

## **Jerusalem of the Kurds: Kirkuk and the Kurdish Strategy for Independence**

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On March 20, 2017, the governor of Kirkuk Province, Najmaddin Karim, raised the Kurdish flag at the Kirkuk Citadel in the heart of the city of Kirkuk. Among Kurds, the city is known as “Our Jerusalem.” The flag-raising was held in honor of the Kurdish national holiday of Newroz, and was intended to be a symbol of Kirkuk’s central place in the crystallizing entity of Iraqi Kurdistan. The flag-raising was perceived in Baghdad, Tehran, and Ankara as an affront and an attempt to establish facts on the ground in areas that have been disputed since the establishment of Iraq in 1920.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the angry reactions were not slow in coming, but were ignored by Iraqi Kurds.

Kirkuk Province’s importance is due to its vast hydrocarbon resources (oil and natural gas) and the ethnic heterogeneity of its citizens. Oil was indeed the driving factor behind the British Empire’s conquest of the Ottoman *vilayet* of Mosul (which includes today’s Kirkuk Province) from the Ottomans in November 1914, despite the October 1914 ceasefire that had already entered into force. It was also the principal factor in the British decision to attach the *vilayet* to Iraq in 1926, even though Turkey claimed the area for itself and local Kurds demanded self-government for the region.

Oil also led subsequent Iraqi governments in Baghdad to Arabize Kirkuk Province. New research shows that this policy already started in 1929, when the number of Arab residents in the province stood at only 20 percent of the total.<sup>2</sup> Arabization grew even stronger during the 35 years of Ba’thist rule (1968 to

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that as early as 1931 Kirkuk Province was recognized as a Kurdish region, as reflected in the Local Languages Act adopted by the League of Nations, which granted cultural autonomy to the Kurds in four provinces of Iraq. See: Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan 1918-1985*, (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), p.111.

<sup>2</sup> Farid Asasard, *al-Mas’ala al Kurdiyya ba’da Qanun Idarat al-Dawla al- ‘Iraqiya* [The Kurdish Issue after the Administrative Law of the Iraqi State] (Cairo: Madbouli Books, 2006), pp. 80-81.

2003).<sup>3</sup> Following the March 1970 agreement, which granted autonomy to the Kurds of Iraq, the Kirkuk issue became the main bone of contention between Iraq's Kurds and the central government. The Kurds, led by Mulla Mustafa Barzani, claimed it for themselves based on a 1957 census that showed that the Kurds had a majority in the province.<sup>4</sup> For its part, the government in Baghdad, led by Saddam Hussein, sought to keep the province under its control. The proposed solution was to hold a census to determine if indeed the Kurds held a majority in the province. The census was never held and the Ba'athist regime carried out an aggressive policy to Arabize the region.

The Arabization of Kirkuk included uprooting Kurds – or forcing them to change their nationality to Arab – and the settlement of a large number of Arab families in their place, while providing large financial and economic incentives and falsifying the date of their settlement in the population registry. Baghdad constructed thousands of homes to settle Arabs in Kirkuk Province, while forbidding Kurds from purchasing homes and, most severe of all, deporting 250,000 Kurds to the southern desert of Iraq in order to bring an end, once and for all, to any Kurdish claim to Kirkuk.<sup>5</sup> The demographic engineering of Kirkuk carried out by the Ba'athist regime were most clearly evident in the numbers: While according to the 1957 census, Kurds constituted 48 percent of the population and Arabs 28 percent, in the 1999 census, Kurds amounted to only 21 percent of the population while the number of Arabs had increased to 72 percent.<sup>6</sup> As for the Turkmen ethnic minority that lived in constant tension with both Arabs and Kurds, they were never a majority in the province; today, while they claim to be a majority in the city of Kirkuk itself this seems unlikely given the demographic changes over the years. For example, the percentage of Turkmen in the province decreased from 21 percent in 1957 to only 7 percent in 1999.<sup>7</sup>

The Kirkuk question was brought up for discussion after the fall of the Ba'athist regime in 2003. The new 2005 Iraqi Constitution included a specific reference to the Kirkuk question in article 140, which included the following points: (1) The residents who were expelled from Kirkuk Province and other areas as a result of the Arabization policy of previous governments will be able to return and receive compensation, while the new residents relocated by these governments will return to the south; (2) A census will be held in the disputed territories; (3) A

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<sup>3</sup> Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: The Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Compromise*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 33-36.

