

Kirkuk Turmoil Over Council Move

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Government calls for calm as Kirkuk authority urges union with Kurdish region. Politicians have warned that Kirkuk provincial council's threat to join the region to Iraqi Kurdistan will inflame tensions and undermine national unity.

The Kurdish-dominated provincial council called for the region to be brought under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG, on July 31, two days after a suicide bomber struck a predominantly-Kurdish protest and stoked what appeared to be ethnic-related violence.

The council's move and the violence earlier this week raised long-standing fears that simmering political tensions between Kirkuk's ethnic groups – particularly Kurds and Turkomans, who are ethnic Turks – could lead to bloodshed and political chaos.

The authorities in Baghdad are calling for calm and urging the provincial council not to carry out its threat.

"The Iraqi government calls upon all parties and groups in Kirkuk province to refrain from carrying out any [actions] that might harm the national unity," government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said in a statement. "The Iraqi government is stressing its [opposition to] any unilateral measure to change the status of Kirkuk."

Turkoman and Arab members boycotted the Kirkuk provincial council's session and were angered by its actions. "The decision will cause problems inside of the city and it's illegal," said Mohammed Khalil Nasif, an Arab member of the assembly.

Turkey's prime minister Tayyip Erdogan called Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, to express concern over the council's threatened move, according to a statement from Talabani's office.

Kurds and Turkomans both lay claim to Kirkuk and battle for political control of the oil-rich city, which is also inhabited by other Iraqi minority groups and Arabs.

Talabani told Erdogan that the council was threatening to join Kirkuk province to Iraqi Kurdistan if an agreement is not reached on a draft provincial council election law.

Parliament is holding an extraordinary session on August 3 to try to iron out differences over the proposed legislation, which is stalled due to political bickering over Kirkuk.

Kurds boycotted the vote on the election bill because it guaranteed an equal number of provincial council seats to Arabs, Turkomans and Kurds.

According to Jason Gluck, a rule of law adviser at the United States Institute of Peace and a former

constitutional advisor with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq, UNAMI, the Kurds were willing to split power equally with other groups only if Kirkuk were part of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The vote passed despite the Kurdish boycott, but the presidential council last week sent the draft law back to parliament so that assembly members could reach a consensus.

A female suicide bomber blew herself up during a Kurdish-led protest against the election law in Kirkuk earlier this week.

Turkoman guards fired as Kurdish demonstrators rushed toward their offices near the protest. Turkoman officials said the demonstrators were attacking the offices, and claimed that Kurds burned other premises around the city following the violence. No one has claimed responsibility for the bombings.

Basim Daud, a member of parliament with the Shia United Iraqi Alliance, which enjoys good relations with the Kurds, said he was frustrated that Kirkuk council was "pressuring the government to change the [draft] election law".

"It's going to be a big problem," he added

"It's become seriously more difficult over the last week to reach some kind of political agreement" with regard to Kirkuk, agreed Gluck.

Iraqi Arabic and Kurdish media said Iraqi parties were meeting in an attempt to hammer out a compromise but were not hopeful that they would come to an agreement.

According to the Associated Press, UNAMI has proposed holding local elections in every province but Kirkuk so that the political storm over the region did not to delay polls throughout Iraq.

The elections, which were originally scheduled for October 1, are being pushed by the United States to increase local government representation of Sunni Arabs, who boycotted the 2005 polls.

If the election law is approved and Kirkuk is left out of the ballot "the tension will release a little bit", said Gluck.

Brendan O'Leary, a political science professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a former constitutional adviser to the KRG, noted that delays in dealing with Kirkuk is a source of frustration for the Kurds and fueling instability.

The Kirkuk provincial council's decision "reflects understandable impatience at the failure of the Iraqi government to implement Article 140", he said.

According to Article 140 of Iraqi the constitution, a referendum on whether Kirkuk falls under the control of

the KRG or the central government should be held after a process of “normalisation” takes place whereby the original inhabitants of Kirkuk who were driven out by Saddam Hussein’s regime – mostly Kurds and Turkomans – are allowed to return, and Arabs who were brought in to the city are returned to their provinces of origin.

Kurdish leaders have expressed frustration that the normalisation process is moving slowly, forcing the referendum to be delayed twice.

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