

# Unresolved status of Kirkuk heightens tensions in Iraq

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The long brewing confrontation in Iraq over the fate of the so-called “disputed territories”—the areas of the north claimed by the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)—is set to erupt this month with the release of a UN report.

The main area at stake is the province of Kirkuk, where some 40 percent of Iraq’s oil is produced and up to 15 percent of its untapped reserves are located. The other disputed areas are the Kurdish-populated territories in Ninevah and Diyala provinces, which border the KRG-controlled region.

Leaked details of a draft UN report include a plan for Kirkuk to be designated a “special status” province for up to 10 years. This status would give the province a high degree of political autonomy, but it would not be able to join the KRG or raise revenue independently of the central Iraqi government. The ambitions of the Kurdish elite for control of Kirkuk would be thwarted.

Kurdish claims on Kirkuk date back to the emergence of a Kurdish nationalist movement during World War I. To undermine the Turkish Ottoman empire, British imperialism made vague promises to support the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in its Kurdish-populated regions. In the postwar carve-up of the Ottoman empire, Britain and France reneged and the Kurdish people became divided, oppressed minorities within the newly-formed states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

Kurdish nationalists have at times referred to the city of Kirkuk as the Kurdish “Jerusalem”—the historic heart of Kurdish culture. However, the primary concern of the Kurdish elite is that the province’s oilfields would be a source of significant wealth for any independent Kurdish state.

The Kurdish nationalist parties backed the 2003 US invasion of Iraq as it initially seemed to hold out the prospect that their ambitions would be realised. Tens of

thousands of Kurdish *peshmerga* militiamen were allowed into the disputed areas by US forces.

As a further reward for Kurdish support, the American authors of the country’s Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) inserted a clause that stipulated a referendum on joining the KRG in the disputed territories no later than December 31, 2007. Prior to the plebiscite, the constitution stated that the Iraqi government had to assist the return of Kurds previously forced out during the ethnic cleansing campaigns of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime.

In the Iraqi constitution adopted by referendum on October 15, 2005, the TAL stipulations regarding the Kurdish question were incorporated as Article 140.

Since then, calls to implement Article 140 have met with strident opposition from the large Arabic and Turkomen communities in Kirkuk and from most of the Arab-based parties in Iraq. Article 140 is also opposed by the Turkish government, which fears that a KRG takeover of the northern oilfields would encourage separatist agitation in the Kurdish-populated east of Turkey.

In Kirkuk itself, the Kurdish-dominated provincial government, backed by the KRG and the *peshmerga*, has pushed ahead with the re-settlement into the city of tens of thousands of Kurds. There are numerous allegations that Kurdish forces have carried out murders, kidnappings and intimidation in order to pressure Arabs, Turkomens and Assyrian Christians to leave.

Explosive ethnic tensions have resulted. The city, effectively partitioned into Kurdish, Arab and Turkomen zones, is regularly rocked by bombings, assassinations and other violence. In 2007, as the deadline for the referendum approached, the US military feared the eruption of full-scale blood-letting while it was preoccupied with suppressing Sunni and Shiite insurgents in other parts of Iraq. Washington was also concerned that Turkey might invade the KRG to forestall the ballot.

In mid-2007, under US pressure, the Kurdish parties in the federal parliament and the KRG agreed to postpone the referendum. Last year, with no agreement on a new date, the Iraqi parliament called on the UN to propose a solution.

Not surprisingly, the reported stance of the UN commission—in line with US interests—is to seek to prevent a civil war in the north and a Turkish intervention. As the Kurdish majority in Kirkuk is likely to vote to join the KRG and provoke conflict, no referendum can be held. To mollify the Kurdish elite, a “special status” is being proposed.

Such a scheme still carries the risk of angering Kurdish parties and heightening tensions. But Washington is more interested in consolidating its pro-US government in Baghdad, than pandering to the KRG’s ambitions. While the rest of Iraq was in flames, the relatively stable Kurdish north was an important asset. However, as *Guardian* columnist Ranji Alaaldin commented: “As Iraq’s situation improves, the Kurds are gradually being rendered dispensable.”

The Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is exploiting the impasse to strengthen its own grip over the disputed territories and especially Kirkuk.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported on March 26 that predominantly Arab troops of the Iraqi Army’s 12<sup>th</sup> Division are securing the roads around Kirkuk and seeking to force *peshmerga* and Kurdish intelligence officers out of the city. Their commander, Major General Adbul Amir Zaidi, told the newspaper: “This is outside their jurisdiction.”

Maliki’s selection of Zaidi to command the operation is particularly provocative. In the 1990s, he was a brigade commander in Saddam Hussein’s army and responsible for enforcing the regime’s authority in Kurdish areas to the north of Kirkuk city.

In Baghdad, Maliki is preparing to sideline the Kurdish parties, which have used their numbers in the federal parliament to function as kingmakers, exploiting divisions between Shiite and Sunni parties.

Maliki’s Da’wa Party included opposition to any Kurdish takeover of Kirkuk in its platform for the January 31 provincial elections, which were held in all areas except the three northern Kurdish provinces and Kirkuk. Its appeals to Arab nationalism assisted Da’wa to win the largest share of the vote—25 percent.

For the first time, Da’wa did not stand in alliance with Shiite Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which has been less vocal against Article 140. Instead, Da’wa

sought coalitions with parties that share its opposition to Kurdish expansion. In some provinces, it is forming governments with supporters of Shiite cleric and Iraqi nationalist Moqtada al-Sadr. In Baghdad, Babil, Salah Al Din and Diyala provinces, Da’wa is seeking a bloc with the Sunni-based party headed by Saleh al-Mutlaq, which is supported by many former Baathists.

Over the past month, as the signs of their marginalisation have become clearer, the Kurdish nationalist leaders have stridently insisted that a referendum be scheduled. Kurdish warlord and KRG president, Massoud Barzani, and a delegation of local Kirkuk leaders unanimously agreed at a meeting on March 30 that implementing Article 140 was the only acceptable solution to the issue.

Jalal Talabani, the other main Kurdish leader, and currently president of Iraq, said on April 1: “Article 140 is a constitutional matter and no-one can change that.”

President Obama’s visit this week to Turkey, however, where he lauded the Turkish government and promoted it as a pivotal US ally, is further evidence that the Kurdish claim is unlikely to get support from the White House.

Once again, the Kurdish elites have subordinated the Kurdish people to the interests of imperialism, only to find themselves being left out in the cold. As was repeatedly the case in the twentieth century, this sordid manoeuvring with the major powers for an independent capitalist state or autonomous region has proven to be complete dead-end for the Kurdish population.



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