<sup>4</sup> The number of Kurds in Kirkuk Province was held to be 157,575 of 285,900, which included Turkmen, Arabs, and other minorities. See: Cecil J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp.438-439.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson and Stansfield, pp. 36-40.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 44.

public referendum will be held to examine whether the residents of the disputed territories want to be part of Iraq or the autonomous region of Kurdistan.<sup>8</sup> Article 140 was supposed to enter into force by the end of 2007, but Baghdad has not implemented it.

The rise of the Islamic State (IS) and its control over Mosul beginning in June 2014, along with the sudden and total collapse of the Iraqi Army, provided Iraq's Kurds with the opportunity to exercise control over Kirkuk Province and the other disputed territories. Today they attempt to use this fait accompli on the ground in order to move forward towards *de jure* independence, since in their view they have achieved control over the territory within the borders of their "imagined" Kurdish state. The flag-raising in Kirkuk, therefore, was symbolic expression of the incremental path to Kurdish independence.

What is the Kurdish strategy for independence and what are the challenges it faces? The decision to adopt independence as a strategic goal came to fruition in 2014, after the Kurds won control over the oil-rich disputed territories, the Baghdad government was severely weakened, and conflicts emerged between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad over various political, military, and economic issues. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and its leader, the president of the Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani — along with his nephew, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, and his son, Security Chief Masrour Barzani — are leading Kurdistan's drive towards independence. Their strategy was built on five pillars, the first of which was reconciling with their two rival political parties: The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), whose historic leader was Jalal Talabani; and the Goran ("Change") Party, which was led by Nawshirwan Mustafa.

The main bone of contention between the three parties was the division of power and economic resources, but above all the refusal of President Barzani to relinquish power after a two-year extension to his elected eight-year term in office expired in 2013. The conflict between Goran and the KDP led to the dissolution of parliament in October 2015, creating antagonism between the three major parties. In light of this serious crisis, the KDP initiated a reconciliation with the PUK at the end of 2016. The PUK, which had been weakened by internal party conflicts in the aftermath of Jalal Talabani's 2012 stroke was more open to this move. Accordingly, after a few rounds of talks with the KDP, the two sides arrived at a new formula for reconciliation and an agreement on holding a public referendum as a first step towards independence.

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<sup>8</sup> David Romano, "The Iraqi Kurdish view on federalism: Not just for the Kurds", in David Romano and Mehmet Gurses (eds.), *Conflict, Democratization and the Kurds in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 197-198.

As for Goran, it still hasn't declared its support for the referendum due to pressure from Iran and its own continued weakness, particularly following the death of the party's founder and leader, Nawshirwan Mustafa, in May 2017.

The public referendum, which is the second pillar of the Kurdish strategy, is scheduled to take place on September 25, 2017. It will pose one question to the entire population of the Kurdistan region, including those in the disputed territories, asking whether they support independence or not. The objective of the referendum is to provide internal and international legitimacy for independence, as well as make it possible for the Kurds to annex Kirkuk Province and other disputed territories to the Kurdistan region.

It was clear that these steps would be strongly opposed by the government in Baghdad. Hence, the third part of the Kurdish strategy has been to try to reach an understanding with Baghdad so as to facilitate the Kurdish region's separation from the Iraqi state. The Kurdish leadership believes that if Baghdad agrees to a negotiated separation, it will legitimize the Kurdish state regionally and internationally. Indeed, in the summer-fall of 2016, there was a limited rapprochement between the Kurdish leadership and Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-'Abadi, when the two sides came to an understanding on security issues and the Kurdish leadership permitted the Iraqi Army to cross Kurdish territory on its way to fight the Islamic State in Mosul. 'Abadi was even quoted as saying that the Kurds have the right to self-determination.<sup>9</sup> In all likelihood, 'Abadi's stance at that moment was tactical aimed at solving the urgent problem of getting Iraqi forces to Mosul. The fact is that since then there have been no significant developments between the Kurds and 'Abadi, which is not surprising given the heavy pressure on 'Abadi from all parts of the Shi'i camp in Iraq, which is opposed to Kurdish separation.

