

197  
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## WHY KIRKUK MATTERS

### A Kirkuk-centric approach to Iraqi elections and the country's most immediate challenges

**Albert Charara**, Programme Assistant at the Dialogue Advisory Group\* and Researcher at the Centre for International Historical Studies – Universitat de Barcelona

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The third Iraqi elections since the end of the US occupation are scheduled for May 12<sup>th</sup>. These arrive in a context of slow but progressive recovery of Iraq and its institutions. The Islamic State (IS) military defeat in December 2017 and the relatively non-violent and effective response of the federal authorities to the Kurdish independence referendum held in September 2017 are remarkable achievements for the Iraqi state and its prime minister, Haider al-Abadi. Nonetheless, analysts and policymakers describe the timing and impact of the May 12<sup>th</sup> vote in diverging ways. The more optimistic portray the upcoming elections as a turning point that will reinforce current positive trends and close one of the darkest chapters of Iraq's recent history. Those with a more pessimistic approach fear that elections could have a destabilising effect, becoming an obstacle in the path

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Kirkuk will certainly be present at the bargaining table for the creation of a coalition federal government.

Kurds often refer to Kirkuk as their Jerusalem. For Arabs, having Kirkuk under Baghdad's control represents Iraqi unity. As for the Turkmen, Kirkuk is a symbol of their position as a significant ethnicity in Iraq.

According to some experts, the implementation of a special status for Kirkuk would alleviate sectarian grievances and legitimise local leadership, providing the time and context needed to start working towards a locally compromised solution for the status of the province.

The federal government of Iraq and the KRG engaged in a contest over the control of Kirkuk's oil.

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towards recovery that, by altering the current balance of power in Baghdad, could revive internal sectarian dynamics and unpredictably reshape the influence of regional powers.

Iraq has been at a similar crossroads before. The 2010 elections were perceived as an opportunity to set the basis for sustainable peace after four years of sectarian war and the defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq. However, PM Nouri al-Maliki's second-term policies, which alienated the Sunni community, the sectarian rhetoric emerging from the Syrian war and the escalating regional tensions allowed the rise of IS in the north of the country, sending Iraq into another cycle of death and violence.

Once again, Iraq is facing one of those periods of sociopolitical reconfiguration that have strongly shaped its recent history. How the current political, securi-

ty, economic and societal challenges are addressed by the newly elected PM and his government will determine the fate of the Iraqi people in the next decade.

### **Political fragmentation and electoral cross-sectarianism**

The truth is that nobody can accurately predict the results and impact of these elections, set to be the most open since 2003. Abadi runs as favourite, but he will have to cope with the titanic task of putting together a coalition government in a scenario characterised by unprecedented political fragmentation. Shias, Sunnis and Kurds are all internally divided and on different electoral lists: five major Shia lists, two major Sunni lists, two major Kurdish lists, and several independent and/or new parties and lists. This shift towards political fragmentation has been enhanced by the fact that various actors who participated in the war against IS, including the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), are now contenders in the political arena. Also, the Kurdish division after the holding of the independence referendum deserves a special mention. As a united bloc in Baghdad, the Kurds have played a key role in the formation of federal coalition governments. However, the two main Kurdish parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union

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of Kurdistan (PUK) – are now running separately. This division was exposed by the decision of the then president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and historic leader of the KDP, Masoud Barzani, to go ahead with the independence referendum and materialised after the subsequent loss of Kirkuk, now under federal control. Even if they act as a united bloc after elections, Kurdish politicians in Baghdad will be weaker than in the past legislature.

With no clear victory expected for any of the alliances, the formation of a coalition government is likely to take months, crippling the provision of public services and slowing down reconstruction and reconciliation efforts.

On a brighter note, fragmentation is being met with rising cross-sectarian tendencies in all major lists. For example, Abadi's list, the Victory Alliance, has representatives running in all Iraqi provinces including the KRI and counts Sunni and Kurdish figures amongst its ranks. The same has happened with another Shia list, Hadi al-Amiri's Conquest Alliance, which brings together a vast array of PMF leaders but has Sunni Arab candidates running in two northern provinces, Anbar and Nineveh. Even more surprisingly, the Muqtada al-Sadr Islamist list is running together with secularists from the Iraqi Communist Party, promising to put an end to injustice and corruption in Iraq. This is not a

game-changer, but it is a new, promising phenomenon that might modulate ethnic and sectarian cleavages and encourage new multi-party dynamics beyond identity politics.

