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The Dangerous Implications of Raising the Kurdish Flag in Kirkuk

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In recent weeks, the already complicated politics around the Iraqi city of Kirkuk have been further inflamed by the decision of Kirkuk Governor Najmaddin Karim to raise the flag of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) over government buildings in the city ([Rudaw](#), March 28).

The decision came as somewhat of a surprise for international, regional and local audiences who have been focusing their attention on the offensive to recapture Mosul, the upcoming Raqqa operation in Syria and the end of Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield. The incident is expected to have implications not only for the future of Kirkuk, but also — as the city is a microcosm of Iraq's ethnic and religious composition — for the country as a whole.

It could also have serious regional implications for the fight against Islamic State (IS) as several regional players in that conflict have been closely engaged with Kirkuk, either directly or indirectly.

Kirkuk Under PUK Control

In the aftermath of the IS offensive on northern Iraq, the city of Kirkuk has fallen increasingly under the influence of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Since the summer of 2014, when Iraqi troops fled the city in the face of the IS advance, security in Kirkuk has been guaranteed by Kurdish peshmerga forces, along with the PUK-controlled *asayish* (a regional police force) ([Ekurd Daily](#), June 12, 2014).

Turkmens and Arabs have expressed their irritation with this situation, but the peshmerga's efforts to save the city from an IS invasion, and the city's political landscape — Kurdish MPs constitute a majority of the Kirkuk Provincial Council — put the Kurds in a strong position ([DW Türkçe](#), April 5).

Karim himself has been unwavering. His tough stance is linked to the importance Kurdish political and armed groups across the board give to the city. Described as the "Jerusalem" of the Kurds by PUK leader Jalal Talabani, it falls within the boundaries of the Hamrin Mountains, an area many view as the historical boundary of a Kurdish region ([Rudaw](#), April 2; [Hurriyet Daily News](#), December 31, 2004).

Kurdish political parties have long called for a referendum in Kirkuk, and the government was due to hold one in December 2007, in accordance with Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. However, the planned preceding steps — the settlement of land disputes following an influx of Kurds to the city and a census of the city's population — never came about. Since 2003, there has been considerable Kurdish migration to the city, which the Iraqi government says has significantly changed Kirkuk's demographics.

Arabs and Turkmen argue, given the current situation, that Article 140 is no longer in effect. Kurdish parties, however, point out it remains in the constitution and say it remains valid, even though the deadline has passed.

In March, in protest at Baghdad's neglect of Kirkuk, the PUK advanced on the oil wells near the city. Kirkuk's hydrocarbon resources have long been a point of tension, not only between Erbil and Baghdad, but also between the Kurds themselves — specifically the KDP under KRG president Masoud Barzani, and the PUK ([ARA News](#), March 3). The move by Kirkuk governor Karim needs to be viewed in the light of these divisions.

Raising the Flag

Karim's decision was in defiance of the Iraqi government, but with the army busy with its offensive on Mosul, he could be confident the military would be unable to respond. Karim can thus strengthen his own position, as well as that of the PUK, at a time when the PUK, KDP and the Gorran Movement founded by the late Nawshirwan Mustafa are engaged in a clash over Barzani's continuing presidential term, regarded as illegal by the PUK and Gorran ([al-Monitor](#), May 22, 2015).

The move — both defying the central government and further underlining KRG's ambitions regarding the city — is a boost for both Karim and the PUK, not only in Kirkuk but in the KRG as a whole. It is also a position that Iraq's Kurdish political parties can get behind, offering some sense of political cohesion.

Karim's decision, however, has caused an outcry from several local and regional actors. The central government condemned it, calling it a violation of the constitution and insisting that only the Iraqi flag could be raised over buildings under the authority of the central government ([al-Jazeera](#), April 2). However, Karim says Baghdad's objection has no legal basis and that he is under no obligation to obey it ([Hurriyet Daily News](#), April 3).

The mainly Iran-backed Shia militia umbrella organization Hashd Shaabi is also against an expansionist Kurdish policy. The militia's presence around Kirkuk and its earlier encounters with peshmerga, resulting in clashes in Tuzkhurmato, suggest a key challenge might come from the Hashd Shaabi ([K24](#), November 15, 2015; [Rudaw](#), April 26, 2016).

Turkey too has been critical, viewing itself historically as the protector of the Iraqi's minority Turkmen population. İbrahim Kalın, spokesperson for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, warned the move would cause further tensions in Kirkuk, while Hüseyin Müftüoğlu, spokesperson for the Turkish foreign ministry, said the move would damage stability and reconciliation efforts and could erode the multi-cultural identity of the city ([al-Jazeera Turk](#), March 31; [TRT Haber](#), March 19). President Erdoğan himself warned that unless the flag is taken down, the Kurdish

administration of the city risked damaging the "good ties" between Ankara and Erbil ([Rudaw](#), April 5).

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), meanwhile, described the decision as a "unilateral step that might jeopardize harmony and peaceful coexistence among many ethnic and religious groups that rightly call Kirkuk their home" ([Rudaw](#), March 21).

A Distraction in the Fight Against IS

The move may also have significant implications for the fight against IS. A crisis in Kirkuk could divert the Iraqi army's attention at a time when it is engaged in the Mosul offensive, especially if the central government decides harsher measures are required against what it sees as a violation of the sovereignty of the state.

The already problematic relationship between Erbil and Baghdad has further deteriorated, while the risk of a military response by the Hashd is no less dangerous since it could trigger both broader sectarian fighting and an ethnic clash between Turkmen and Kurds due to the presence of Shia Turkmen in the militias.

Since the Hashd's position is closely linked with that of Iran, PUK-Iran relations could also suffer. The statement of the Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Behram Kasimi that the decision is illegal and a violation of the Iraqi constitution is telling ([Anadolu Agency](#), April 3).

Turkey's irritation at the matter may hinder any possible anti-IS cooperation with the KRG, as well as threaten the KRG's economic future since Turkey is its largest trading partner. The KRG is already beset with economic difficulties. The move could also pose a risk for Barzani, and inflame internal political struggles that, in the past, have spilled over into violence between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PUK, and between KDP and Gorran ([Rudaw](#), April 5).

Therefore, at a time of financial and political difficulty for the KRG, and against the backdrop of the fight against IS, the move may act as a further destabilizing factor, especially considering the multi-ethnic dynamics in Kirkuk.

The decision to raise the KRG flag threatens not only to inflame tensions locally, but also nationally, and could endanger the post-IS reconstruction and reconciliation efforts that will be necessary in Iraq in the coming years.

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