



The Kurdish Question

Iraq is once again in a period of transition. As Iraqi forces take on more security functions and U.S. forces begin preparations for eventual withdrawal, attention is turning to a vexing issue that long predates the 2003 overthrow of the former regime. The Kurdish question has dogged Iraq and its neighbors since they were created at the end of the First World War. Ninety years later, the issue threatens the tenuous stability won at such great cost to Iraqis, Americans and their coalition partners.

When the Ottoman Empire was carved into its successor states, ethnic Kurds were deeply disappointed. The region they inhabited was divided among Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey and the Soviet Union (now Armenia and Azerbaijan). The Kurds have rebelled against their various governments numerous times since, seeking autonomy, independence and, ultimately, the creation of a unified state of Kurdistan. Hopes for Kurdish independence were especially high after World War II sounded the death knell for colonialism, and again in the 1970s when the Soviets supported Marxist anti-imperialist movements, including the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). However, the nations involved have succeeded in suppressing Kurdish rebellions and keeping their borders intact. Kurds in Armenia and Azerbaijan are too small in number to pose a plausible threat to either state. Iran and Syria oppress their majorities as well as their Kurdish minorities. It is in Turkey and Iraq that the Kurdish question burns most intensely.

Turkey has the largest Kurdish minority, numbering perhaps 15 million and constituting as much as 18 percent of the population. From 1984 until 1999, the Turkish

military ruthlessly suppressed an armed insurgency by the PKK, displacing much of the Kurdish population from its traditional lands in the southeast. The military's conduct raised serious human rights concerns that have hindered Turkey's integration with the European Union. After the capture of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in 1999, the PKK lost much of its support. Ocalan has since renounced violence, and the remnants of the organization are divided between those who have entered politics and those who continue the struggle using terrorism. Some of the latter have taken refuge in northern Iraq, and the Turkish military has conducted several cross-border raids (most recently in February 2008) attempting to shut down the PKK.

The 6.5 million Kurds in northern Iraq have had an equally violent relationship with their central government. Promises of Kurdish autonomy have been repeatedly betrayed, and frequent Kurdish rebellions have threatened to destabilize the fractious and somewhat artificial Iraqi nation. But with lucrative oil and natural gas fields stretching across northern Iraq, successive Baghdad governments have fought tenaciously to keep the Kurds from seceding. The Kurds have revolted against Baghdad's rule several times and have also fought amongst themselves.

Iraqi Kurdish politics have long been dominated by two rival factions. Like the PKK, they seem to be equal parts guerilla movement and political party, each with its own peshmerga militia. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was established in 1946 by legendary Kurdish fighter Mustafa Barzani. Since the elder Barzani's death





This map has been adapted by the International Crisis Group from a map made available by the U.S. government. The Kurdish "green line" has been added, and the border of the "Disputed areas" adjusted to add more detail. Used with permission from ICG.

in 1979, the KDP has been led by his son, Massoud, who is also the current president of the Kurdish regional government. In 1975, KDP dissidents formed the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) under Jalal Talabani, who still leads the organization and is now president of Iraq. The complex relationship between the two groups has included both bitter fighting and peaceful cooperation.

Sixty years of periodic fighting between the Kurds and the Iraqi state culminated in the al-Anfal Campaign, launched in the late 1980s by the government of Saddam Hussein. The three-year military operation killed hundreds of thousands of Kurdish civilians, destroyed thousands of Kurdish villages and resettled thousands of Arabs in the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul in an attempt to change the

ethnic character of the region. The brutal campaign made extensive use of chemical weapons and left a legacy of deep hatred among Iraqi Kurds.

In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, both of Iraq's oppressed ethnicities—Shi'ite Arabs in the south and Sunni Kurds in the north—rose in revolt against the Sunni Arab-dominated Hussein regime. The simultaneous revolts were both put down, and the regime survived. Although the United States did not assist the uprisings, they provided humanitarian aid to Kurdish refugees fleeing northward and eventually prohibited Iraqi aircraft from flying in the northern and southernmost reaches of the country. Without air support, the Iraqi military lost its principal advantage against the Kurdish fighters, and retreated from the area covered by the northern no-fly zone. The United States, United Kingdom and France enforced the zones until the 2003 invasion made them moot, and under this protection the Iraqi Kurds achieved de facto independence.

