

Recent Developments in the Kurdish Independence Movement in Iraq

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Nearly 20% of Iraq's population is Kurdish. The Kurds, whose total population of nearly 40 million stretches across Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and the former Soviet Caucasus, have long lived in the north of modern Iraq, but have sought to form their own nation-state. Their quest for independence has resulted in a number of civil wars between various Kurdish groups and Iraqi governments. From 1986-1989, Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime committed the genocidal Anfal campaign in which government forces murdered roughly 100,000 Kurds as a way to pacify the Kurdish independence movement. Since the end of al-Anfal, and the United Nation's Operation Provide Comfort from 1991-1996, fighting between the Kurds and Iraqi government has dissipated. However, intra-Kurdish fighting in the mid-1990s saw Saddam's forces militarily back Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) against rival forces from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

In 2005, Iraq's new constitution recognized an autonomous Kurdish region run by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a way to decrease conflict and tensions in the post-Saddam era. Once more, the KDP and PUK faced one another for leadership in Iraqi Kurdistan. Again, Barzani prevailed. He was then re-elected in 2009 and his term was extended further in 2013. At the same time, growing sectarian tensions within Iraq resulted in instability throughout the country. In response, the KRG began building its military forces. By 2014, the Kurds were fighting the Islamic State (ISIS). During this effort, the KRG extended its reach by taking control of strategic territory outside its region. Ostensibly, these maneuvers were to help the Kurds fortify their position in the fight against ISIS, as Iraqi forces moved out. However, the move also provided the Kurds control over Kirkuk,¹ an area the Kurds have long claimed though were not granted by the 2005 Constitution. Importantly, Kirkuk also contains 40% of Iraq's oil reserves. The central Iraqi government objected to these war efforts, claiming that the Kurds had overstepped their constitutional rights and had illegally seized the valuable oil reserves.

In the midst of this turmoil, Barzani announced his plan to hold a referendum on full Kurdish independence in 2014. However, turnover in leadership within the central government allowed for improved relations between the regime and the Kurds. The KRG put the referendum on hold until 2017 and worked with Iraqi forces to combat ISIS. In September, Barzani once more pushed the referendum forward. Three unsurprisingly results followed. First, over 90% of the votes cast favored independence. Second, the central government of Iraq rejected the referendum's legality. Third, Arab countries within the region possessing Kurdish minority populations have rejected the KRG's independence. Iran, for instance, called the vote a threat to regional stability, closed its borders with Iraqi Kurdistan, and moved forces to that border. Meanwhile, Turkey threatened economic sanctions and military maneuvers against Iraqi Kurdistan. The United States, which sees both Iraq and the Kurds as allies in the fight against ISIS, spoke against the referendum, as well. Given these negative reactions to the referendum, the Iraqi central government gained confidence from its neighbors' stances. It arrested pro-Kurdish demonstrators, stopped flights into Iraqi Kurdistan, and moved troops into position near Kirkuk.

Both sides discussed control of Kirkuk as non-negotiable. Given its large oil reserves, Kirkuk appeared crucial to the long-run success of an independent Kurdistan. Possessing the area and its oil would give an independent Kurdistan a means for being economically viable. Conversely, losing these reserves could greatly weaken the capacity of Iraq. Fearing the consequences of losing these reserves, Iraqi forces attacked Kirkuk on October 15, 2017. Within a day, Iraq retook the capital city. The underwhelming Kurdish defense of the city was contributed to the multiethnic composition of the city, given which its inhabitants were divided on the future of

¹ Kirkuk is both the name of the oil rich area south of Kurdistan and the area's capital city.

Kirkuk, and serious divisions within Kurdish leadership on how best to bargain with the central government. The central government received assistance from the PUK, which controlled much of Kirkuk, and the Arab and Turkmen residents of the city welcomed the government's troops. Barzani's KDP troops retreated outside the city to hold positions in the area important to controlling the oil reserves. However, the government's forces soon dislodged these Kurds, as well.

The KRG now finds itself in a precarious position. Its referendum angered its neighbors and alienated its ally, the United States; it has lost its source of economic strength; its poor defense of Kirkuk revealed significant concerns about its ability for military success in the future; and divisions between the PUK and KDP appear salient and strong. This division is particularly concerning for the stability of the KRG, as Barzani's opponents have accused him of ruining Iraqi Kurdistan's economy, stealing oil wealth, and maintaining power through autocratic means. Current in-fighting between these factions is reminiscent of the intra-Kurdish conflicts of the 1990s that helped the Ba'athist regime maintain power over the northern Kurdish regions. It also places Barzani in a difficult position because the referendum requires he move towards independence, but such a move is unlikely to succeed without access to Kirkuk's oil--and, control of Kirkuk is unlikely without unity between the KDP and PUK and a joint willingness to endure a protracted military confrontation with the central government. This is quite unlikely now. A failure to move towards independence could mean the ousting of Barzani by his fellow Kurds, while another advance on Kirkuk could mean his removal by Iraqi forces.

Unified Iraq's future stability also remains in peril. While the central government has momentarily halted the Kurdish independence movement, it faces other problems. First, Iraq's crude oil flows through the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline, which the Kurds continue to control. With its other major pipeline destroyed in the fight against ISIS, the central government will need to negotiate with the Kurds to avoid having its oil flows stalled by the KRG. The loss of revenues from stalled flows will increase the instability faced by the regime already. Second, ISIS has exploited the crisis between the Iraqis and Kurds to renew its fight in the country. Just two days after the central government captured Kirkuk, ISIS fighters attacked villages south of Kirkuk. It was the thawing of tensions between Bagdad and the KRG that allowed the two to work together previously in pushing ISIS out of the third of the country it had earlier controlled. Without a unified front, Iraq may appear to be an easy target for ISIS once more. Further complicating this situation is that Iranian backed militias supported the Iraqi forces in capturing Kirkuk and remain in the country. The presence of these militias creates an additional level of uncertainty for all parties involved, as questions remain about control of the militias, their intent, and how long they may operate on Iraqi soil given instability in Kurdistan.