, while Kurds made up 35 percent, Arabs 24 percent, and Christians 1 percent. That census revealed a population in the surrounding at-Tamim province in which Kurds made up 55 percent of the population, while Turkmens made up 14 percent, Arabs 29 percent, and Christians less than 1 percent.

Because Kirkuk was such an overwhelmingly non-Arab city, Saddam Hussein used demographic engineering to "Arabize" the city. He forcibly expelled Turkmens, Kurds, and Christians from their homes, and replaced them with (mostly Shiite) Arabs from central and southern Iraq to wrest control of the oil-rich city and its environs from its non-Arab inhabitants. Human Rights Watch reports that, after the 1991 Gulf War alone, the Iraqi government expelled 120,000 Turkmens, Kurds, and Christians from government-controlled areas of northern Iraq, mostly from Kirkuk and surrounding villages, replacing them mainly with poor Shiites from the south. Francis M. Deng, from 1994 to 2004 the UN secretary general's special representative on internally displaced persons, maintained that around 200,000 Arabs were resettled in Kirkuk during the Arabization campaign. In addition to a process known as "national correction," in which Kurds and Turkmens were forced to register as Arabs, this process dramatically altered Kirkuk's demographics.

After the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority envisioned a legal process to repatriate all of Kirkuk's previous inhabitants, creating the Iraqi Property Claims Commission (IPCC) to correct Saddam-era injustices. However, due to insufficient political will, coupled with actual Kurdish control of Kirkuk since 2003, so far the IPCC has settled only 16 percent of the claims it has received.

Article 140 of Iraq's 2006 constitution dictates a three-stage process to address this issue and determine the political future of the city. The first stage is "normalization," with an anticipated return of Christians, Turkmens, and Kurds to the city before March 2007. The ensuing stage is a census in July 2007 to determine the city's legal residents, who can vote in a referendum (the third stage) on Kirkuk's future, to be carried out before November 15, 2007.

Kurdish Control in Kirkuk

Since the war, Kirkuk's population appears to have increased; by some accounts, it has risen from 700,000 before the war to 800,000 today. This is despite an exodus of Arabs and Turkmens. According to Judith Yaphe, a senior fellow at the National Defense University, as many as 150,000 Arabs have left the city since the war as a result of violence and intimidation. *USA Today* and the *Washington Post* have reported cases of intimidation and violence to force out Arabs involving arson, the killing of livestock, and gunfights—some of which were reportedly facilitated by Kurdish *peshmerga* forces belonging to the PUK and the KDP. The Sunni Turkmen population, hitherto the city's largest ethnic group and the foundation of its urban elite, has all but disappeared. Despite these incidents, Kirkuk's population has, nevertheless, increased due to what appears to be a massive influx of Kurds. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that more than 350,000 Kurds—at least 100,000 of whom never lived in Kirkuk—have entered the city since April 2003. Financial support from the two parties that control the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)—the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—has enabled Kurds to build homes and purchase Arab lands. In short, the first stage of implementing Article 140, normalization, has been anything but normal.

Prior to the January 2005 Iraqi elections, the Kurds threatened a nationwide boycott lest the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) accede to a demand that “displaced Kurds in Erbil and Suleymaniye” not residing in Kirkuk be able to vote in Kirkuk's provincial elections, thereby increasing their representation in the city. Thanks to this procedure and to population engineering, the joint KDP/PUK list collected 59 percent of the vote and an absolute majority in the at-Tamim provincial council.

This success enabled the Kurds to make gains in Kirkuk through their control of the provincial government. Kurdish loyalists in key civil service positions in Kirkuk are paid with funds from the budgets of the KRG. Kurds control Kirkuk's intelligence services and security police. In 2005, the chief of Kirkuk's police, an ethnic Kurd, said that 40 percent of Kirkuk's 6,120-member police force was loyal to the two Kurdish political parties. Kurdish *peshmerga* patrol the streets, and street signs have been changed from Arabic to Kurdish.

Oil

Kirkuk's oilfields are a defining factor driving the contest for the city. The U.S. Geological Survey estimates that at-Tamim province contains around 8 percent of Iraq's 78 billion barrels of recoverable oil reserves. The British firm RSK estimates that with further exploration, at-Tamim could increase its potential reserves to 10–20 billion barrels.

Article 112 of Iraq's 2006 constitution specifies that present fields “will be administered by the federal government in cooperation with the governorates of the producing regions and provinces.” The article does not specify what constitutes a “present field,” creating ambiguity about the ownership of currently undeveloped fields that may be developed in the future. Article 115 states, “All that is not written in the exclusive powers of the federal authorities is in the authority of the regions.”

