

# Securing an Immediate Iraq-KRI Ceasefire

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Oct 20, 2017

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Brief Analysis

## To prevent Baghdad from overplaying its hand, Washington must demand publicly that the fighting stop.

**T**he United States has a delicate balancing act to perform in Iraq, protecting U.S. interests amid a military crisis between larger federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Privately, Washington has provided Baghdad with guidance on unacceptable conduct that would undermine the U.S.-Iraq relationship, such as Iraqi initiation of firefights or the use of Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in advances into Kurdish-held territory. Washington has also viewed some of the Iraqi advances as indicating a return to the Iraq-KRI frontlines from before the Islamic State offensive in June 2014. These frontlines reflect an interpretation by Washington and Baghdad of the July 2016 memorandum of understanding signed by U.S., Iraqi, and Kurdish leaders ahead of the Mosul offensive against the Islamic State.

The problem is that the focused advances on specific locations by regular Iraqi military forces is quickly giving way to a free-for-all. Iraq is presently pushing well beyond the June 2014 line, such as in its October 20 advance north of Kirkuk onto the Erbil-Kirkuk highway at Altun Kupri. This advance was resisted strongly by the Kurds, and heavy fighting ensued. The Iraqi forces cleared Kurdish Peshmerga up to the edge of Erbil province, one of the four universally accepted component provinces of the KRI -- with the others being Dahuk, Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja. The Iraqi forces were fighting for areas that were entirely under Kurdish control in June 2014. Soldiers thus died so

that Iraq could claim to have moved up to the formal borders of Kurdistan rather than just a few miles back from them. The development also threatens to spark panic in Erbil, which is only thirty kilometers away from the battle zone near Altun Kupri.

The skirmish at Altun Kupri also witnessed frontline use of PMF troops, who joined the battle when regular Iraqi forces faced opposition. Much has been opined about the PMF in the current Iraqi advances, but strong evidence suggests this reality: these forces are not intended by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to lead such advances -- that role is set aside for disciplined forces like the Counter-Terrorism Service and Iraqi army -- but they are increasingly crowding in to such advances. PMF elements are also more and more active in non-Kurdish and mixed-ethnicity areas from which Kurdish forces have withdrawn. Although Abadi has issued orders for them to withdraw from such areas, enforcement is spotty and reinfiltration of PMF fighters is frequent.

Aside from the realities on the ground, important perceptions must be monitored. U.S. interests may ultimately be met, and Iranian influence reduced, by a stronger Abadi and stronger Iraqi nationalism. But this crisis is likely to damage U.S. credibility, in Iraq and beyond, if Washington does not assertively and publicly demarche Baghdad at this point, and make demonstrations of military force -- overflights, visible surveillance, observers on the Kurdish side -- to show that "enough is enough." Arab and Iranian media and social media are already interpreting the latest military movements as a clear victory for the Islamic Republic and its Shia allies, and a defeat for the United States. Further, Sunnis will doubt that Washington can stand up for its allies, an impression they already harbor. Iraqi Shia will believe the rumors that Gen. Qasem Soleimani, head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, orchestrated this crisis to punish the Kurds, diminishing any gain Abadi and Iraq may take from the episode. Behind-the-scenes advice is often the right path in such a situation, but what is needed today is a high-visibility and crystal clear U.S. demand that the fighting must stop. The public demarche can be accompanied by private threats of suspended military cooperation along with promises of immediate negotiating assistance.

*Michael Knights, a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute, has worked in all of Iraq's provinces and spent time embedded with the country's security forces. David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at the Institute and director of Project Fikra. ❖*

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