

Disputed Zones: A Reservoir of Eternal Conflict

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Brief Analysis

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A large proportion of the Iraq's disputed zones fall within the administrative boundaries of the Nineveh governorate, areas in the Rabia-Zummar region where Sunni Kurds and Sunni Arabs are deeply intermeshed. The Sunni Arabs are split between those who support the Kurdistan Region (the Shamar and Jabour tribes) against the Shia Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and those who believe that the PMU represent the efforts of the Iraqi state to preserve the unity of Iraq against the foundation of an independent Kurdish state motivated by the Baathist legacy. Over the past decades the sectarian policies of Iraq's political and military forces have severely damaged the Iraqi social fabric. The disputed zones, which contain diverse religious and ethnic populations, received a significant share of that damage due to the failure of both Erbil and Baghdad to reach a common ground on the administration of those zones. Unfortunately, the current approach, which Iraqi politicians employ in these areas, has made them candidates for greater escalation and conflict.

In the south and southwest, in the areas surrounding Mount Sinjar, the bloody images of yesterday's conflicts are still in the imaginations of everyone from the Yazidi Kurds to the Sunni Arabs. These conflicts are a mix between nationalist (Kurdish-Arab) and religious (Muslim-Yazidi). The rape of thousands of Yazidi women are still on the minds of the people of this region, which were followed by the Yazidi Kurds' implicit hatred of the Muslim Kurds, especially the Peshmerga forces. The Peshmerga have been accused by some of retreating from Mount Sinjar in August 2014, leaving the Yazidis highly vulnerable to the Islamic State, who then committed brutal massacres against them.

Later, some media reports accused what they referred to as Yazidi gangs of attacking Arab villages and carrying out massacres, acts of theft, and looting, despite a lack of any evidence. As for the zones in the Nineveh Plains, the conflicts are between Sunni Kurds, Yazidi Kurds, the Shabak, and Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, and Christians. It is noted that the ongoing conflict between Baghdad and Erbil has divided the Shabak people, who live in Shekhan, Bartella, and other areas in the Nineveh Plains, into two factions: those who support the Peshmerga based on their nationalist identity and those supporting the Shabaki Militias based on their sectarian affiliation.

Most of the conflicts have taken place inside the city of Kirkuk, where there are populations of all sects and peoples. After the attacks by the PMU on Kirkuk, the residents of twenty-five villages in Zummar were driven towards the city

of Zakho, fearing that they would face retaliatory attacks after the PMU entered Zummar and burned the offices of the Kurdish Democratic Party. On this matter, Qomri Hussein, a resident of Kalhi in her fifties said, “This is our land, we were forced to leave after the failure of the Kurdish Revolution of 1975, and we were promised it once again after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Now, we are in the city of Dahuk, and have been driven from our land for the fourth time.”

In this vein, Khalil Mirza, a member of the Kurdish Democratic Party, points out that the most prominent Kurdish tribe in the Zummar province is the Kirkaria Tribe, and that this tribe has followed the tribal approach to preserve its existence. Their Kurdish identity has been mixed with Arab identity, and Iraqi governments have deluded themselves into thinking that they are of Arab origin, and do not support Kurdish parties. However, this has created an unclear identity for future generations in the tribe. He added that, if it were not for the mountains surrounding the cities of Zakho and Dahuk, then these would also have been disputed territories.

Developments in this of Kirkuk have also taken on a sectarian character. The Salam Brigades, loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist Movement, opened up their ranks to volunteers less than a day after arriving in Kirkuk on October 20, which ended with the displacement of more than 120,000 Kurds from the city. Moreover, The Quds Force arrived after the announcement of the PMU’s retreat from the city, which was viewed by observers as an Iranian endeavour to “Shia-fy” Kirkuk. This also coincided with American intelligence revealing the presence of Qasim Soleimani, leader of the Quds Force in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. He is the architect of the agreement between a wing of the Talabani family and Hadi al-Amri, a leader in the PMU and head of the Badr Organisation, which stipulated that Kirkuk and its vital facilities would be handed over to the PMF.

The area between the two governorates of Erbil and Kirkuk furthermore has a Turkman presence, which is also divided into two parts: between Sunni-Shia and purely nationalist, as in Tuz Kharmatu. The conflicts of this region have taken on an ethnic character, which became clear in the first days of the Kirkuk crisis when Turkman units, supported by the PMU, burned Kurdish property. Reports received by the United Nations documented the burning of 150 homes and the displacement of 1,875 families.

It is important that the areas in the plains from Mosul and to its west have a predominately rural character, as the population is distributed throughout towns and villages that lack much infrastructure. Also noteworthy is the enormous economic damage that has been done to their livestock and agricultural production, their two main sources of development, due to the absence of any other sources of development like factories or companies. This made joining a military faction the most accessible opportunity for work, which encouraged organizations like the Islamic State, the Babylon Brigade, the Turkman Brigades, the Ezidkhan Protection Force, and the Jazeera Brigade. This development also reinforced the transformations in Iraq’s political situation over the past decades, which saw deepening sectarianism. This has reduced the chances of these populations to carry significant political power, as they have essentially been divided into smaller, opposing factions.

Reports in the Iraqi media claim that the liberation of the Nineveh province from the Islamic State cost them more than 70 percent of their infrastructure, not to mention the psychological effects of the war and displacement. The Al-Sharqiya satellite channel reported that chaos and devastation in the province would significantly affect the integrity of parliamentary elections there. There are no indications of an easing of these divisions in the disputed areas, whether it is the dispute over political representation, or the current conflict between the PMU and the Kurdish Peshmerga— in addition to the political dispute between Baghdad and Erbil over the right to administer the disputed area. It is a dispute that will bring nothing but further division. Even if the dispute ends with the optimal solution of a joint administration of these areas, it would be another kind of conflict, accompanied by tensions that will not provide the appropriate environment for stability and development.

It is important to note that the United States cannot undertake all missions in Iraq by itself; there is a great need for international partners to help them in the matters of achieving stability and providing a climate for development and reconstruction. This also requires the participation of international organisations and efforts to bolster civil society and to assist with capacity development, especially for women and children, in order to realise a common dimension for future reconciliations. ❖

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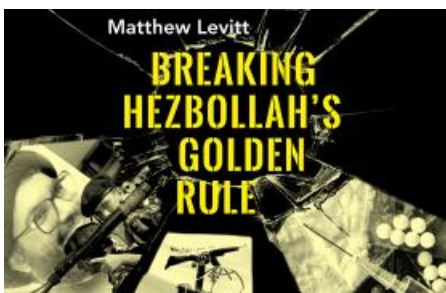
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