Iraq: Carnage in Kirkuk amid conflicts over city's future

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A suicide bomber detonated an explosives-filled truck on Monday in the busy political and commercial district of the oil-rich Iraqi city of Kirkuk, just as hundreds of people were going for their lunch-break. The carnage was horrendous. At least 85 people were killed and more than 180 wounded. The victims were predominantly ethnic Kurds. Given the crisis-stricken state of the country's health system, many of the injured are unlikely to survive.

The bomber targeted the headquarters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the two Kurdish nationalist parties that control the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which rules the three predominantly Kurdish provinces in Iraq's north. The KRG claims Kirkuk as its historic capital and is seeking to incorporate the city and its lucrative oil fields by the end of the year.

According to witnesses, a man drove a dump truck into the blast walls surrounding the PUK complex. Local police estimated that the vehicle was packed with up to four tonnes of explosive material. While the bomber failed to break through the building's protective barriers, the impact of the explosion brought down office walls and part of the roof and generated a fireball that engulfed nearby shops, buses and cars. Days later, the rubble of collapsed buildings was still being searched for bodies.

Some 20 minutes after the blast, a second bomb hidden in a truck was detonated in the busy Haseer market approximately one-and-a-half kilometres away. Nearby shops, houses and vehicles were damaged and one passer-by was injured. A third bomb was discovered in a taxi and neutralised. A fourth car bomb was exploded near a police patrol, killing one policeman and wounding three others.

The city's medical facilities could not cope with the casualties and their horrific injuries. Health workers were forced to turn away wounded and arrange for their evacuation to the northern cities of Irbil and Sulaymaniyah. Hundreds of hospital beds in Kirkuk are still filled with the victims of the massive July 7 bombing in the town of Amerli, some 80 kilometres to the south, which killed 155 and wounded well over 260 people. The Amerli atrocity, inflicted on an impoverished, ethnic Turkomen, Shiite community, is believed to be the worst terrorist attack of the Iraq conflict.

The Iraqi government immediately blamed the bombings in Kirkuk and Amerli on Al Qaeda-aligned Sunni Muslim extremists, who have carried out numerous indiscriminate massacres on civilians in retaliation for the support given by the Shiite and Kurdish political elite to the US occupation. Suicide attacks are their hallmark.

Over the past five months, the US military and the Iraqi army have been conducting major operations in the western province of Anbar, in Baghdad, and in areas to east of the capital to root out Sunni insurgents, including the group calling itself "Al Qaeda in Iraq". Heavy fighting has taken place in Baqubah, the capital of Diyala province to the south of Kirkuk. Following an assault on Baqubah in June, a number of extremist fighters are believed to have fled north into the areas of neighbouring Salah ad Din province where Amerli is located. Others may have re-established themselves in Kirkuk.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government declared on Monday: "The enemy with his outrageous attacks against civilians is trying to break the blockade imposed upon him in Baghdad, Diyala and Anbar."

Other possibilities cannot be excluded, however. An intense domestic and international political struggle is taking place over Kirkuk's future. A number of Iraqi organisations and foreign intelligence agencies have a motive for wanting to plunge the city into as much chaos and instability as possible.

The context of the Kirkuk bombing is the countdown to a November 15 referendum to determine whether or not the city will be merged into the KRG. Kirkuk is the prize that has underpinned the collaboration of the Kurdish nationalists with the US invasion and occupation. The oil reserves surrounding the city would provide the autonomous Kurdish region with substantial resources. The Kurdish elites openly express their ambition to become an economic hub of the Middle East, sustained by oil revenues. Factions within the Kurdish ruling parties make no secret that their long-term agenda is to split from Iraq and establish an independent nation—Kurdistan.

The Bush administration has supported Kurdish ambitions in order to secure a reliable local ally in Iraq. The US-established Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) legitimised the establishment of the KRG as a de-facto separate state from the rest of Iraq. Article 58 of the CPA's "Transitional Administrative Law" (TAL) or constitution obliged the Iraqi government to restore the homes and property of thousands of Kurds who were forced out of Kirkuk by the former Baathist regime during pogroms in the 1970s and 1980s. Baghdad was required to move out tens of thousands of ethnic Arabs who were resettled in the city as part of an attempt by Saddam Hussein to transform the

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predominantly Turkomen and Kurdish area into an Arab stronghold. The aim of the current resettlement program is to ensure that Kurds are a clear majority of Kirkuk's population before any referendum is held.