The fourth aspect of the Kurdish strategy was developing close ties with Turkey, something that began already in 2008. The most meaningful achievement in this respect was the economic lifeline Turkey provided to the Kurdish entity by allowing its independent oil and gas pipelines to pass through its territory.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Kurdish progress towards economic independence has moved forward, but with the heavy price of escalating conflict with Baghdad and increasing Kurdish dependence on Turkey. Turkey appeared to prefer Erbil to Baghdad, particularly in light of the deepening Sunni-Shi'i rift. Ankara signaled its ties with Erbil by raising the Kurdistan flag outside the Istanbul and Ankara airports during President Barzani's February 2017 visit.<sup>11</sup> Although the Kurdistan flag

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<sup>9</sup> "[Iraq PM sees Kurdish referendum as undisputed right](#)," *Rudaw*, August 26, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> The oil pipeline began transporting oil from the Kurdish region to Turkey in January 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Mahmut Bozarslan, "[Kurdish flag controversy continues, in Turkish court](#)," *al-Monitor*, March 7, 2017.

was flown alongside the Iraqi flag, the symbolism of flying a Kurdish flag in Turkey, a country that until recently considered such a step heresy, can't be overstated. A commentator in the London-based *Independent*, even predicted that Turkey would be one of the first states to recognize an independent Kurdish State in Iraq.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, one should also expect Turkey to try and limit the Kurdish drive towards independence. For example, Ankara has been outspoken in support of the

The diplomatic offensive the Kurds are conducting across the world, led by President Barzani, is another part of the Kurdish strategy. This offensive is leveraging the upheaval in Iraq and Syria, and the danger of radical jihadi organizations, in order to present a positive image of Iraqi Kurdistan and seek support for its drive towards independence. The Kurdish leadership cultivates its image by emphasizing the Kurdish *Peshmerga* fighting the IS, its pro-Western orientation, its strategic alliance with the U.S., the Kurdish region's stability and its role as a refuge for minorities and displaced persons.

The diplomatic infrastructure that is carrying out this offensive constitutes more than 40 representatives operating around the world. At the same time, there are 36 diplomatic missions in Erbil that serve as embassies in all but name.<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that the international community understands and even identifies with the Kurds in Iraq far better now than in the past. According to a Kurdish newspaper, already in 2014 a number of states, including the U.S., the U.K., France, Italy, Jordan, Kuwait, and several other Arab Gulf states have even informed Kurdish representatives that they "will show understanding if the Kurds declare independence."<sup>14</sup>

This strategy, which has been carefully calculated and implemented, should not obscure the serious challenges facing the Kurdish leadership. Those who are against independence warn of the danger of civil war within the Kurdish region like the one that is taking place in the new state South Sudan, as well as the potential for a confrontation with Baghdad. An Iranian intervention to subvert independence, using Shi'i militias such as *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* (Popular Mobilization Units), is a real possibility. Further, Turkey could also initiate a military intervention to prevent the Kurds from annexing Kirkuk. Nevertheless, Kurdish leaders are well aware of these challenges and continue to demonstrate

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<sup>12</sup> Gary Kent, "[Kurdish independence is coming – but the Kurds themselves have to secure it](#)," *Independent*, May 20, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> [Basnews](#) (in Kurdish), May 24, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Deniz Serinci, "[Europe's Kurds Rally for Kurdish Independence](#)," *Rudaw*, July 14, 2014.

a firm resolve to pursue the path towards independence, which enjoys broad popular support.<sup>15</sup>

It was Jalal Talabani who coined the expression, "Kirkuk is the Jerusalem of the Kurds."<sup>16</sup> Qubad Talabani, who serves as the KRG's deputy prime minister, echoed his father on the occasion of the March flag-raising ceremony in Kirkuk, proclaiming, "Congratulations on raising our flag in the Kurdish Jerusalem." He also mentioned his father's statement that Kirkuk was the key to solving the Kurdish issue.<sup>17</sup> But Kirkuk is not only a key; it is also a huge barrel of flammable oil, containing a variety of diverse factors and interests, that could explode and thus destroy Kurdish aspirations for independence, if the Kurdish leadership does not handle the issue carefully, patiently, and wisely.

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<sup>15</sup> A public opinion poll at the end of 2016 reported 84.3% support for independence; see: Mewan Dolamari, "[Survey: 84.3 percent of Kurds favor independence](#)," K24, August 20, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Mustafa Gurbuz, "[Iraqi Kurdistan's bid for independence: Challenges and prospects](#)," Arab Center, Washington D.C., January 26, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> *Rudaw*, March 28, 2017.