### **All roads lead to Kirkuk**

If there is a place in Iraq where all the above-mentioned dynamics and the factors that created and promoted them are present, that is the province of Kirkuk. With an estimated population of 1.2 million people, Kirkuk is home to four ethnic communities: Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen and – significantly smaller in numbers – Chaldo-Assyrians. It is located in the disputed territories between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal government of Iraq and its contested status has been a central issue in post-2003 Iraqi politics.

Kirkuk stands right in the middle of all problems between Baghdad and Iraqi Kurds and directly conditions the governance of Iraq as a whole. This is mainly for three reasons: its unresolved legal-political status and the highly symbolic meaning that Kirkuk has for both Kurdish and Arab nationalists (also for the Turkmen); as a result of the latest developments, the complex coexistence between the different security actors present in the province; and the extraordinary amount of oil reserves under Kirkuk soil. In this regard, Kirkuk has become a central issue in the agendas and electoral campaigns of many parties and will certainly be present at the bargaining table for the creation of a coalition federal government.

#### **Resolving the status of Kirkuk**

The status of Kirkuk is specifically addressed by Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution. The article sets out a three-step procedure for Kirkuk and other disputed territories. First, the implementation of a normalisation process, meaning the return of people forcibly displaced by Saddam Hussein's regime (mainly Kurdish) and also the undoing of the gerrymandered administrative borders, done to promote the "Arabisation" of Kirkuk. Once the normalisation process is completed, a new census needs to be approved. Finally, Article 140 mandates a referendum to determine if Kirkuk should become part of the KRI or not. Neither the creation of a new census nor the referendum, constitutionally scheduled for December 2007, have taken place. This has triggered great frustration for Kurdish leaders, who have long laid claim to these areas, and specifically KDP affiliates, since they are still pushing for Article 140 to be implemented when most of the other actors consider it has expired.

Nevertheless, Kirkuk has been under Kurdish administrative control since 2005, as they dominated the Provincial Council and the governor had always been Kurdish. Although local governance is supposed to work through power-sharing agreements between the different communities, such dynamics have been highly dysfunctional. Provincial elections have not been held since 2003 and boycot-

ting the sessions and resolutions of the Provincial Council became a recurrent political strategy for both the Arabs and the Turkmen.<sup>1</sup>

When the Peshmerga (the military forces of the KRI) filled the security vacuum left by the retreating Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in June 2014, the Kurds also took full control of the security apparatus of the province and acquired its oil fields and other strategic installations. Due to the strong position the Kurds achieved in the province, and the misperception that they would receive international support after their committed fight against IS, Kirkuk was included in the independence referendum held in September 2017. This set Kirkuk as a top priority for the Iraqi government and, among other factors, triggered the ousting of the Kurdish governor of Kirkuk, Najmaldin Karim (who was replaced by the Arab deputy governor, Rakan Saeed), led to the implementation of an international flight ban on Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports, and motivated the military operation that ended up with the ISF and several PMF units retaking full control of the province in October 2017. A military operation that Baghdad executed after allegedly striking a highly divisive deal with a faction of the Kurdish PUK, which eventually led to the withdrawal of the Peshmerga forces deployed in the province.

All these factors directly played into the different communities' imagery, narratives and perceived grievances. Kurds often refer to Kirkuk as their Jerusalem. For Arabs, having Kirkuk under Baghdad's control represents Iraqi unity. As for the Turkmen, Kirkuk is a symbol of their position as a significant ethnicity in Iraq. This romanticisation further aggravates grievances perceived by the communities, deepening their sense of deprivation and consequently shaping their political agenda, both at the local and national levels. In this regard, some experts suggest that the implementation of a special status for Kirkuk, not fully aligned with either Erbil or Baghdad, would alleviate sectarian grievances and legitimise local leadership, providing the time and context needed to start working towards a locally compromised solution for the status of the province.