Article 58 was incorporated unaltered as Article 140 in the US-vetted 2005 constitution that replaced the TAL. The most important constitutional pay-off to the Kurdish establishment was the power over oil resources granted to regions such as the KRG. While the Baghdad government exercises authority over current fields, regional governments were given exclusive rights over all untapped oil fields lying within their jurisdiction. The KRG has already entered into contracts with foreign energy companies, allowing them to develop small fields in northern Iraq. The incorporation of Kirkuk would enable the KRG to claim rights over potentially large fields in the vicinity of the city. Including the remaining reserves in the Kirkuk fields, the KRG claims that the Kurdish region has reserves of more than 45 billion barrels, worth over $3 trillion at current oil prices. If that figure proves true, Kurdistan would be the largest potential source of oil outside Saudi Arabia, Canada, Iran, Venezuela, Russia and Iraq itself.

The Kurdish perspective is being resisted on a number of fronts. Both Sunni and Shiite factions of the Arab elite in Iraq oppose the prospect of northern oil revenues going to the KRG. Central Iraq has limited oil reserves, but the Baghdad-based ruling class has historically been able to extract the main benefits from the country's energy wealth in both the north and south by concentrating revenues in the coffers of a strong central government. The loss of the Kirkuk and northern oilfields would strip the country of as much as 40 percent of its potential resources.

In the Iraqi parliament, Sunni parties and the powerful Baghdad-centred Shiite movement of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr have insisted that the constitution be revised to uphold central authority over oil. They have also demanded that the planned referendum in Kirkuk be postponed indefinitely, or, alternatively, that the entire country be allowed to vote, not just residents of the city.

Within Kirkuk, the political conflicts have fueled divisions. Sunni and Shiite Arabs, ethnic Turkomen and Christian Assyrians accuse the Kurdish-dominated city government and security forces of "reverse ethnic cleansing," intimidating non-Kurdish families to leave their homes to make way for returning Kurdish refugees. Over the past months, a census has been taken in the city to determine who can vote in the November referendum. Remaining Arab settlers will be ineligible, even if they have lived in the city for decades. The voting list is due to be released at the end of this month. As tensions mount, the city is polarising into cantons, and non-Kurdish minorities are believed to have formed militias to defy the Kurdish armed forces.

The latest bombings will be seized on by all sides to strengthen their positions. Opponents of the referendum argue that it needs to be delayed and may call for the dispatch of non-Kurdish units of the Iraqi army to provide security. The KRG has already deployed more Kurdish *pershmerga* militiamen into the city.

The response of the Turkish government is being closely monitored internationally. Ankara has previously threatened to take military action to prevent Kirkuk becoming the capital of an autonomous Kurdish region. There are over 15 million Kurds in Turkey—compared to less than 5 million in Iraq—and separatists have waged a guerilla war since 1983. Turkey fears that the consolidation of the KRG with a viable oil-based economy will fuel separatist sentiment among eastern Turkey's Kurdish minority.

The Turkish military has an estimated 160,000 to 200,000 heavily armed troops along the border, ostensibly to prevent Kurdish rebels sheltering in northern Iraq from crossing over and carrying out attacks during the summer months. The Turkish military commander has called for an invasion of northern Iraq to wipe out guerilla bases, and threatened the KRG and its president, Massoud Barzani, whom the military has accused of supporting the Kurdish struggle in Turkey.

An additional *casus belli* for a Turkish intervention into northern Iraq, and Kirkuk in particular, would be emotive claims that it was necessary to protect the persecuted Iraqi Turkomen population from ethnic cleansing. Significantly, Ankara contacted US occupation forces soon after the Amerli bombing to volunteer Turkish military aircraft to airlift the Turkomen casualties back to Turkey for treatment.

Turkomen are the descendents of Turks who moved into what is now Iraq, which for centuries was part of the Ottoman Empire. While making up only 2 percent of the country's population, they were previously the majority in Kirkuk. The Turkish government funds the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF), a Kirkuk-based organisation that holds seats in the Iraqi parliament and is virulently opposed to the city's annexation by the KRG.

In April, the ITF organised a demonstration in Ankara to appeal for support to prevent the impending referendum. A range of Turkish politicians and nationalist groups attended. An ITF speaker warned: "I am calling out to Baghdad from here. This is the sound of the footsteps of the Turkish people. We will protect our traditions and customs in Iraq."

In the tense and volatile situation created by the US-led invasion of Iraq, the only thing that is certain is that the death and suffering that took place on Monday will not be the last.

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