

Competition over Kirkuk: Between Internal Conflicts and Regional Rivalries

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Brief Analysis

Kirkuk's future remains uncertain due to the lack of any consensus-based projects between the governorate's political actors. Even if these longtime rivals find a way to participate in the local government, it is possible that a slight grievance could devolve into political deadlock.

Since 2003, Kirkuk Governorate has been at the center of key Iraqi political conflicts. The cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity that makes this governorate unique has in many ways fueled the ongoing crises, as actors from across Iraq's political spectrum feel as though they have a stake in this coveted territory. Following a political impasse that lasted for more than eight months after Iraq's municipal elections, the major players in the new municipal council finally agreed on a new governor. Yet while some had hoped this appointment might calm tensions, sectarian and ethnic groups—both within Kirkuk and around the region—have only ratcheted up their attempts to exert their influence.

The Conflict in Context

Kirkuk Governorate is located in northeastern Iraq, about 298 kilometers away from the capital of Baghdad. It has a diverse population that includes different Iraqi minorities and is also home to significant natural resources. Kirkuk is considered part of the "disputed territories" between the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

According to the second clause of Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, the elected executive authority shall bear responsibility for the governorate once it achieves political normalization, conducts a census, and holds a referendum on Kirkuk and other disputed areas to determine the final legal status.

The KRG has pointed to this article to assert its claim to Kirkuk and the governorate's rich oil fields. In October 2017, the KRG held an independence referendum throughout the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and included Kirkuk despite Baghdad's opposition. This bold move was a miscalculation, with then-Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi ordering Iraqi troops to seize Kirkuk from KRG control in retaliation. Peshmerga forces under the KRG withdrew without firing a shot, and since then Baghdad has overseen the governorate's affairs. The KRG paid dearly for its ill-fated independence bid, losing one of its major sources of oil revenues and a large swath of its territory.

In the following years, the KRG has attempted to reclaim Kirkuk through various methods. According to [multiple sources, \(https://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/story/50325-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A6%25D9%258A%25D8%25B3-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D9%258A-%25D9%258A%25D8%25AC%25D8%25AA%25D9%2585%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A5%25D8%25B7%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D9%2586%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A%25D9%2582%25D9%258A-%25D9%2581%25D9%258A-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25BA%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF\)](https://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/story/50325-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A6%25D9%258A%25D8%25B3-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D9%258A-%25D9%258A%25D8%25AC%25D8%25AA%25D9%2585%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A5%25D8%25B7%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D9%2586%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A%25D9%2582%25D9%258A-%25D9%2581%25D9%258A-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25BA%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF) Masoud Barzani—the former head of government in Erbil—sought to form an alliance with Muqtada al-Sadr after the 2021 elections for the Council of Representatives in exchange for control of Kirkuk. After Sadr withdrew from the political process, similar negotiations were held with the new Coordination Framework in exchange for supporting Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani as prime minister.

Internal Conflicts

In many ways, Kirkuk is a microcosm of Iraqi society and politics, home to Sunni and Shia, Kurds and Arabs, and minority groups like Turkmen and Christians. As a result, all of Iraq's major political players are invested in Kirkuk Governorate, each with their own conflicting hopes and aspirations. For example, the two major Kurdish parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—both operate there. Generally speaking, the KDP has ties to the Turkish government, while the PUK is closely linked with the Shia Coordination Framework and Iran.

Various groups of Sunni forces have also been involved in this area. However, the popular base is usually split between two rival entities: the Progress Party, led by Mohammed al-Halbousi—former speaker of the Iraqi Council of Representatives—and the Sovereignty Alliance, which is led by Khamis al-Khanjar. Shia political forces have also established offices in various parts of the governorate, and their base is generally aligned with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and Shia Turkmen.

Holding Elections

Amidst these conflicts, Kirkuk participated in Iraq's provincial elections at the end of last year—the second such elections held in Kirkuk since 2005. Although Iraq has held three rounds of local elections since 2003, the political disputes that have erupted between the main forces in Kirkuk have prevented holding any election or referendum there since the early days of post-Saddam Iraq. During this time, local authorities passed a law in which political power rotated between the various ethnic and religious groups, providing a temporary and tense remedy for the crisis.

