

UN Proposal Provokes Iraqi Anger

Author: [Zaineb Naji](#)

Kurds, Turkomans and Arabs criticise recommendations on how to resolve territorial disputes in north. Rival political factions have slammed a United Nations proposal to settle disputes over control of a number of areas in the north of the country, arguing the recommendations are more likely to deepen their disagreements than resolve them.

Sunni and Shia Arab, Turkoman and Kurdish representatives have cited a variety of reasons for their opposition to the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, UNAMI, plan, which was presented to the Iraqi government by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Iraq, Staffan de Mistura on June 5.

Kurds say the proposal goes against article 140 of the constitution, under which the status of disputed areas in Iraq should be decided by referendum; Turkomans complain it is biased towards the Kurds; and Turkomans and Arabs warn it could mark the beginning of the partition of Iraq.

The UNAMI proposal suggests that the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG, and central government split control of four contested northern areas – across the governorates of Nineweh, Diyala and Erbil.

It is the first of three proposals on how to resolve the status of Iraq's disputed regions which the mission expects to issue in the coming weeks.

The initial proposal suggests that the KRG be given two areas it essentially controls already – Akre in Ninewa, and Makhmour, which lies between Nineweh and Erbil provinces. It also advises that central government continue to administer Mandali district in Diyala, and Hamdaniya in Ninewa province.

UNAMI has been tasked by the Security Council to advise and support the government on resolving control of disputed territories. But the suggestions only appear to have exacerbated tensions.

Politicians are concerned that the UN agency will issue similarly unacceptable recommendations in relation to settling the status of oil-rich Kirkuk – Iraq's most hotly contested province, where Kurds, Turkomans and Arabs vie for power – which will be addressed in the third proposal.

Many of Iraq's disputed areas are in the north, where, under Saddam's so-called Arabisation policy, thousands of Kurds, Turkomans and Assyrians were uprooted and replaced with Arabs.

Many observers believe that resolving control of these contested regions – particularly Kirkuk – is key to the country's long-term stability. The province of Kirkuk is referred to as "Little Iraq" because it is home to nearly all of the country's ethnic and religious groups. The region is now sometimes referred to as a "powder keg" because many fear the battle for control over it could become explosive.

The most fervent opposition to the first UNAMI proposal came from Kurdish leaders, who have criticised the mission for skirting Iraq's constitution that provides for a referendum to settle the status of disputed territories – a process the Kurds are keen on.

A plebiscite was set to take place in Kirkuk at the end of 2007, but was delayed for six months and is expected to be delayed again.

Arab and Turkoman leaders instead advocate a power-sharing agreement in Kirkuk – a position also backed by many international analysts, who see it as the most realistic solution to the dispute.

According to the KRG website, a senior official, Mohammed Ihsan, met UNAMI's team in Iraq on June 16, telling them their proposal was unacceptable.

"The [UNAMI] proposal is superficial," said Abdul-Khaliq Zangana, a member of the Iraqi parliament on the Kurdish list. "It has the potential to deepen conflicts in many of the disputed areas, especially Kirkuk."

He also criticised it for failing to acknowledge the history of ethnic cleansing and demographic changes which have caused the territories to be disputed now.

Turkomans and Arabs in the north, meanwhile, are angry that UNAMI took into account the results of 2005 provincial polls, which were held throughout the country and boycotted by Sunni Arabs, when drafting its proposal.

Kurds won the elections throughout the north and now dominate Kirkuk's provincial council. At the time of the elections, the Turkoman minority accused Kurdish leaders of increasing their support by drafting in Kurdish voters from outside the province.

Turkomans and Arabs in the north resent the KRG's growing influence in Kirkuk and Nineweh since Saddam was ousted in 2003.

"Turkomans are rejecting the UN proposal because it has been influenced by the Kurdish factions," said Hassan Weli, a leader of the Turkoman Front.

He said they are also opposed to external actors resolving internal crises, "Turkomans are trying to unite Iraq and believe that it is in the interests of Iraq and Iraqis to solve their problems by themselves rather than resorting to outside parties, even if that party is the United Nations."

According to a June 15 article on the Turkoman Times website, the Turkoman Nationalist League's response to the UNAMI report was to recommend that the mission consider the Kurdistan capital of Erbil a disputed area because Saddam's regime declared it part of the Kurdish region in 1970.

UNAMI has stressed that the Iraqi government will ultimately decide how to resolve the disputed areas issue.

Andrew Gilmour, political director for UNAMI, acknowledged that most of Iraq's political factions were

unhappy with the mission's proposal – although he said this wasn't surprising.

“We were not expecting any party to welcome the proposals. No party was getting 100 per cent of their [demands],” he added, noting that “compromises are never agreeable to hard-liners in any party”.

He said the mission will make “minor adjustments” in future proposals based on the responses from politicians, but gave no further details on what these might be. Gilmour did say, though, that senior officials from a number of parties said they support UNAMI's efforts as a whole and want to resolve the disputes.

Qassim Daud, chairman of the Al-Tadhamun bloc in Shia-led United Iraqi Alliance, said UNAMI remains a credible agency, despite the widespread rejection of its proposal.

“Just because Iraqi parties have different views about UNAMI, this won't undermine the agency's role in Iraq,” he said.

Zaineb Naji is an IWPR-trained journalist in Baghdad. Middle East editor Tiare Rath contributed to this report.

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