The KRG has signed production-sharing agreements with foreign oil companies and drafted its own petroleum act. Exploratory tests have already been conducted on the Taq Taq oil field located thirty-seven miles northeast of Kirkuk, with more plans to drill in the future. Following the introduction of a petroleum bill, Ashti Hawrami, the KRG's mineral resource minister, said, “As a region, we will control 100 percent of what exploration and production is all about.”

There are some signs that an Iraq-wide hydrocarbon law could emerge, in part from a desire among Kurds to have companies operate in their territory with the confidence that a national law would impart. Even if a national hydrocarbon law were to be issued, an acrimonious debate would ensue over whether it would cover contracts already signed. Nechirvan Barzani, the head of the KRG, threatened to break away from Iraq should the central government refuse to recognize oil contracts that the KRG has signed.

A Rainbow Anti-Kurdish Coalition?

A November 2006 Department of Defense report states that in Kirkuk, “extremists on all sides have sought to undermine the religious and ethnic tolerance of the Iraqi people in order to gain control of territory and resources.” The *Washington Post* reports that Kurdish *peshmerga* routinely abduct and imprison Arabs and Turkmens in KRG prisons. Non-Kurds have responded with attacks in Kirkuk against Kurds and officials of the PUK and the KDP.

Muqtada al-Sadr has not wasted any time in organizing Shiite Arabs expelled by the Kurds. The Iraqi constitution fails to address what is to happen to Shiite families settled by Saddam in Kirkuk—most of whom have now lived in Kirkuk for more than a generation, and have no homes to return to—as well as those families who came to Kirkuk as labor migrants. These Shiite Arabs expelled by the Kurds have accepted a helping hand from Sadr and now support him. Meanwhile, Shiite Turkmens alienated by the main Turkmen party, the Iraqi Turkmen Front, whose leadership has been traditionally comprised of Sunni Turkmens (around half of Iraqi Turkmens are Shiites) have also been recruited by Sadr. The Shiite militias first appeared to confront growing Kurdish control over Kirkuk with the arrival of Sadr’s Mahdi Army in 2004. Their activity began with intimidating Shiite residents into remaining in Kirkuk. This has since escalated into attacks against Kurds. Neighborhood Shiite groups are also responsible for perpetrating acts of violence against Kurds.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda affiliates such as Ansar al-Sunna are known to be helping and recruiting Sunni Arabs and even traditionally secular Sunni Turkmens—most of whom have been expelled from Kirkuk by the Kurds. Kirkuk has witnessed increased al-Qaeda presence. The majority of the twenty suicide bombings perpetrated in Kirkuk from July to October 2006 are presumably the work of al-Qaeda affiliates.

While Iraq has experienced increased sectarian tension between Shiite and Sunni groups since the February 22, 2006, bombing of the Askariya shrine, ironically, in Kirkuk, these groups have been united in their opposition to Kurdish political designs for the city. As a result, complex Mahdi Army and al-Qaeda attacks on KDP and PUK headquarters, along with sniping, rogue assassination attacks, and improvised explosive devices, are now all part of Kirkuk’s violent landscape.

U.S. Policy

Much attention has focused lately on the growing prospects of civil war among Iraq’s various ethnic and religious groups in Baghdad. Similar attention ought to be devoted to Kirkuk and its environs, the other area of Iraq that is home to all of the nation’s ethnic groups. Kirkuk is as likely as Baghdad to produce a calamity that can fracture Iraq. Despite its diversity, Kirkuk is exclusively controlled by Kurds with a maximalist agenda, alienating the city’s non-Kurdish inhabitants. If not addressed before the impending referendum, the Kirkuk issue will turn at-Tamim province into a tinderbox. What is more, the Kirkuk conflict appears to be pulling in Iraq’s neighbors. Turkey, interested in the welfare of the Turkmens, watches the developments in Kirkuk with growing unease, and U.S. officers fear an Iranian hand is supporting the Mahdi Army and other militias in the region—as indicated by the type of military technology being used. Only by facilitating the return of expellee Turkmens and Arabs to Kirkuk and encouraging a power-sharing arrangement among Christians, Turkmens, Kurds, and Arabs to control the town and its oil wealth as indicated by President Bush in his January 10 address can the United States avoid a showdown in Kirkuk, the consolidation of a rainbow anti-Kurdish coalition, and—last but not least—a new front in northern Iraq.

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