Irbil suicide bombings aggravate tensions in northern Iraq

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Two coordinated suicide bombings in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil last Sunday against gatherings of both main Kurdish parties supporting the US occupation of the country have inflicted a severe toll. It is now confirmed that at least 101 people are dead and hundreds more wounded, including a number of regional leaders and officials of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The death toll may reach as high as 140 as more bodies are recovered and people succumb to their wounds.

The attacks indicate careful planning. Both the KDP and PUK had opened up their Irbil offices for a celebration to mark the beginning of the Islamic Edi al-Adha festival. With hundreds of people crowding into the buildings, the bombers, reportedly dressed as clerics and with large quantities of explosives strapped to their bodies, were able to get within metres of the Kurdish political dignitaries. At around 10.45 a.m., they detonated the bombs, virtually simultaneously. Apparently, security had been geared toward preventing car bombers.

A PUK militiaman told Britain's *Guardian* newspaper: "I have fought in many battles but I never saw anything like that. Everything was ruined. There were fingers, legs, bits of face, everywhere." Peter Galbraith, a former US diplomat currently in Irbil, told Reuters: "The bodies are in pieces, they are trying to collect them. The significance of this is devastating to the leadership of the Kurdish Democratic Party, one of the US's biggest allies in the war."

Among those killed were Sami Abdul Rahman, the deputy prime minister of the KDP-run Kurdish government in Irbil province, at least two other ministers of the regional government, and the KDP's governor, deputy governor and police chief in Irbil. The commander of the PUK's *peshmerga* militia died in the other blast, as did at least five other prominent PUK leaders.

The Kurdish organisations and the US have blamed Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda and the Kurdish Islamic fundamentalist group Ansar al-Islam for the bombings. Members of Ansar al-Islam certainly have a motive to carry out the attack. During the invasion last March, the US conducted cruise missile and aircraft strikes against Ansar al-Islam bases on the Iraq-Iran border, while the PUK *peshmerga* carried out a bloody offensive to drive the organisation out of 15 villages.

Whoever carried out the bombings, it is a reflection of the deep opposition in Iraq to the US invasion, including in the areas controlled by the KDP and PUK. There are escalating attacks across the country on the political parties and individuals participating in the American-installed Iraqi Governing Council or supporting the occupation. Only last month, a meeting of the Iraqi Communist Party—which is part of the puppet regime—was bombed in Baghdad.

The KDP and PUK have a long history of close collaboration with the US. Throughout the 1990s, they exploited the US-imposed "no-fly zone" over northern Iraq to establish control of the country's three predominantly Kurdish-populated provinces. The area became a hotbed of intrigue as the two parties fought each other to establish overall domination and to control the lucrative trade in oil and goods that flourished as a result of the UN economic sanctions on Iraq.

The KDP and PUK were both nominated to receive US funding and training following the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act in the US Congress in 1998. Sensing new opportunities, the two parties put aside their differences in the lead up to the US attack on Iraq. During the invasion last March and April, the KDP and PUK militias fought alongside US special forces and paratroopers in the north and accompanied American troops into Baghdad. Both parties were immediately included in the handpicked US provisional government and there has been no attempt by the US military to disarm their *peshmerga* militiamen.

With the fall of Hussein's Baathist regime, the Kurdish parties are pushing for control in the north as their reward. The Kurdish parties are demanding that the new Iraqi constitution designate the country as a federation, with the provinces they hold defined as an autonomous Kurdish region. They want control over taxation, the right to control entry in the Kurdish areas and the right to exclude the future Iraqi armed forces from the region. Most controversially, they are demanding that the ethnically-mixed city of Kirkuk, along with Iraq's main northern oil fields, be included in the Kurdish zone.

In the aftermath of the Irbil bombings, the leaders of the KDP and PUK have declared that the attack makes its necessary for them to work more closely together in the demand for Kurdish autonomy. The Kurdish parties intend to push ahead with plans

to create a single regional government in the north and hold elections next year—regardless of what happens in the southern provinces.

