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Iraqi Kurdistan's New Security Challenges

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Executive Summary

The recent advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and collapse of a quarter the Iraqi Army has created both opportunities and threats for the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). With Baghdad occupied by the crisis, the KRG has been able to consolidate control of disputed oil-rich areas. With the Iraqi government in desperate need of Kurdish support, the KRG has an opportunity to extract concessions on both territory and the distribution of oil revenue, and has become a priority for the United States. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited the region on June 24 in order to request Kurdish support for Baghdad.

While the crisis gives Kurdish leaders leverage over the national government, it has also created a 1,000 kilometer-long border between the KRG and territory controlled by the aggressive and violent ISIS. Kurdish leaders must worry about attacks from the militant group, as well as infiltration or attacks by sympathizers who have likely entered the region among 300,000 Sunni refugees.

On balance, Kurdish leaders believe that they will benefit. They remain optimistic about their territorial and political gains, and believe that the Kurdish security forces will be able to prevent ISIS attacks. Their efforts to navigate the situation will have a major impact on both the struggle in Iraq and the regional strategic situation.

Introduction

The withdrawal of most Iraqi Army units from the Sunni areas of Iraq in early June, solidified Kurdish control over the disputed areas that the Kurds historically consider part of Kurdistan. The Iraqi government, led by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, has tried to push the Kurds back from these provinces since August 2008, but now the Kurds are in full control after securing the deserted Iraqi Army positions.

The blitzkrieg assault led by ISIS has handed most of the oil-rich disputed territories to the Iraqi Kurds, which could serve as the basis of an independent Kurdish state in the future. Furthermore, the KRG has secured most of the Iraqi-Syrian border areas where Kurds live and are now able to defend Kurdish minorities who were under attack in formerly Iraqi-controlled areas. These gains also increase security risks to the Kurds, however.

The United States and Iran have put pressure on the KRG to side with Baghdad against ISIS, but the Kurds would benefit more if they stayed neutral and did not become part of the sectarian conflict. Shiite parties have already made threats against the KRG for allegedly supporting the Sunnis, while ISIS could target the Kurds in case they cooperate with Shiite-dominated government against the militant group (Rudaw, June 20).

The internal divisions among the Kurds might threaten the neutrality of the Kurds, but they speak with a united Kurdish voice to Baghdad over oil and security issues. This is because the two main Kurdish parties are allied with different countries: the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is closer to Iran, while the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is closer to Turkey. Both parties operate their own security forces and this could lead to different approaches in the fight against ISIS (Basnews, June 18).

The KDP has hosted several Sunni leaders, including the governor of Mosul, and has heavily criticized Baghdad's policies. The PUK has been more critical of Turkey. Its territories mostly border Iran and they maintain good contacts with the Iranian security agencies. However, the current crisis might pressure the Kurdish parties to act as one and they have managed to form a national unity government that consists of all parties (Rudaw, June 19).

The PUK fights mostly in the disputed territories of Diyala and Kirkuk, while the KDP is fighting in the disputed areas of Mosul. There were heavier clashes in the PUK-controlled areas where the borders are less clear than in Mosul and there are larger Shiite populations in the areas of control. In Mosul, the population consists mostly of Sunni Arabs and Kurds, Christians and other minorities. Shi'a Turkmen are now fleeing the town of Tal Afar, after the Iraqi Army was expelled.

Kurds Set to Benefit

The KRG hope they can use Baghdad's weakness as a bargaining chip to push the central government to accept independent Kurdish oil exports to Turkey, pay the withheld budget to them and recognize the disputed territories as part of the KRG. The Kurds now demand 25 percent of Iraq's oil revenue having secured Kirkuk's oil fields (Reuters, June 16).

The position of Baghdad has weakened as it loses territory. They cannot control most of the Sunni areas without cooperating with the Kurds. Therefore, the United States realizes that the Kurds are necessary to keep Iraq together and to fight ISIS.

The Kurds have another advantage over Baghdad: Kirkuk's oil can now only be exported through Kurdistan, since the damaged Ceyhan pipeline passes through ISIS-controlled territory and therefore cannot be repaired. The Iraqi Kurds now hold the key to exports from Kirkuk to Turkey.

New Security Risks

Nevertheless, although Kurds have increased their chances of establishing their own state, they now have to deal with ISIS instead of Baghdad. They also suffer from a lack of fuel, resulting from the ISIS takeover of the Baiji refinery and increased fuel demands (PUKmedia, June 23). This can cause social disturbances and worsen economic conditions with the ongoing lack of a budget in the KRG.

