

Report warns of civil war spreading to Kurdish north of Iraq

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A detailed report published last month by the Brussels-based think tank, the International Crisis Group (ICG), pointed out that ethnic tensions brewing in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk could rapidly become politically explosive. If Kurdish leaders overrode the objections of other communities and pressed ahead with a referendum this year on the town's status, the ICG warned, "the civil war [in Iraq] is very likely to spread to Kirkuk and the Kurdish region, until now Iraq's only area of quiet and progress".

The two major Kurdish nationalist parties—the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—fully backed the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 as the means of guaranteeing their control over the Kurdish north of the country. The PUK and KDP dominate the current Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which rules over a quasi-independent state with its own flag, constitution, militia and economic ties to international investors.

The Kurdish parties insisted on a virtual veto over the constitution drawn up under American supervision so as to maintain and extend the KRG's powers. In particular, the PUK and KDP claimed ethnically mixed Kirkuk as the capital of the Kurdish region and demanded its inclusion along with its substantial oil reserves. In the face of concerted opposition by Arab and Turkoman parties, a compromise clause was inserted providing for a referendum on the status of the city by the end of 2007. Prior to any vote, Kurdish leaders insisted on a process of "normalisation"—to reverse the attempts under Saddam Hussein to alter the city's ethnic mix by driving out Kurds and encouraging the settlement of Arabs known locally as *Wafidin* or "newcomers".

The push to include Kirkuk in the Kurdish region has not only inflamed ethnic tensions in the city and surrounding districts, but threatens to draw in Iraq's neighbours. Turkey in particular fears that a Kurdish takeover of Kirkuk and its oil reserves would lay the basis for an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, which would fuel separatist sentiment among Turkey's substantial Kurdish minority. The Turkish military has recently threatened to intervene unilaterally against the bases of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) inside Iraq. While the US has warned against military action, the army's strident nationalist stance is being fuelled by the current political crisis

in Ankara surrounding the presidential elections.

Inside Kirkuk, ethnic rivalry has spilled over into clashes between Kurdish army and police units responsible for security, and various Shiite and Sunni militia, included Islamic extremists. As the ICG reports explains, Kirkuk is increasingly resembling Baghdad, with segregated communities of Arabs, Kurds, Turkomans and Chaldo-Assyrians and escalating violence, including indiscriminate car bombings that have claimed scores of victims.

"Violence at first predominated downtown, where communities commingled, as well as areas inhabited by *Wafidin*. But in February 2007 it moved to the heart of Kurdish neighbourhoods as if to show that the Kurdish parties' control over Kirkuk's security apparatus did not guarantee safety for the Kurdish civilian population," the report stated. As the deadline for the referendum draws nearer, the crisis is certain to intensify.

Every step in the referendum process is bitterly disputed. Arab and Turkoman leaders accuse Kurdish parties of settling non-Iraqi Kurds in Kirkuk and driving out Arabs to stack the vote in their favour. Kurdish officials brand opponents of the referendum as unreconstructed supporters of the Hussein regime who, in league with Syrian and Turkish intelligence, are responsible for violent attacks in Kirkuk.

Some of the *Wafidin* have accepted offers of land and compensation to leave Kirkuk, but others insist on remaining, saying that as Iraqi citizens they should have the right to live anywhere. The rules governing the "normalisation" process also provide land and compensation for returning Kurds and annul land grants made under Hussein to Arab settlers. These guidelines, which were ratified in March, not only heightened ethnic resentments in Kirkuk, but provoked divisions in the federal government in Baghdad, where the ruling Shiite parties identify with the *Wafidin*, many of whom were Shiites uprooted from southern Iraq.

No agreement has been reached on any aspect of the census or referendum, including such vital issues as who will be permitted to vote, who will oversee the poll and which areas will be covered by the outcome. If the referendum goes ahead, Arab and Turkoman leaders have threatened to organise a boycott and to resist with force if need be. If the poll does not

proceed, some Kurdish leaders have threatened to precipitate a major political crisis in Baghdad by pulling out of the Iraqi government. Others have hinted at a unilateral takeover of Kirkuk and the expulsion of their Arab and Turkoman opponents.

