



[Protests in Kirkuk Show the Increasing Risk of a Larger Conflict in Iraq](#)

By Loretta Wolchko

The city of Kirkuk, the proclaimed capital of the semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan region, has been home to a series of violent protests as of late. The most recent outburst took place on Saturday, September 2, born out of a clash between the different ethnic groups residing in the city. Ownership of a building in the capital that has been used as the Iraqi Security Forces Provincial Headquarters was to be turned over to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (henceforth the KDP) so that they may resume political affairs. This decision was intended to serve as a gesture of goodwill towards the Kurds amidst a history of hostility between the two parties. This hostility can be traced back to the twentieth century when Iraqi Kurds struggled for autonomy even preceding Iraqi independence from Britain.

Friction between Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs has been steadily rising over the last month since the announcement from the Iraqi government regarding the shift in ownership of the headquarters. For decades, the city and its inhabitants have faced strife at the hands of the shifting governments as well as growing tensions between the differing ethnic groups. When the region was under the control of the KDP, Turks and Arabs faced discrimination and various human rights violations; families would routinely have documents confiscated, resulting in them losing properties and preventing them from voting or traveling. Torture at the hands of Kurdish forces against ethnic minorities has been reported, as well as the demolition of their homes. In recent years, Turkmen and Arabs have persisted in their opposition to the KDP, both in physical protests and in anti-Kurdish sentiment.

The suffering experienced by Arabs and Turks, however, is not dissimilar to the treatment that the Kurds experienced during Saddam Hussein's reign and his policy of "Arabization." Upwards of one hundred thousand Kurds were forcibly moved from the city throughout this period as a means of demographic engineering and ensuring that Arabs would be both the national and regional majority.

During this weekend's protest, Arabs and Turkmen set up protest camps in front of the building. In concurrence with the protests that occurred over the weekend in opposition, Kurds held their counter-protests. When Kurds approached, warning shots were fired to force them to disperse. In addition, stones and metal pipes were used as weapons between the groups, resulting in more injury. Four people were killed, all of whom were Kurdish as reported by police and medical responders at the scene. The city was placed under curfew following the outburst. Prime Minister Shia al-Sudani spoke with both the KDP President and the President of the Iraqi Kurdistan region to discuss developments within the city regarding the protests. Sudani also made a public announcement that political parties, activist groups, and other community members must play a role in maintaining stability and order in the region now and moving forward.

To say that the change in ownership of the building is the sole driving force of the protests would be a drastic understatement. In 2014, Kurdish forces took full control of the oil-rich city and remained in power until 2017 when Iraqi forces took the city back. The aforementioned ethnic groups suffered under the rule of the KDP as ethnic minorities and currently actively oppose any action or sentiment by the KDP to exert supremacy over the

region. It is possible to see that Turkmen and Arabs saw this move by the Iraqi government as a postponement of any problems that may arise with the city still under the control of the Iraqi government; with the KDP getting their headquarters back, perhaps this will be enough to stall tensions for a while. These actions taken are also postponing any subsequent resolution that could come about from addressing the root problems.

The attempted gesture of the Iraqi government could signify that steps can be taken to move forward in finding commonality in the vision for the future of the region. Another independence referendum (that isn't annulled) seems a bit too far-fetched at this point, considering how quickly the 2017 referendum was rejected. It is possible, though, that the return of the headquarters is the beginning of the offering of an olive branch of sorts. Sudani has vocalized his intent to improve relations between his government and the KDP. With Sudani's hopes in mind, it is certainly feasible that this attempted offer by his government is a stepping stone towards concession.

Conversely, such strong opposition from Turks and Arabs joining forces could result in more violent protests and an ardent opponent of the KDP, composed of the ethnic minorities of the region. Those affected will want to ensure that the suffering their communities endured with Kurds in power will not happen again. If the Iraqi government is not going to commit to suppressing the KDP, then the people of the autonomous region will have to continue with their methods of protesting.

Overall, the sociopolitical backdrop of the Iraqi Kurdistan region and Iraq as a whole has been particularly fragile over the last decade. There are several different avenues that the relations between Kurds, other ethnic groups such as Arabs and Turks, and the Iraqi government can take. If ethnic tensions and laxation on the KDP continue, then the region is going to see more violence and opposition in response to the Kurds.