The so-called trigger line – a curve stretching across Iraq from the Syrian to the Iranian border where the Kurdish fighters faced the Iraqi Army – has been replaced by a security line of 1,000 kilometers bordering ISIS militants between the Syrian border in Rabia and Naftxana, close to Iranian border. [1]

The Kurdistan Region now borders ISIS, and not Baghdad. "We now have 1,000 kilometers of border with terrorists. Of course that is a threat. We are not happy to be neighbors with terrorists," said Peshmerga spokesperson Jabbar Yawar. [2]

Although the security situation strengthens the Kurdish hand against Baghdad, the Kurds now face battle-hardened ISIS fighters instead of the disorganized Iraqi Army. Nevertheless, the Kurds remain confident that they can contain the ISIS threat, although ISIS could attempt to carry out bombings in the KRG or engage in battles with Kurds in the disputed areas. So far, ISIS remains the biggest threat for Baghdad and not the KRG.

Internal Security in the KRG

As a result of the threat, the KRG Interior Ministry has heightened security measures.

"The internal security is good anyway, the security forces are dedicated and have a lot of experience in what they are doing," says Harry Schute, a former U.S. general and security advisor to the KRG. [3] "The recent movement of ISIS and the long border we have with them now, caused our internal security forces to have a higher state of readiness and are more on alerts." [4]

The number of checkpoints and security controls has also increased as the result of an influx of over 300,000 internally displaced Sunnis that fled the fighting (UNHCR, June 17). The KRG already welcomed more than 200,000 Syrian Kurdish refugees and thousands of refugees who fled the Iraqi government crackdown on Anbar governorate earlier this year (UNHCR, June 15).

Although the Kurdish government welcomed the Sunni refugees, they are aware that some of the displaced Sunnis could be sympathetic to Sunni insurgent groups and pose a security risk and could even be used as sleeper cells.

Some oil companies operating in Kurdistan are worried about the security conditions and have evacuated non-essential staff (Global Post, June 20). Foreign oil companies operating in disputed territories close to ISIS borders are also worried. So far, though, it seems the KRG has successfully fortified these positions since they

were already under full Kurdish security control. It is unlikely that ISIS could threaten critical oil infrastructure in these territories.

"We are aware, before the problem began, that one critical infrastructure for Kurdistan is the oil and gas sector, therefore there is a lot of attention for that, and sometimes even more intensive than for other areas," Schute said. [5]

Some Kurdish security officials even suggest that security has improved in the Kurdistan region. "The security will be better now because in the past any terrorist that entered in Kurdistan came from Mosul and Kirkuk and now we control these [parts of these] areas completely," Halgurd Hikmet, a spokesperson of the Peshmerga forces said. [6] The oil-rich and strategic city of Kirkuk is now under full Kurdish control and protected by security trenches. "We have [Peshmergas] along the river Zab. Here in this area we moved our forces further west, around 35 kilometers from the city. Around 25 kilometers from the [security] trench. That has given us a defensive line," says Kirkuk Governor Najmaldin Karim. [7]

Nevertheless, ISIS still carries out bomb attacks against Peshmerga forces in the border town of Rabia border town and Kirkuk city and will be able to continue to destabilize the disputed areas in the near future. On June 24, the Turkmen head of the Kirkuk provincial council was gunned down by unknown gunmen (PUKmedia.com, June 24).

Threat of Kurdish Jihadists

Another risk the KRG faces are homegrown jihadist fighters that have travelled to Syria. According to Mariwan Naqshbandi, spokesperson for the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, around 200 Kurds have travelled to Syria. [8] In reality, this number might be higher and there is a high possibility that these Iraqi Kurdish jihadists could join ISIS in battle against the KRG in Iraq.

The close proximity to ISIS territory also makes it easier for Kurdish ISIS sympathisers to travel to ISIS controlled areas without travelling to Syria first. Therefore, the KRG might have to tighten intelligence control over Kurdish ISIS sympathisers who pose a threat to the KRG.

Conclusion

The Iraqi Kurds benefit from the current crisis in Iraq where ISIS has taken over many areas. The situation and the uncompromising mentality of the Iraqi government could lead the Kurds to break away from Iraq if they are able to get support from Turkey. Kurdish borders are now clearly demarcated and they are likely to benefit from controlling Kirkuk's oil resources. Nevertheless, the fact that the KRG now borders 1,000 kilometers of ISIS territory will also present serious security risks to the Kurdistan region. There have been several clashes between the ISIS and Kurds and in the future the ISIS could destabilize the KRG if they pose a threat to ISIS plans. Nevertheless, the Kurds are confident that they can maintain their security in the future.

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Notes

1. International Crisis Group (ICG), "Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble Along The Trigger Line," July 2009, www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/088-iraq-and-the-kurds-trouble-along-the-trigger-line.aspx.
2. Author's interview with Jabbar Yawar, June 18, 2014.
3. Security meeting, Middle East Research Institute, May 24, 2014, Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Author's interview with Halgurd Hikmet, June 15, 2014.
7. Author's interview with Najmaldin Karim, June 29, 2014.
8. Author's interview with Mariwan Naqshbandi, spokesperson for the ministry of endowment and religious affairs, June 22, 2014.