The ICG report warns of the dangers of civil war, calls on Kurdish leaders to cancel or at least postpone any referendum on Kirkuk and appeals to the US to end its “studied bystander mode” and develop a “proactive strategy” to defuse the conflict. However, like the current sectarian violence perpetrated by Shiite and Sunni militias, the ethnic tension erupting over Kirkuk is a crisis of Washington’s making.

In the wake of the 1990-91 Gulf War, the US unilaterally imposed a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, effectively barring the Hussein regime from reasserting its control over the Kurdish regions. In the name of “defending the Kurds,” Washington transformed the zone into an autonomous Kurdish state presided over by KDP and PUK, which were bitter rivals throughout the 1990s. The region became a base of operations for the CIA and other intelligence agencies and a hotbed of intrigue as each of the Kurdish parties sought the support of the major and regional powers.

Following the 2003 military invasion, the Bush administration relied heavily on the Kurdish parties to form a reliable puppet government in Baghdad and in return gave full backing for an autonomous Kurdish region in the north. With the prospect of greater power and privilege, the KDP and PUK buried their differences and exploited the opportunity to the hilt.

Offering a peaceful and stable north policed by their *peshmerga* militia, the Kurdish leaders set out to attract foreign investment to their region. At the same time, the KDP and PUK reaped the benefits of an expedient alliance with Shiite fundamentalist parties to secure a number of key posts in the federal government in Baghdad—including foreign minister and president.

A lengthy *Washington Post* article last month provided details of Kurdish lobbying in the US to advertise “Kurdistan” as a stable business gateway to Iraq and to ensure continued American backing for Kurdish autonomy. The KPG maintains its own diplomatic office in Washington headed by Qubad Talibani, son of the Iraqi president, and spends millions on television advertisements and political lobbyists and consultants. In February, US undersecretary of commerce for international trade, Franklin Lavin, travelled to the Kurdish city of Irbil to encourage American companies “to think about particular locales that might be fruitful environments for starting a business”.

Superficially, Kurdistan is a booming success. As described in an article in *Time* last month: “The plains around Irbil—once a glaring semi-desert wasteland—are exploding with luxury housing developments. They have names like British village, which resembles a gated California suburb, and Dream City,

which supposedly will have its own conference centre, supermarket and American style school.... An American company wants to build Iraq’s first ski resort in the mountains near the Turkish and Iranian borders. While citizens in Baghdad struggle to survive, a sign in Irbil declares that the city is ‘striving for perfection.’”

The emergence of a small wealthy Kurdish elite has only emphasised the social divide between rich and poor. The bulk of Irbil’s residents are struggling to cope with rising inflation and the lack of basic services. Rural towns and villages are still mired in backwardness and poverty. Ethnic divisions are compounding social tensions as 150,000 Iraqi Arabs have come to the Kurdish north looking for jobs and relative security. Iraqi Arabs seeking to enter the Kurdish region are compelled to have a Kurdish resident vouch for their character.

All of this has only engendered hostility among broad layers of Iraqis who regard the Kurdish leaders as flunkies of the US occupation. According to US journalist Seymour Hersh among others, the US military, the CIA and Israel’s spy agency Mossad, have continued to use the Kurdish north as base of operations—in particular for infiltrating spies and provocateurs into neighbouring Iran. The recent deployment of Kurdish army units to assist the US “surge” in Baghdad has only exacerbated the enmity.

Kurdish leaders are well aware that they require US backing to maintain their privileged position and to extend their writ to Kirkuk and other disputed districts in northern Iraq. Their opposition to any delay in the Kirkuk referendum is conditioned by concerns that a new US administration may not be as sympathetic. “I trust Bush,” the president of the Kurdistan National Assembly told the ICG. “But who is going to be there in two years? US policy is going to change, and then the best friend we will have is ourselves.” The Kurdish parties bitterly opposed the US Iraq Study Group report, issued in December, which urged the referendum be delayed.

Having backed the Kurdish nationalists and supported the establishment of the Kurdish region, the Bush administration is clearly reluctant to alienate its closest political allies in Iraq. The inevitable result—more likely sooner rather than later—will be a rapid escalation of ethnic conflict in Kirkuk and across the Kurdish north.



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