On December 28, 2023, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) [announced](https://ihec.iq/%2525D9%25252586%2525D9%25252585%2525D9%25252588%2525D8%252525B0%2525D8%252525B0%252525D8%25252582-%2525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252588%2525D8%252525B1%2525D8%252525A7%2525D9%25252582-%2525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252582%2525D8%252525AA%2525D8%252525B1%252525D8%252525A7%252525D8%252525B9-%252525D9%25252585%252525D8%252525AD%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252581%252525D8%252525B8%252525D8%252525A9-%252525D9%25252583%252525D8%252525B1%252525D9%25252583%252525D9%25252588%252525D9%25252583/)

[the final election results with the 16 governorate seats split between the political factions:](https://ihec.iq/%2525D9%25252586%2525D9%25252585%2525D9%25252588%2525D8%252525B0%2525D8%252525B0%252525D8%25252582-%2525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252588%2525D8%252525B1%2525D8%252525A7%2525D9%25252582-%2525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252582%2525D8%252525AA%2525D8%252525B1%252525D8%252525A7%252525D8%252525B9-%252525D9%25252585%252525D8%252525AD%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252581%252525D8%252525B8%252525D8%252525A9-%252525D9%25252583%252525D8%252525B1%252525D9%25252583%252525D9%25252588%252525D9%25252583/)

Kirkuk is Our Strength and Will Alliance (affiliated with the PUK): 157,000 votes, 5 seats

Arab Alliance: 102,000 votes, 3 seats

Iraqi Turkmen Front: 75,000 votes, 2 seats

Leadership Alliance: 61,000 votes, 2 seats

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP): 52,000 votes, 2 seats

Al-Uruba Alliance: 47,000 votes, 1 seat

Babylon Movement: 1 quota seat for Christians

Even though the PUK-affiliated party claimed the largest share, the results were far from decisive. No party claimed even a third of the total seats. Rakan al-Jabouri, the acting governor of Kirkuk, called for the first governorate council sessions to convene on February 1, 2024 in order to select the chairman of the council and governor and to form the local government. However, conflicts between the winning blocs have prevented a clear outcome and all efforts to form a local consensus government failed, with Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen candidates all vying for the position of governor.

Steps Towards Forming a Government

Hoping to break up the deadlock, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani called for (https://x.com/mohamedshia/status/1810760646507548838?ref_src=twsrc%2525255Eftw%2525257Ctwcamp%2525255Etweetembed%2525257Ctwterm%2525255E1810760646507548838%2525257Ctwgr%2525255E%2525257Ctwcon%2525252) a governorate council session on July 11, urging the relevant political forces to implement previously agreed upon terms and continue open dialogue sessions. Nevertheless, these sessions failed to produce tangible solutions, and Sudani threatened to appoint a governor from outside the elected council based on his authority and the coalition's control over the government.

This threat prompted the winning blocs to form alliances among themselves, including multiethnic and cross-sectarian coalitions. The parties split into two main camps: The first camp included Masoud Barzani's KDP, the Iraqi Turkmen Front, and the forces backed by Khamis al-Khanjar's Sovereignty Alliance and Rakan al-Jabouri, the acting governor of Kirkuk. The second camp included Bafel Talabani's PUK, the Christian Babylon Movement (which is aligned with the PMF), three Arab members of the Progress Party (headed by Mohammed al-Halbousi, the former speaker of the Council of Representatives), and the Shia Coordination Framework forces.

On August 10, this second group formed a local government, bringing it to power by majority vote. Though the principle of majority vote lacks fairness compared to the principle of political consensus, it remains the most frequent process for Iraqi political coalitions. Significant national and regional leaders attended the session, including PUK leader Bafel Talabani, Qais al-Khazali, the leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Mohammed al-Halbousi, the head of the Progress Party. The blocs elected Rebwat Taha—a member of the PUK—as governor during a controversial session in which the Iraqi Turkmen Front and about half of the Arab forces did not participate, and the KDP was likewise absent.

Halbousi played a key role in granting the governorship of Kirkuk to a PUK member, since he gave the votes from his party's three seats to the PUK candidate in response to efforts by his opponent Khamis al-Khanjar to reach out to the KDP in Erbil. Opponents have argued that Halbousi's national role as former speaker in the Iraqi parliament and efforts to return to this position have impacted the negotiations in Kirkuk. Halbousi was ousted from his position as speaker of the Council of Representatives on November 14, 2023 after the IHEC issued a resolution accusing him of fraud. Since then, he has been adamant about his party's right to the position of prime minister. As a [condition \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRAYb2go32Q\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRAYb2go32Q) for supporting Rebwat Taha's victory, Halbousi asked for his new allies' support for his own party in the future.

In response, the groups not in attendance filed a legal case against the electoral process that had taken place at the al-Rasheed Hotel, claiming it had violated the principle of consensus because these groups had not been present at the session to vote. However, the Federal Supreme Court dismissed the case since the voting process did not violate legal regulations, and consequently, there was no need to issue a jurisdictional order from the Federal supreme Court against the procedures of forming the new government. It is worth noting that consensus rule is a political act to which Iraqi political forces resort when faced with political deadlock, unable to resolve their crises or obtain a majority of votes in nomination cases.