### Post-IS security scenario

Kirkuk has recently acquired a central role in the security discussion in Iraq. The province is considered one of IS's final redoubts and the threat of infiltrations and attacks during and after the May 12<sup>th</sup> electoral process is real. Since the federal forces retook Kirkuk in October 2017, the presence of external security actors on the ground – the Iraqi Special Operations Forces from the ISF, PMF units, plus federal and local police – has alienated many locals and

created gaps in the coordination of security in the province. Especially divisive is the presence of the PMF units. Formed upon the call (fatwa) for national mobilisation against IS by the top Iraqi Shia cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the PMF have established themselves as an umbrella organisation for more than 40 militias, most of them Shia. They have played a crucial role in the fight against IS and, by the end of 2016, were incorporated into the ISF. Although this was meant to signify the end of any kind of affiliation to other political or social groups, serious doubts remain as to the actual level of "command and control" Abadi has over the militias. If the PMF, whose ranks are filled by young men from the southern areas of Iraq, are allowed to unilaterally manage security in the rural areas of Kirkuk province under their control, it is likely that sectarian tensions will continue to deepen and in turn revive sympathies for IS-like groups.

At the other end of the spectrum, a return to the previous Kurdish-controlled security scenario concerns Arabs and Turkmen. They fear that the Kurdish security forces would bring the political agendas from Erbil and Sulaymaniyah with them into the security context. Both the Arab and Turkmen communities in Kirkuk felt marginalised and excluded from decision-making in Kirkuk prior to October 2017, to the detriment of their respective communities. On

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the other hand, Kurdish representatives have expressed concern about the reverse situation, where Kurds are completely alienated from security discussions, and by extension what that could imply for the safety of the Kurdish community in the province.

### Oil politics

Kirkuk sits on oil fields holding between 10–15% of Iraq's total reserves. After the US invasion in 2003 and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, the federal government of Iraq and the KRG engaged in a contest over the control of Kirkuk's oil. In the hands of the KRG, Kirkuk's natural resources would boost the region's economy and rapidly become a political tool to achieve more autonomy and, perhaps, independence. On the other hand, federal government control over Kirkuk's oil reserves would consolidate its position as the supreme executive power in the country while strengthening the national economy and political unity of Iraq.

The oil dispute not only occurs at a federal level, but is also at the core of internal divisions between the PUK and the KDP and their regional allies. Kirkuk fields were controlled by Iraq's state oil company before being taken over by the KDP Peshmerga units in 2014. Around that time, the KDP was nurturing a good trade relationship with Turkey, while the PUK wanted to export oil from Kirkuk to Iran,

1. After the Kurdish governor of Kirkuk was deposed and the ISF retook control of the province, the Kurds themselves started to use similar tactics in an effort to deactivate the powers of the Provincial Council.



eventually encouraging both Baghdad and Tehran to build a pipeline to export Kirkuk's oil to their country. After the referendum, this commercial dispute was brought into the political arena when the KDP accused the PUK of colluding with Iran to facilitate Baghdad's military intervention in Kirkuk, which the PUK denied. In the end, the recapture of Kirkuk left Iraqi government troops back in control of half of all Kurdish oil output. These dynamics exemplify how the economic component interrelates and strongly influences the local, national and regional realities, and show how Kirkuk plays a significant role in all of them.

### Regional influence

Traditionally, but especially during the last year, Kirkuk has been on the agenda of the two main regional powers: Iran and Turkey. The reasons are pretty straightforward: Kirkuk is key for the stability and unity of Iraq, which benefits both Iran and Turkey; both Iran and Turkey have sig-

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nificant Kurdish communities in their territories and the possibility of Kirkuk being absorbed into the KRI could enhance the region's quest for independence and have a subsequent domino effect; and both countries have a direct commercial interest related to the province's natural resources. Additionally, in Kirkuk itself there is a significant Turkmen population, ostensibly protected by Turkey.

This is why when Barzani decided to hold the independence referendum in Kirkuk, Ankara and Tehran stood alongside Baghdad to alienate him – same as the US and the European Union – and showed their explicit disapproval. Following the vote, Iran and Turkey threatened to close the land borders, and engaged in military manoeuvres close to Kurdish-controlled territory. Turkey suspended contacts with the KRG and threatened to stop the oil transfers from the Kirkuk pipeline to the Ceyhan port. Furthermore, Iran – through Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani – played a facilitating role in the above-named agreement between the PUK and the federal government of Iraq that ended up with the ISF retaking Kirkuk in October 2017.

