

How to Keep Armed Clashes in Kirkuk from Escalating

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Brief Analysis

Now that the Iraqi government has regained access to half of Kirkuk by force, Washington should act quickly to prevent a violent local backlash.

In the early hours of October 16, the federal Iraqi military forced its way into many parts of Kirkuk city and adjacent military and energy facilities. The Counter-Terrorism Service, supported by army tanks, the Federal Police, and special forces (though not by Popular Mobilization Forces), took over the K1 military base, the governor's palace, the Kirkuk Provincial Council headquarters, the North Oil Company and North Gas Company headquarters, the Kirkuk Regional Air Base, and key road junctions. Local Kurdish forces offered only token resistance, seemingly because the political faction in charge of them -- the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) -- was not fully resolved to resist the move. Thus far, no international body or state has opposed the move either, with President Trump noting today that the United States would not be "taking sides" in the dispute.

As a result, Baghdad has retaken portions of PUK-controlled Kirkuk that it held prior to the 2014 military collapse. It has even regained access to some urban areas where federal security personnel customarily did not go in years past. Its forces are now moving into the oil fields of Dibis district that have been held by the Kurdistan Democratic Party since 2014. These fields produce 275,000 barrels of oil per day, or nearly half the 620,000-barrel output of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

The United States has not opposed Baghdad's return to Kirkuk in part because the move was framed in terms of restoring the status quo before the Islamic State crisis. But if realities on the ground are not monitored closely, they could result in federal authority over Kirkuk far exceeding the pre-2014 balance.

For instance, Kirkuk city has long been treated as a partially demilitarized area -- the police had primacy in urban security, while federal army troops and Kurdish Peshmerga were not allowed to deploy inside the city proper. The

entrance of federal special forces there has now upended that status quo. Moreover, Kirkuk security was at its best when handled by a joint security headquarters that included Kurdish and federal forces; as of today, however, only the latter are manning the K1 headquarters. Similarly, the ideal model for oil field security was never military garrisons, but a dedicated oil field police force; the same is true for other energy infrastructure and government buildings.

In other words, if the pendulum swings too far in the direction of totally excluding Kurdish forces, then security over northern Iraq's citizens, state institutions, and oil facilities will surely suffer. Accordingly, the United States should take four immediate steps:

Back the formation of a Joint Security Mechanism for Kirkuk. The K1 headquarters should quickly incorporate representatives from local security forces such as the Kirkuk Police Service, Emergency Support Units, and Task Force Black. The Counter-Terrorism Group should also be added because it is a Kurdish force that federal authorities have worked alongside frequently in the Kirkuk area.

Signal the urgent U.S. desire for de-escalation. Commenting on the fighting, President Trump noted "we don't like the fact that they're clashing." To decrease the risk of further clashes, the U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force should send a senior officer into K1 and other potential flashpoints (e.g., Sinjar), ostensibly to meet with task force advisors already present there, but also to send a message that Washington is intently focused on the nature of future Iraqi advances and Peshmerga reactions. No matter what diplomats say or do, nothing speaks to local security decisionmakers like an on-the-ground U.S. presence, even if only a symbolic visit by command-level officers.

Press for an interim Kirkuk governor. If the post is now considered vacant as reported, Washington should encourage the provincial council to swiftly appoint an interim Kurdish governor. This would maintain the basic power-sharing compact negotiated by Kirkuk community leaders in 2007. Such symbolic steps of continuity lessen the risk that new waves of fighting will break out inside Kirkuk city, where the risk of coalescing resistance to federal forces should not be underestimated.

Encourage continuity in oil-sharing deals. Baghdad, Kirkuk, and the KRG all benefit from the current split of the province's oil. Although many of Kirkuk's oil fields are now under federal control, this does not alter the basic rationale for the deal: that the KRG has the only functional export pipeline, and that KRG refineries have the spare capacity the federal government lacks to produce much-needed oil products for liberated areas in Ninawa, Salah al-Din, and Diyala provinces. Maintaining this arrangement could be a continued "win-win" that facilitates future Baghdad-KRG negotiations, so it should not be allowed to lapse.

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. ❖

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