On the first day of Taha's term as governor of Kirkuk, he called on the political forces that opposed the results to participate in a dialogue. Taha stated at a press conference that opposition parties were invited to participate in this dialogue so that Kirkuk could become a model of peaceful coexistence and development.

The political players outside the PUK-Halbousi-Shia coalition are steadfast in their opposition to the new governorship. They advocate a system of two-year rotations between different groups in the governorate, i.e., in which Kurds would be given the governorship for two years, then Arabs, then Turkmen, and so on. However, all of these proposals have failed thus far.

Regional Conflict

Although the political feud in Kirkuk appears to be hyper-local in nature, regional powers have also taken an interest in the governorate's council. The crisis in the Kirkuk Governorate is an extension of the regional rivalry between Turkey and Iran, and each is trying to pursue the political outcome that would best serve their own goals.

Turkey portrays itself as the patron and protector of Iraq's Turkmen—an ethnically and linguistically Turkic community. This rhetoric constitutes a significant part of Turkish political discourse towards Iraq. Compared to Tehran, Ankara's efforts are focused mainly on northern Iraq, which it sees as an extension of the Turkish state, specifically because it sees Kirkuk as a Turkmen city. After the Kurdistan Region's independence referendum, Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), stated that Mosul and Kirkuk were part of Turkey. This was a claim that former Turkish President Turgut Özal had also made in 1993. Current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has similarly warned against interference or demographic change in what he called "the Turkmen city."

There are other issues that pique Turkey's interest in Kirkuk besides the Turkmen. Oil has played a role in this crisis, as Kirkuk is home to the Baba Gurgur oil field, which is the first field discovered in Iraq since 1927 and the second largest in the world. There are five other huge oil fields with reserves as large as around 13 billion barrels, producing 400,000 barrels per day.

The Turkish government wants to take control of these oil fields and the revenue it would gain from exporting the oil through the pipeline between Kirkuk and the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The central Iraqi government has authorized the KRG to export oil from these fields provided that it sends the corresponding revenue to Baghdad. However, Erbil has allegedly not kept to these commitments and withheld these payments.

Baghdad has tried to stop Ankara from exporting Iraqi crude oil through its Ceyhan port, but Turkey has ignored these requests in the past. This led Iraq to file an arbitration case in 2014 against Turkey in the International Chamber of Commerce in Paris for exporting Iraqi oil. Iraq argued that Turkey could not make unilateral agreements with the Kurdistan Regional Government; Turkey subsequently lost the case when a verdict was finally delivered in 2023 and was forced to pay 1.4 billion USD in damages to the government in Baghdad.

Kirkuk's oil fields have also been a target of Iranian interest. Iran signaled this in no uncertain terms when it targeted the house of Baz Karim Barzanji, CEO of the KAR Group, in a strike on Erbil a month after he had met with the presidents of the KRG and Turkey in Ankara. Iran is looking to develop the pipeline from Kirkuk to the Syrian port of Baniyas.

Kirkuk's strategic location and its role in the Iranian-Syrian gas pipeline shed additional light on why Tehran wants to control this area. This has prompted Iran to solidify control of armed factions in Kirkuk, especially following the central government's takeover of the city after Peshmerga forces were expelled in 2017. Iran has sought to develop various armed factions that are aligned with its policies, most recently a Kurdish militia as well as Shia Turkmen brigades, which now fight against Turkey.

As part of its rivalry with Ankara, Ankara has also accused Tehran of backing the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Ankara believes that the recent ascendance of Iran's allies such as the PUK and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq in the local Kirkuk government is only the beginning of making this a potential PKK stronghold which opposes the Turkish government. Iran's involvement in Kirkuk is also due to its desire to secure a land route from Iran to Syria through Kirkuk as well as the districts of Tal Afar and Sinjar in Nineveh Governorate.

Future Prospects

Kirkuk's future remains uncertain due to the lack of any consensus-based projects between the governorate's political actors. Even if these longtime rivals find a way to participate in the local government, it is possible that a slight grievance could devolve into political deadlock.

Additionally, the sheer number of tribal forces and armed militias will have further repercussions for security in the governorate. The fracturing of security forces into different groups undermines the stability of the area and prevents cohesive enforcements of laws and policies. This unstable situation is further compounded by the continued interference of neighboring countries in Iraq's internal affairs, as Turkey and Iran both funnel arms and money into paramilitary groups.

Things could change in Kirkuk if it falls under the control of a strong central government capable of imposing the rule of law, or if it becomes politically isolated from Baghdad and Erbil in a semi-federal system of local rule without outside political influence. However, such scenarios are far removed from the current reality, and so for the foreseeable future Kirkuk should be considered a potential flashpoint and backdrop for local and regional tensions in the coming months. ❖

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