Rallies, prayers and funerals for those killed in Irbil have witnessed passionate calls for not only Kurdish autonomy, but full independence from Iraq and even a "Greater Kurdistan" taking in the Kurdish populations of neighbouring states. One Kurd told the *Guardian*: "Now we must be insistent for our rights. We want federalism but of course our aim is more than that. We should be united with Kurds from other countries, just as Arabs talk of their Arab homeland."

The demands of the Kurds confront the Bush administration with a dilemma. If it does not meet them, it risks opening up an entirely new front in the resistance to the US presence in Iraq. If it attempts to meet them, it will intensify the opposition to the US occupation in the rest of the country and antagonise other governments in the region.

The Arab and Turkomen communities in Kirkuk fear that Kurdish control of the city will be followed by ethnic cleansing to drive them out. On January 27, Arabic tribal leaders marched through Kirkuk against the Kurdish demands for the city. A sheikh of one tribe told the press: "You cannot chase Arabs out of Kirkuk because it is a town for everyone and we denounce statements made by Kurdish parties who want to split Iraq." Another declared: "We believe that federalism will spark civil war in Kirkuk."

Significant elements of the Sunni and Shiite elite in the Arab provinces of Iraq view the Kurdish demands as the first step toward a Yugoslavia-style break-up of Iraq along ethnic lines. They do not want to see the revenues from the northern oilfields—40 percent of Iraq's total oil—flowing into the coffers of an autonomous Kurdish government, at the expense of a central government in Baghdad, which they expect to dominate. The main Shiite cleric, Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, included opposition to federalism in his denunciation of the proposed interim Iraqi government being planned by the US and may call on Shiites to reject any constitution that includes it. No major non-Kurdish organisation supports Kurdish control of Kirkuk.

The government's of Iraq's neighbours, Turkey, Syria and Iran, see the granting of autonomy to Iraq's Kurds as likely to fuel sentiment for a "Greater Kurdistan" among their own substantial Kurdish minorities, and view it as a long-term threat to their territorial integrity. The Turkish regime is particularly alarmed. It has conducted a brutal decades-long campaign to crush the armed struggle led by the Workers Party of Kurdistan (PKK) for a separate Kurdish state.

Up to 5,000 PKK fighters are believed to be hiding out along the Turkish-Iraqi border. Until now, the US has lent upon Turkey not to send forces into Iraq to attack the PKK, out of fears the Iraqi Kurdish militias would be drawn into clashes with the Turkish military. At the same time, however, the US military, preoccupied with the resistance to the occupation further south, has not undertaken its own operations against the PKK.

Every indication so far is that the US is seeking to impose various compromise solutions that will only disappoint the various factions and interests, aggravate the underlying tensions and focus discontent on the American occupation force.

On January 28, the day before the bomb blast, Paul Bremer, head of the Iraq occupation authority, announced that the US would begin stopping the PKK using Iraq as a "terrorist haven". An American official did not rule out US troops being used to hunt down the PKK. The Turkish government has welcomed the declaration.

The move against the PKK appears to be aimed at mollifying Turkish opposition to the granting of limited autonomy in northern Iraq. There were immediate signs though that it had created animosity among sections of the Iraqi Kurdish population, who view it as a betrayal of Kurdish interests. A Kurdish politician, Mahmoud Othman, told the *Financial Times*: "The US took this step only to satisfy Turkey."

A far greater sense of betrayal is being triggered among militant Kurdish nationalists by the early signs that the KDP and PUK are being bullied by the US to agree to a new constitution that gives limited autonomy but does not include Kurdish control of Kirkuk. The issue of Kirkuk's future was left out of the opening constitutional discussions in Baghdad last Saturday. The *Washington Post* reported February 1 that the "Kurdish authorities, while reportedly agreeing to the compromise on territory, are still debating the division of Iraq's oil revenue".

In the aftermath of the Irbil bombings, the KDP and PUK will be under immense pressure to make no compromises. After witnessing the carnage, Peter Galbraith, who is a former US ambassador to Croatia, warned in a *New York Times* op-ed piece: "It [the bombing] will probably harden their diplomatic positions as the Kurdish public comes increasingly to feel it must rely on its own institutions—the *peshmerga*, the local police and security services—to protect it against a danger that most see as coming from the south."

In its reckless attempt to reorganise the Middle East in its own interests, US imperialism has opened up a Pandora's box of conflicting forces.