

Kirkuk Foreshadows Challenges for a Post-ISIL Iraq

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Articles & Testimony

Tensions in Kirkuk serve as warning of the instability that could rack Mosul after its liberation.

All eyes are on the Iraqi city of Mosul, the capital of the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which could be attacked by Iraqi forces as soon as April or May 2015 according to a US government briefing given to reporters in February 19. But whenever Mosul is actually attacked, the key challenge for the liberating forces will not end when ISIL fighters are expelled. Governance of multiethnic Mosul city will pose an equally significant test for the Iraqi and Kurdish leaderships, as well as their international allies.

One way to gauge the complexity of post-conflict stabilisation is to look at the Iraqi city of Kirkuk today. Kirkuk sits partway between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) capital of Erbil. Placed at a crossover point between the Kurdish highlands, Turkmen towns and Arab farmlands bordering the Tigris, Kirkuk expanded greatly after oil production began in the province in the 1920s.

The 1957 census -- considered the least politicized -- broke down Kirkuk's population by mother tongue, finding the province was 48.3 percent Kurd, 28.2 percent Arab, 21.4 percent Turkmen, and the rest Chaldean, Assyrian, or other. From the 1960s onwards, urban Turkmen and Kurds were targeted with increasing violence by successive Iraqi governments: In 2003, the pendulum swung again and the Kurds became the dominant force within the city.

STRATEGIC GEOGRAPHY OF KIRKUK

Kirkuk is the point at which Iraqi Kurdistan is at its narrowest. Throughout the last century, Kirkuk was used as the jump-off point for government incursions into the Kurdish highlands. It sits astride the most direct highway linking the two main KRG cities, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. For a hostile force to control Kirkuk is to cut the Kurdish

region in half.

Today, the Kirkuk area continues to represent a neuralgic point for the Iraqi Kurds -- a potential chink in their armour. Multiethnic Kirkuk is almost unique because of the large numbers of Arabs who live within the frontline secured by the Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Kirkuk is linked to the KRG by highways, and a busy flow of commercial and passenger traffic still transits between it and the KRG cities every day.

This has made Kirkuk the single most significant entry point for ISIL car bombers and attack cells seeking to penetrate the Kurdistan Region. On January 30, ISIL launched a major localised offensive against the Peshmerga frontline southwest of Kirkuk city, simultaneously installing a team of suicide attackers on the roof of a hotel in the city. Mass sweeps and intelligence-led raids are now combing Kirkuk's Sunni Arab communities for terrorist cells.

KURDISH PARTIES AND KIRKUK

Kirkuk has attained a political symbolism over the past 50 years, much as Mosul is a political and economic centre for many of Iraq's Sunnis. The Kurdish political parties vie for influence in Kirkuk, and when the city is attacked they rush to defend it. In August 2014, the inflow of Kurdish Peshmerga to Kirkuk arguably stripped other fronts to the extent that the ISIL offensive penetrated almost to Erbil.

Control of Kirkuk city currently rests with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the smaller of the two largest Kurdish political parties, but the rival Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is gradually encroaching. In July 2014, the KDP opportunistically expanded their military control of western Kirkuk, including the Northern Oil Company's Bai Hassan and Avana oilfields.

Kirkuk Governor Najmaldin Karim, who is close to PUK leader Jalal Talabani, must balance the dual needs of maintaining Kurdish unity to defend the city while at the same time restraining further expansion of KDP influence in Kirkuk.

KIRKUK'S OIL: MORE VITAL THAN EVER

Compared to southern Iraq's massive post-1950s oilfields, which are still expanding their production, the grand old Kirkuk fields have been in decline for a while. Yet control of the western Kirkuk oilfields is more significant than ever because of the dire financial straits that Iraq is suffering from due to high government spending needs and the collapse in oil prices since November 2014.

Kirkuk oil played a central role in the passage of the 2015 budget and the Baghdad-KRG revenue-sharing deal contained within it. Under the deal, Kurdistan must provide Baghdad with 250,000 barrels per day (bpd) of Kurdish-produced crude oil, which is made possible, in part, by the KRG's takeover of the Bai Hassan and Avana fields. The KRG likewise is committed to helping Iraq export 300,000 bpd of Northern Oil Company-produced Kirkuk crude via Kurdistan's pipeline to Turkey. Every barrel of oil shipped will furthermore earn \$2 for the province under the "petrodollar" scheme.

In the next year, Kirkuk oil could fill a vital gap in Iraq's budget (and provide Kirkuk province with investment) or it could become a source of disagreements between Baghdad and Erbil. The Iraqi government is already eyeing the return of Bai Hassan and Avana oil to the federal exchequer.

The Kurds meanwhile are winning over the Northern Oil Company with an effective outreach programme of technical support and pipeline-building, which could aid the full KRG annexation of Kirkuk's oil industry if the revenue-sharing deal with Baghdad breaks down.

SHIA POPULAR MOBILISATION UNITS

Perhaps the newest challenge to emerge in Kirkuk is the tension between the predominately Shia Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Units or PMUs) and the Kurdish-led administration. The PMUs have been gradually working their way up the Baghdad-Kirkuk road since September 2014, liberating Shia Turkmen towns overrun by ISIL and garrisoning Sunni settlements with a heavy hand.

Now the PMUs have reached the southern outskirts of Kirkuk city, the first federal security forces to return to Kirkuk since the 12th Iraqi Army Division disintegrated last June. The Kurds swore at that time that no federal forces would return to Kirkuk, but the Shia militias, in part due to Iranian backing, have very effectively grown their presence, with large training camps emerging to arm local Shia Turkmen and Arab Kirkuki volunteers.

Such Shia militants are not completely novel in Kirkuk: Shia Kirkukis from the Iranian-backed Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) terrorist groups fired rockets at the US-occupied airbase and attacked US vehicles in Kirkuk right up until the US departure in 2011.

Now these groups are beginning to challenge Kurdish dominance: On February 8, Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri, the PMU leader in much of northern Iraq, visited the Kirkuk governor with an imposing 50-vehicle security detail. On February 17, AAH leader Qais al-Khazali said that his fighters would enter Kirkuk city to challenge the Peshmerga if Kirkuk's Shia residents called upon AAH to do so.

This emerging risk is an indication of the potential complexities that could challenge the post-ISIL governance of northern Iraq, particularly of a liberated Mosul city, an ethnic melting pot with nearly a million residents. The ultimate significance of the ISIL offensive in Iraq may not lie in the movement's fleeting control of Iraqi cities but rather in the ethno-sectarian militias and decentralising forces released by the loss of government control.

Michael Knights, a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute, travels to Iraq regularly to work with local leaders, government ministries, and security forces. ❖

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