

Provincial election delay in Iraq heightens ethnic tensions in Kirkuk

James Cogan
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On August 6, the Iraqi parliament adjourned for a five-week summer break without passing the legislation needed to hold provincial elections by the scheduled date of October 1. At the heart of the impasse were differences over the future of the northern oil-rich province of Tamim and its capital Kirkuk. In the two weeks since, the divisions have only widened.

The Kurdish nationalist parties aspire to incorporate Tamim into the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) formed out of the three northern, majority Kurdish provinces of Irbil, Dahuk and Sulaymaniyah. Their plans are opposed by a range of other Iraqi factions that do not want to see the KRG assert any rights over the country's northern oilfields, which produce 40 percent of Iraq's oil exports.

Both sides employ communal agitation to conceal the fact that the essential conflict is over the control of territory and resources. The Kurdish nationalists insist that Kirkuk is the "Jerusalem" or historic capital of the Kurdish people. They claim that it has a majority Kurdish population who, if given the right to vote on the matter, would elect to join with the KRG.

Their opponents insist that the large Turkomen, Arab, Assyrian and Chaldean Christian minorities in the city would face discrimination and even persecution within a Kurdish-defined state. Turkomen nationalists, descendents of Turkic people who moved into what is now northern Iraq centuries ago, go further and claim that the city is as much Turkomen as Kurdish.

The underlying tensions are made more complicated by the recent history of Kirkuk. In response to a series of Kurdish separatist rebellions against the Iraqi state, the former Baathist regime began a program of ethnic cleansing in Tamim province in 1975. Several hundred thousand Kurds, Turkomen and Christians were forced to leave and tens of thousands of Arabs were settled in Kirkuk in an attempt to alter the city's demographics.

The policies implemented after May 2003 under the US occupation guaranteed that ethnic conflicts would erupt. The Bush administration consciously favoured the Kurdish nationalist leadership, in reward for its support for the US invasion. The Kurdish claim over Kirkuk was recognised in Article 58 of the so-called Transitional Administrative Law (TAL)—an interim constitution largely written by US State Department officials. The TAL stipulated a policy of reverse ethnic cleansing—evicting Arab settlers and returning Kurds—that was bound to inflame tensions.

The TAL edicts were incorporated into Article 140 of the new Iraqi constitution, which was put to a referendum in October 2005. Article 140 stated that the population movements and a new census had to be completed by December 2007 and a referendum held in Tamim province on joining the KRG. It also included a clause that gave regions, not the federal government in Baghdad, full authority over all new oil and gas fields within their borders. This positioned the Kurdish nationalists to lay claim to the revenues of untapped fields in Tamim and the other KRG provinces.

An election law that was tabled in the Iraqi parliament on July 22 attempted to curb Kurdish ambitions by giving Turkomen and Arabs a permanent majority in the Tamim provincial government. It stipulated ethnic quotas, with 32 percent of members Kurdish, 32 percent Turkomen, 32 percent Arab and 4 percent Christian. It also decreed that the large Kurdish *peshmerga* militia in Kirkuk had to be withdrawn and replaced with troops from the "south and centre", i.e., Arab troops.

The 58-strong Kurdish bloc in the 225-seat parliament stormed out in protest, as did members of their main Shiite fundamentalist ally, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). ISCI has ambitions to form its own regional bloc in the country's oil-rich southern provinces, where Shiites form the majority of the population. Any

undermining of the KRG's position under the constitution could potentially threaten ISCI's plans.

The remaining 140 legislators voted regardless, passing the measure by 127 votes to 13. Within 24 hours, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, and one of the two vice-presidents, Adel Abdul Mahdi, from ISCI, used their powers to veto the legislation.

On July 29, bloody clashes broke out in Kirkuk between Kurds and Turkomen after a suicide bombing targeted a Kurdish demonstration against the parliament's actions. The violence left dozens dead and wounded.

UN mediators proposed a compromise to defuse the rising tensions. They recommended postponing elections in Tamim but made reference to the need to prepare to hold a referendum on the province's status vis-à-vis the KRG. Turkomen and Arab politicians rejected the proposal during a special legislative session convened from August 4 to 6 to set the date for the provincial elections. Parliament thus adjourned without any settlement.

Over the past fortnight, the rhetoric has increased in heat. On August 6, KRG President Massoud Barzani declared: "We will not allow the Kurdish people's achievements to be wrecked by the Iraqi parliament. Iraq will fall apart if the constitution is violated."

A Sunni Arab leader in Kirkuk, Mohammad Hussein al-Jabouri, warned that the Arab population would take up arms to defend the city from Kurdish forces. Kurdish leader Najat H. K. Manmi responded by declaring: "We will cut off Jabouri's head". On August 16, Barzani visited Kirkuk to make clear that the Kurdish nationalists would accept nothing less than the "full implementation" of Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution.

The Shiite fundamentalist parties that were elevated to power after the US invasion in 2003 initially accepted Article 140. An agreement to hold a referendum in 2007 was considered a small price to pay for a Shiite-Kurdish coalition that would guarantee office after the elections in December 2005.

However, little effort was made by the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to finance the relocation of Arabs out of Kirkuk, let alone to conduct a census and prepare a referendum. A vicious Shiite-Sunni civil war developed in 2006 and continued throughout 2007, alongside a full-scale insurgency against the US occupation forces by both Sunni and Shiite guerilla groups. Under such conditions, the Baghdad government could argue that Kirkuk was not a priority.

In late 2007, the Bush administration pressured the

Kurdish leadership to agree to a six-month delay in the holding of a referendum, partly in response to threats by the Turkish government that it would militarily intervene to prevent the KRG gaining control of Kirkuk.

While the Turkish government postures as being concerned for the city's ethnic Turkomen, its primary concern is to prevent an autonomous Kurdish region on its border gaining access to the significant resources of the northern oil fields. For the past four decades, the Turkish regime has been seeking to suppress a separatist movement among its own large Kurdish minority. It fears that a strengthened KRG, with a capital at Kirkuk, would rejuvenate Kurdish nationalist agitation in eastern Turkey.

In the wake of open Turkish military incursions into northern Iraq this year, the Kurdish parties agreed in June to allow a UN mission to investigate the best means of resolving Kurdish claims on Tamim and other so-called "disputed territories".

Time and patience on the part of the most virulent Kurdish nationalists is now running out. The delays have been exploited to create such a volatile situation in Kirkuk that a referendum would almost certainly lead to violence—which could be used to justify deploying either Iraqi government forces or even Turkish troops into the city.

The US military has attempted to blame sensational journalism for the tensions. Major General Mark Hertling, the commander of American forces in northern Iraq, told a Pentagon press conference on August 11: "It is tense [in Kirkuk]. Quite frankly, it is tense because of the debate over the elections. And that's just something that the Iraqi people will have to work out among themselves, but I have confidence that they will in a peaceful means as long as some of the people don't flare it up with false reporting."

The Iraqi parliament, however, is scheduled to sit again on September 9 under conditions in which there is little room for the rival factions to compromise. ISCI leader Redha Taki noted last week in remarks to *USA Today*: "Kirkuk is a minefield. If we touch it and try to solve the problem, it will blow up. If we continue ignoring and delaying it, it will also eventually blow up."



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