

## **Ethnic Groups Tussle Over Northern City**

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Turkomans and Arabs object to Kurdish plans to draw oil-rich Kirkuk into a separate autonomous region of Iraq.

Inhabitants of Kirkuk in northern Iraq remain bitterly divided over the future, debating whether the oil-rich city should become part of a Kurdish federal region.

Kurdish political parties say Kirkuk is historically part of Iraqi Kurdistan, and claim it has a Kurdish majority, albeit one reduced in size by state-sponsored ethnic cleansing over the past few decades. They also insist on the right of Kurdish refugees to return to the city.

After the 1991 Gulf war and the ensuing uprising against Saddam, the Kurds gained de facto autonomy from Saddam Hussein's rule in three governorates – Arbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dahuk - but their leaders claim historical rights to areas outside this zone, including Kirkuk.

Many of the city's Turkomans disagree, saying the city has always been dominated by their ethnic group, or else mixed.

Turkomans and Arabs also complain about their treatment at the hands of former Kurdish military forces – the peshmerga – that have been incorporated into the police.

Given such disagreements, it is hardly surprising that a recent decision by Kurdish parties to press for an autonomous federal region that would include Kirkuk ended in trouble.

On December 31, a crowd of Turkomans and Arabs estimated at several thousand held a demonstration in Kirkuk's main square. A group of them marched off to the office of the provincial governor, a Kurd whose bodyguards include former peshmergas. According to one witness – who said the demonstrators were very angry – they “wanted to express anger at proposals to include Kirkuk in Kurdistan”.

Eyewitnesses said guards at the governor's office ordered the demonstrators to leave, but they refused, and “shots were fired”. At least three people are reported to have been killed.

Governor Abdelrahman Mustafa Fatah told IWPR his office had been informed of the protest in advance – but had received promises that it would be confined to the main square.

Some Kurdish officials claim that the protestors were egged on by agents provocateurs. “Some of these demonstrators were officials in the former regime,” said Khudhir Hasan, deputy head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, office in Kirkuk. He contrasted this with a Kurdish demonstration nine days earlier, which he said passed off peacefully even though it was attended by some 50,000 people.

At least three more people have died in Kirkuk since the demonstration – a Kurd shot dead while walking through an Arab neighbourhood, and two Arab gunmen killed after they opened fire on a police patrol.

Many Kurds believe they have earned the right to incorporate Kirkuk into the Kurdistan region, after nearly 80 years of struggle against successive regimes based in Baghdad. They liken it to the Palestinians' aspiration to control Jerusalem.

"The Kurds will not back down on this issue, even if it means dying for it," asserted shopkeeper Azzat Mohammed.

Kurds point out that their peshmerga helped overthrow Saddam Hussein and liberate Kirkuk. "The Kurds participated in the liberation of Iraq, [so] the least of their rights is the achievement of federalism," says the PUK's Hassan. "History proves that Kirkuk is part of Kurdistan."

But Aziz Qadir of the nationalist Turkoman Front said that his community would not accept becoming part of Kurdistan, even though it would still be part of Iraq.

Qadir complained that Kurdish civil servants are flooding in from Sulaymaniyah, and accused the PUK of orchestrating the influx in order to dominate the bureaucracy.

The Kurds retort that government offices were packed with Arabs and Turkomans when the Kurds were expelled by the former regime. They say the returning civilians are merely refugees displaced during Saddam Hussein's 20-year programme of "Arabisation".

Kirkuk's Arabs, meanwhile, find themselves in a particularly delicate situation. Many of them, like the impoverished Shia from the south, were offered financial incentives by the former regime to move north. The intention was to dilute this strategically important city's Kurdish and Turkmen populations, both of which were considered security risks by Saddam Hussein.

Medical student Inas Abd-al-Hussein comes from one of these families. She claims her community is now beset by Turkomans and Kurds alike. The former, she says, have forcibly repossessed an Arabic-language school that was taken over from them during the Arabisation programme.

Inas says she and her friends are harassed by former peshmerga soldiers in the police force. "[If] any woman wears traditional [southern Arab] peasant clothes, they might tear her dress," she claimed. "No one dares express their rejection of the Kurds."

Tribal sheikh Wasut al-Ubeidi, a Sunni Arab with extensive roots in the region, says his people are caught in the middle. "The Kurds treat us as if we were Saddam, but I do not want to pay for the mistakes of Saddam," he said.

Wasut is willing to accept the return of Kurds forced out of the area under the old regime, as long as it is managed in an organised way with some official commission to control it.

He is also prepared to accept a federal arrangement - but only if the province of Kirkuk, rather than the region of Kurdistan as a whole, is the designated territorial unit. The Kurdish parties have already ruled out proposals for this kind of federalism.

Meanwhile, United States Secretary of State Colin Powell has stated Washington's belief that Iraqis should decide the future of the northern region, but that the area cannot secede.

"The Kurds wish, in some way, to preserve their historic identity and to link it in some way to geography," Powell said. "But I think it's absolutely clear that that part of Iraq must remain part of Iraq."

"We'll be in close consultation not only with Turkey, but with the other neighbours in the region who have an interest as well," Powell added, referring to other countries with large Kurdish populations, such as Syria and Iran.

Powell's remarks did not go down well with Kurdish representatives in Baghdad. "We are part of the coalition and we lost more lives than the British," said a deputy to a Kurdish member of the Governing Council.

"The Americans are Machiavellian with their friends, and naive with their foes," he said.

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