Freed from Baghdad's rule, the Iraqi Kurds set up a regional government with its capital at Erbil, but in 1994, fighting broke out between the KDP and the PUK. For four years, violence and chaos continued as the two factions fought for power. The KDP even recruited the hated regime of Saddam Hussein, and later the Turkish military, to help them against the PUK. Starting in 1997, the United Nations' "oil-for-food" program brought the two groups together to receive and distribute the Kurds' share of the benefits. Although the regional government was not reestablished, the two factions observed a cease-fire brokered by the United States in 1998. After the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, they combined forces to compete in the 2005 elections, allowing the Kurds to present a united front in the national vote. The Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan (DPAK) also included a few minor factions, and has dominated Iraqi Kurdish politics. In Kurdish regional elections held in July 2009, DPAK was challenged by a group of former PUK members calling themselves Change. The new party garnered 25 percent of the vote, limiting the DPAK to only 59 percent.

Iraqi Kurdistan is now a recognized region within a federal Iraqi nation—the only region formed so far under the new constitution. But major questions still surround its extent and its future, and violence is on the rise along its borders. For twelve years, the Kurdish region was bounded by the "green line" that separated Iraqi national

security forces from Kurdish forces in 1991. In 2003, U.S. military leaders allowed Kurdish security forces to expand beyond the green line into additional areas. The Kurds have incorporated these areas into their region and would also like to add a wide swath of land across the green line that they say is majority Kurdish—or would be if Kurds displaced during the al-Anfal Campaign and the 1991 uprising were able to return. Non-Kurds in the disputed areas generally oppose being placed under Kurdish rule, and the issue of the boundary of the Kurdish region remains unresolved. In addition to the issue of ethnicity, most of the functioning oil fields in northern Iraq are in these disputed areas.¹

An additional issue—rarely discussed openly—complicates relations between Baghdad and Erbil: Kurdish independence. The Kurds have sought an independent nation for decades, but pursuing such a course is not without risk. The Baghdad government has repeatedly resorted to force to keep the country intact. Syria and Iran have long opposed an independent Kurdish state for fear that their own minorities would be encouraged to join it, and both nations have been willing to intervene in Iraqi affairs in the past. Turkey has opposed Kurdish independence as well, and for the same reasons. However, Iraqi Kurdish leaders have been cultivating a new relationship with Ankara, pursuing energy contracts and cooperating with the 2008 Turkish incursion into Iraq to search for PKK terrorists. Some experts believe the Kurds may someday look to Ankara as a counterweight to Baghdad.²

Although the disputed areas run the entire length of the green line, two major cities are the center of much of the recent violence and the most likely flash points of conflict between Baghdad and Erbil. The fate of Kirkuk and its lucrative oil fields remains unsettled, despite vigorous mediation efforts by United Nations officials. And Mosul and its environs are a constant source of tension between Kurds and Arabs, as well as between Shi'ite and Sunni Arabs.

The city of Kirkuk and its surrounding region was traditionally Kurdish, though it has had significant minorities of Turkmen and Assyrians for centuries. The last reliable ethnic census of the city, done in 1957, counted Kurds as nearly two-thirds of the population. However, the Hussein regime's violence drove many Kurds out, and the policy of "Arabization" settled large numbers of Arabs in the city. Many Kurds believe their ethnic group still

¹ For an in-depth discussion of the boundary issues, see International Crisis Group, "Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble Along the Trigger Line," *Middle East Report*, No. 88, 8 July 2009, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6207&l=1>.

² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

comprises a majority of Kirkuk's residents and insist that the province should be part of Iraqi Kurdistan. The city's other ethnic groups oppose this, and Turkey has sought to protect the rights of its ethnic kinsmen. Baghdad has long planned a local referendum to determine whether the Kirkuk province should join the Kurdish region, but the vote has been repeatedly delayed by disagreements over process. The issue is not just ethnic, as the Kirkuk region includes some of the largest, most developed oil fields in northern Iraq.

While Iraqi Kurds do not claim a majority within the city of Mosul, most of the land to the north and east of it is said to be majority Kurdish. Like Kirkuk, Iraq's

second largest city was targeted by the former regime's "Arabization" program, and its population has long been a volatile ethnic mix. The city was the site of heavy fighting in 2004, and violence there is increasing again. With a large Arab population in Mosul (itself split between Sunnis and Shi'ites) and Kurds inhabiting much of the surrounding countryside, control of Ninewa province is an ongoing source of tension.

Ninety years later, the Kurdish question still lacks a definitive answer. Ethnic tensions, long-standing hatreds, past atrocities and valuable oil resources make for a complex, contentious set of issues. And the unsettled fate of Iraqi Kurdistan leaves the future of Iraq in question.

Key Points

- The Kurds have struggled for independence for nearly a century.
- The Kurdish question involves Iran, Syria and Turkey as well as Iraq.
- Iraqi Kurds have fought bitterly with the central government, and suffered grievous oppression.
- The border of the Iraqi Kurdistan region has not been permanently decided and the area remains volatile.
- Lucrative oil and natural gas resources in northern Iraq complicate the issue.



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