

# Iraq: Kirkuk on edge following suicide bombing

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A female suicide bomber detonated an explosion on Tuesday in the midst of a demonstration by over 5,000 Kurdish residents of the northern oil-rich city of Kirkuk. The carnage was horrific. Seventeen people were killed immediately and more than 47 others were wounded.

The atrocity occurred within the context of an escalating communalist conflict over the fate of Kirkuk. The demonstration was being held against the inclusion in provincial election legislation, put to the Iraqi parliament on July 22, of the stipulation that no elections be held in Tamim province—of which Kirkuk is the capital—when the other provinces elect new governments later in the year.

Ahead of the vote, Kurdish legislators and members belonging to the Shiite Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) had walked out in protest. Despite only 127 out of the parliament's 275 legislators endorsing the bill, the speaker, Sunni Arab nationalist Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, ruled it had passed as a quorum of 140 members were present.

The next day, Iraq's president, Kurdish nationalist leader Jalal Talabani, and one of the country's two vice presidents, ISCI leader Adel Abdul Mahdi, vetoed the legislation. In the increasingly bitter dispute, the parliament has not re-considered the legislation, leaving not only the issue of Tamim province unresolved, but also whether elections will take place in the other provinces.

The Kurdish nationalist parties aspire to incorporate the Tamim province into the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) that rules over the predominantly Kurdish provinces of Irbil, Dahuk and Sulaymaniyah. These Kurdish ambitions are opposed by Iraqi nationalist factions in Baghdad that do not want the Kirkuk oilfields stripped from central

government control. They are also opposed by the Turkish government, which fears the strengthening of the KRG by the inclusion of the oil-rich territory would encourage Kurdish separatism in eastern Turkey.

The US-vetted Iraqi constitution stipulated that the issue would be resolved by a referendum held no later than December 2007. The failure to conduct a census in the province was used to put off any vote for six months. This year, a further delay was agreed to by the rival factions and a United Nations mission asked to recommend a solution.

The Kurdish nationalists currently hold the Tamim provincial government and are determined to retain control ahead of a referendum. It enables them to deploy Kurdish *peshmerga* militiamen in and around Kirkuk, ostensibly to provide security. It also allows them to facilitate the return of tens of thousands of Kurds, who were ethnically cleansed from Kirkuk under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, in order to ensure that the province has a majority Kurdish population who will vote to add Tamim to the KRG.

As many as 30,000 Kurds are believed to have returned. Many are still living in sports stadiums or squalid tent cities on the outskirts of the city, as only some 2,000 Arabs who were settled in Kirkuk under Hussein have agreed to leave. Anger and frustration is growing.

The trump card being used against the Kurds is the presence in Kirkuk of a large ethnic Turkomen community, as well as many Arabs. Both the Iraqi nationalists and Turkey portray their opposition to Tamim joining the KRG as motivated by concerns that the Turkomen and Arab minorities could suffer persecution and discrimination in a Kurdish-dominated region. At times, Turkey has threatened to deploy military forces into northern Iraq to protect the

Turkomen population.

The legislation presented to the Iraqi parliament last week not only cancelled elections in Tamim but decreed that the Kurdish-dominated provincial government must dissolve and be replaced with a council comprising 10 Kurds, 10 Arabs, 10 Turkomen and two Christians. Even more controversially, it stipulated that Kurdish-dominated military and militia units must withdraw from the city and be replaced with “security forces from the centre and the south”—in other words, ethnic Arabs.

While the legislation has been vetoed, it has nevertheless inflamed the passions of the Kurdish nationalists. Before Talabani and Mahdi could act, the Kurdish Regional Government threatened to defy the Iraqi parliament. It bluntly stated: “We declare that the Kurdish region is not bound by the results of this unconstitutional process.”

Fouad Massoun, the leader of the Kurdish faction in the Iraqi parliament, declared: “We have been fighting for Kirkuk for 50 years and they think they can take what we’ve got with this law?”

The potential for a descent into civil war in northern Iraq was demonstrated by the events that followed Monday’s bombing. The Kurdish crowd blamed ethnic Turkomen and converged on the political offices of the Turkomen Front. The building was riddled with small arms fire, wounding as many as 25 guards inside. The Turkomen security detail returned fire, killing up to 12 attackers and wounding dozens. With city hospitals overwhelmed, some of the injured had to be rushed to the major Kurdish cities of Irbil and Sulaymaniyah for treatment.

The exchange of gunfire lasted for over an hour. In the course of the communal violence, other Turkomen offices were burnt to the ground and 15 vehicles belonging to the Turkomen Front set ablaze. A police commander told the *New York Times* that armed members of the Kurdish secret police, the Asaish, took part in the attacks.

A curfew was declared from 5.00 p.m. until 7.00 a.m. the following day, with hundreds of police and *peshmerga* militia deploying into the streets in an attempt to prevent further violence.

The incident resulted in another implicit warning from Turkey that it would send troops to occupy the city if there were further violence against ethnic

Turkomen. A Turkish foreign ministry statement declared: “Some circles, who aim at disturbing the relatively peaceful environment that has recently been established in Iraq and the multi-ethnic structure of Kirkuk, which is a small model of Iraq, undertook provocative actions soon after the suicide attack in Kirkuk. It is important for the Iraqi security authorities to take the necessary security precautions against these activities....”

Turkomen members of the Tamim provincial government have reportedly requested that UN peacekeepers be deployed into the city.

The volatile situation in Kirkuk is only a particularly sharp indication of the fragility of the Bush administration’s much-touted stability in Iraq. A spasm of communal violence ripped through Baghdad on Monday as well, with suspected Sunni fundamentalist suicide bombers detonating explosions amid crowds of Shiite pilgrims taking part in a religious festival. Three separate bombs killed a total of 32 people, including four children, and wounded as many as 117.

A curfew was immediately imposed in the capital, banning all vehicles from the streets for 48 hours.



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