

## Iraqi Forces Deployed in Altun Kupri and North of Kurdish Capital Irbil

Last Friday Iraqi forces hoisted the Iraqi flag in the town of Altun Kupri north of Kirkuk, writes Nermeen Al-Mufti in Kirkuk

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*Iraqi forces, including army, police and counter-terrorism personnel and Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), entered the Altun Kupri region 40 km north of Kirkuk and 50 km south of the Kurdish capital Irbil last week.*

"Iraqi federal police and counter-terrorism forces, along with Hashd Al-Shaabi fighters, have deployed in and imposed security on the sub-district of Altun Kupri," the Iraqi Defense Ministry said in a statement, adding that "Altun Kupri is now under the control of federal forces."

By last Friday afternoon, Al-Ahram Weekly was also in Altun Kupri. Civilians were leaving the city, while the booming sound of mortar fire could be heard.

"Kurdish Peshmergas [fighters] are bombing the town with mortars," an Iraqi army officer said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "There were limited clashes between the Iraqi forces and Peshmergas, with the latter withdrawing and bombing the bridge on the way to Irbil," he added, saying that civilians should leave the town for their own safety.

Altun Kupri, once a Turkmen town with a name meaning "Golden Bridge," is located between Kirkuk and Irbil on the Zab River.

"The town was linked to Irbil for years by the former Baath regime [in Iraq], and now we are re-linked to Kirkuk," Yusuf Kopulu, a local resident, commented to the Weekly.

After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Kurdification of the town began, "as before that date there were Kurdish villages around the town. During the 1991 uprising following the Gulf War, around 100 civilian Turkmens were arrested by the Saddam Republican Guards [loyal to former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein] in the town, and their executed bodies were later found in a mass grave."

"The Turkmen lands were confiscated on the pretext of constructing a security cordon around the town," Kopulu said, adding that after 2003 the Kurds controlled the town. "But we used to have good relations with the original

Kurds who came to settle in the town from the surrounding villages,” he said.

By retaking Altun Kupri, the Iraqi government in Baghdad did what it had previously said it would: re-establish federal authority and impose the rule of law over the oil-rich Kirkuk province of Iraq, which had been controlled by the Kurdish Peshmergas since the June 2014 Islamic State (IS) group offensive in the region.

The situation is now stable in Kirkuk, and schools and government establishments have reopened, including the Northern Oil Company and the Northern Gas Company. The markets are back at work, though many Kurdish families fled Kirkuk on 16 October when the Iraqi forces retook control of the city.

Last Monday, thousands of young men and women celebrated in the centre of Kirkuk, organising parades featuring the Iraqi flag. These were raised everywhere, and a giant Iraqi flag 500 metre long was held up by young men and women.

Reports have said that Maan Al-Sadi had become the military governor of Kirkuk, but Al-Sadi, commander of the counter-terrorism forces, has denied the reports. He was quoted as saying that Kirkuk was administrated by its governor and the Kirkuk Provincial Council (KPC).

“Imposing authority and law on Kirkuk have now been completed,” Al-Sadi told the Weekly, adding that “the only forces in Kirkuk are the counter-terrorism forces and the local police. The province is stable and ordinary life has come back.”

He said that necessary measures had been taken to ensure the stability of the province.

Khoshnaw Hama, a Kurd and the owner of a shop in Kirkuk, told the Weekly that he had taken his family to Irbil on 17 October but had returned on 19 October after hearing statements from the Kirkuk administration and army commanders confirming the stability of the city.

Hama said that neither his house nor his shop had been looted.

“Everything in our neighbourhood and market was safe,” he said.

The Turkmen and Arab blocs in the KPC have asked the Kurds to return to their jobs, confirming their intention to make sure that Kirkuk remains a city for all living under the authority of Baghdad.

Tech 4 Peace, a Facebook page, has denied reports published by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdish political party the KDP to the effect that Hoshiyar Zibari, a former Iraqi minister of foreign affairs and head of the Kurdish Referendum Council, had said that Iraqi commanders had met with Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander Qasim Sulaimani in Kirkuk.

It said that photographs published by Hemin Hawrami, a senior adviser to Masoud Barzani, outgoing leader of Iraqi Kurdistan, claimed to show Peshmergas near damaged US Abrams tanks belonging to the Iraqi forces in Altun Kupri. But the truth was that the photographs

were of US tanks destroyed near Baghdad in 2003.

It also said that a Kurdish Facebook page that had published a photograph of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg raising a banner saying “demonstrate for Kurdistan” was in fact a photoshop version of another Zuckerberg photograph with a banner saying “going live with the International Space Station.”

*Featured image is from the author.*

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