

Iraq: Kurdish leader threatens civil war over Kirkuk

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The president of the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), Massoud Barzani, last Tuesday threatened “a real civil war” in Iraq if a referendum to incorporate the oil-rich city of Kirkuk into Kurdish territory continues to be delayed by the other Iraqi political factions.

Clause 140 of the 2005 US-vetted Iraqi constitution states that a referendum in Kirkuk and other Kurdish “disputed territories” must take place by December 31, 2007 to determine whether the populace wants to join the KRG. The inclusion of the clause was one of the main pay-offs by the Bush administration for the assistance of the Kurdish parties. Since the 2003 invasion, they have been the most loyal allies of the US occupation. Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani have been crucial participants in all the puppet governments in Baghdad, generally endorsing every action by the White House and the US military.

Kurdish authorities and security forces in Kirkuk province have been working to ensure that the disputed territories have a clear majority of Kurdish voters before the referendum. Tens of thousands of Kurds who were driven out of Kirkuk in the 1980s by Saddam Hussein’s regime have been re-settled in the city. Thousands of Arabs have been evicted over the past four years. This reverse ethnic cleansing is called “normalisation” in the constitution. While some Arabs have taken financial assistance and left voluntarily, others allege that Kurdish militias have used actual or threatened violence. Turkish-speaking Turkomans, who have been a major presence in Kirkuk for centuries, also claim they are being terrorised into leaving.

Gaining control of Kirkuk would provide the economic foundations for the long-term perspective of Kurdish nationalists—a separate Kurdish state. The KRG currently consists of Iraq’s three northern majority Kurdish

provinces of Sulaymaniyah, Irbil and Dahuk. The adjoining areas that would be added under Clause 140 include the Kurdish populated districts of Ninewa and Diyala provinces and much of Kirkuk province, which contain Iraq’s oldest oil fields and as much as 40 percent of the country’s total untapped oil reserves. The Kurdish region would be transformed into one of the world’s top 10 oil producers overnight.

Just four months before the referendum deadline, however, the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has done next to nothing to prepare for a vote. In particular, it failed to complete a census in the disputed territories by July 31, as had been previously agreed with the KRG.

The stalling reflects the extent of opposition. Arab and Turkoman leaders in Kirkuk have warned they will take up arms to stop a Kurdish-controlled referendum, the outcome of which is predetermined and would overnight convert members of their communities into second class citizens in a de-facto separate state. Sunni and Shiite Arab parties in Baghdad oppose losing lucrative oil revenues and have demanded that Clause 140 be repudiated. In Ankara, some Turkish politicians, who fear an energy-rich KRG would intensify separatist calls among Turkey’s 15 million-strong Kurdish minority, have called for an invasion of northern Iraq to stop a KRG annexation of Kirkuk.

The Bush administration publicly stands by the Iraqi constitution. Leading figures within the US political establishment, however, have expressed concerns over the Kurdish claims on Kirkuk. There are fears of sharp tensions with Turkey—a key NATO ally—as well as deepening instability in Iraq. The Iraq Study Group report prepared last year by Republican James Baker and Democrat Lee Hamilton described Kirkuk as a “powder keg” and called for the referendum to be delayed indefinitely.

Barzani's threat of civil war testifies to the frustration among the Kurdish elite over the possibility that their ambitions might be thwarted. He told the US-based Arabic television station Al-Hurra:

"There is procrastination and if this issue is not resolved, as I said before, all options are open. Frankly I am not comfortable with the behaviour and the policy of the federal [Iraqi] government on Kirkuk and Clause 140 ... The Kurds will never relinquish or bargain over Kirkuk, but we have accepted to regain Kirkuk through constitutional and legal methods. But if we despair of those constitutional and legal methods, then we will have the right to resort to other means. If Clause 140 is not implemented, then there will be a real civil war."

Barzani's rhetoric contains a significant degree of brinkmanship, aimed at pressuring the Iraqi government and the US into facilitating the referendum as soon as possible. Maliki is flying to Turkey today for talks with re-elected Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan over the KRG's ambitions in Kirkuk as well as the presence in Iraq's north of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) rebels who have fought a 23-year civil war with the Turkish state.

As many as 200,000 Turkish troops are massed on the Iraqi border and the Turkish military is demanding parliamentary approval to cross over and destroy PKK hideouts. The top Turkish commander, General Yasar Buyukanit, stated on May 31 that the only question he needed to be answered was whether "something will happen with Barzani as well" if his forces invaded Iraq.

According to an article in yesterday's *Washington Post*, Kurdish politicians have "urged Maliki to tell the Turkish leader to stay out of Iraq's affairs". If Maliki does not, it could end his government. The main Sunni faction and the large Shiite faction loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr have walked out of the cabinet. Baghdad is swirling with rumours of new coalitions being formed and an imminent vote to elect a new prime minister. If the Kurdish legislators in the Iraqi parliament switched to supporting another candidate, their votes could bring Maliki down.

Omer Taspinar, from the Brookings Institute, told the *Post* he believed the Kurds wanted to trade their agreement to crack down on the PKK "as a quid pro quo for Kirkuk". In other words, if Turkey agrees to the city and its oil coming under Kurdish jurisdiction, the KRG would allow a Turkish military intervention or deploy its own forces to dislodge the PKK from the border region. Such a deal would also serve to mollify US fears of regional chaos.

If Kurdish political maneuvering fails, however, the KRG has a considerable military force to turn Barzani's talk of civil war into reality. Kurds who were recruited out of the *peshmerga* militias of the KDP and PUK make up a large percentage of the new Iraqi army units operating in northern Iraq. One estimate is that the KRG could mobilise 175,000 fighters, equipped with tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery.

Arab and Turkoman organisations fear that deployments are already underway for the armed seizure of the city. Following suicide bombings in Kirkuk on July 16 that killed 85 people, there are unconfirmed reports that as many as 12,000 additional Kurdish troops have begun moving into areas surrounding the city, ostensibly to provide security. According to the Voices of Iraq news agency, some 6,000 *peshmerga* have been dispatched to "protect oil pipelines", while another 6,000 are being sent to "protect power lines".

Given the carnage in Iraq over the past four-and-a-half years, Barzani's choice of the word "real" to describe the character of a civil war over Kirkuk cannot be passed over lightly.

The Kurdish leader's remark suggests that he believes ethnic conflict in northern Iraq would result in even greater death, destruction and displacement than the sectarian violence raging in Iraq's central provinces. Fighting between Shiite militias linked to Maliki's pro-US government and Sunni Muslim extremists opposed to its existence has killed tens of thousands of people from both sects and forced well over one million to flee their homes. An exodus of Arabs, Turkoman and other minorities from Kurdish-populated areas—including Iraq's third-largest city of Mosul which the KRG has only reluctantly not laid claim to yet—could produce well over two million refugees.

The Bush administration has sought to avoid a conflict in northern Iraq that would inevitably provoke a political crisis in Baghdad, destabilise the only relatively stable areas of the country and potentially draw in Iraq's neighbours—Syria and Iran, as well as Turkey. Yet, just as the US invasion is responsible for fuelling sectarian Sunni-Shiite tensions, so it has unleashed communal forces in Iraq's north over which Washington has no control.



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