### Future perspectives

Since the events of October 2017, Baghdad and Erbil have initiated direct communications and begun to mend relations. This led to the reopening of the Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports to international flights in mid-March and Baghdad sending money to pay the salaries of state employees in the KRI for the first time since 2014. Abadi is trying to promote rapprochement as well as cross-sectarian and unity narratives in his campaign. He has managed to have representatives of his list running in all Kurdish provinces, with Kurdish and Sunni Arab figures amongst its ranks. He recently travelled to Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk, where he talked about economic recovery and fighting corruption, calling for Kurdish-Arab unity in fac-

ing such challenges. He also stressed that no citizen should be oppressed based on their ethnicity, sect or religion. Abadi visited Kirkuk at the end of April, where he met with the governor and security officials. He affirmed that Kirkuk represents a microcosm of Iraq and regarded its capital as a city of tolerance.

Regardless of the honesty of his statements, it is clear that a stable Kirkuk is in Abadi's interest, as he seeks to continue to rule the country. The official line is that Kirkukis should decide their own future without discriminating against any community, and through peaceful dialogue and negotiation always within the limits of the Iraqi constitution. However, it remains to be seen if Abadi is able to maintain his moderate position while struggling to form a coalition government. He has already experienced the difficulty of finding such an equilibrium. In January, just before the deadline to register for the May 12<sup>th</sup> vote, Abadi welcomed the PMF's Conquest Alliance into a grand coalition

hoping to consolidate his options to maintain the premiership, showing that he was willing to run alongside some of the most extremist candidates. The backlash from his supporters was severe,

making Abadi change his mind and the Shia militia leaders leave the coalition. However, the PMF will continue to condition Abadi's re-election and his project for Kirkuk. If the Conquest Alliance obtains significantly good results on May 12<sup>th</sup>, compromises on the political status and security administration of the province would be harder to reach. In line with Iranian interests, the PMF would consolidate their presence in the province and further deepen the division between the Kurdish parties, strengthening PUK dominance in Kirkuk and definitely removing the possibility of enacting Article 140.

On the Kurdish side, the lack of a coordinated electoral strategy in the main political parties will certainly diminish their influence in Baghdad. In Kirkuk, the KDP decided to boycott the elections, since they consider the province to be occupied by the federal forces. The PUK will be running, but their role in the October takeover and the general sense of dismay of the Kurdish population after the independence referendum mean great results are not anticipated for them either. Usually, the Kirkuk governorate has 12 MPs in the Iraqi parliament. Until now, around half of them have been Kurds and the rest a mix of Arabs and Turkmen. Because of the KDP's withdrawal, it is possible that the Kurds will not even reach half of the seats for Kirkuk. This would put Kirkuki Kurds, especially KDP affiliates, in an even more delicate position, reducing their leverage to negotiate at a national level. Nonetheless, from a general perspective, it is also likely that, given the current level of fragmentation and following his rapprochement strategy, Abadi would not want to isolate the 50 MPs the Kurds will approximately get.

Locally, and despite the tensions that persist, there have been positive developments for the governance of the province. In early March, MPs and representatives from Kirkuk in the Iraqi parliament reached an agreement on a provincial electoral law that will allow provincial elec-

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tions to take place in Kirkuk for the first time in 13 years, in December 2018. This contributed to a crack in the political deadlock in Kirkuk and was greeted with enthusiasm from all sides. As a result, tensions between the communities have also significantly decreased, allowing some openness to discussing the idea of future engagement with the Kurds on political and security issues in Kirkuk.

The May 12<sup>th</sup> vote and the post-election process of forming a new federal government will probably freeze the Iraqi political landscape for the next months. In the meantime, Kirkuk will be a key asset in the negotiations. The province is facing challenges that will require direct cooperation between the newly formed government in Baghdad and the KRG, plus constructive approaches from the regional powers. But more importantly, they will require Kirkuki leaders openly talking to each other. For the sake of Kirkuk itself, but also for the sake of Iraq and the stability in the region.