

Iraqi Seizure of Oil-rich Kirkuk from Kurds Risks Broader War

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Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi ordered an offensive by Iraqi army units and pro-government Shia militias Monday to capture the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and surrounding areas from the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The attack, which reportedly provoked clashes in some areas between Iraqi units and Peshmerga fighters, threatens not only to further destabilize Iraq, but could prove the trigger for a broader catastrophic conflict that could quickly engulf neighboring Syria, drawing in regional and imperialist powers.

The retaking of Kirkuk took place after Baghdad negotiated the voluntary withdrawal of Peshmerga forces aligned with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) faction, which is hostile to KRG president Masoud Barzani and opposed September's Kurdish independence referendum. The referendum, which returned a substantial majority in favor of independence, was condemned by the regional and imperialist powers, and denounced by Baghdad as unconstitutional.

Barzani declared the Iraqi advance to be an act of war and ordered the Peshmerga under his command to use all available resources to fight back. KRG officials accused the PUK of a "betrayal" for failing to resist the Iraqi advance.

The loss of Kirkuk will be a devastating setback to Barzani's independence plans. Control of the oil reserves from the area represented an important source of income for the KRG, which established a pipeline to Turkey to bypass Baghdad and sell oil on the world market.

While Peshmerga forces remained in control of oilfields outside Kirkuk Monday, Irbil reportedly had to halt oil supplies to Turkey as engineers failed to report to work. Eurasia Group estimated that of the 600,000 barrels a day shipped by the KRG to Turkey, 450,000 barrels would fall under the control of the Iraqi central government if it establishes a secure hold over Kirkuk and surrounding regions.

While US military figures and the corporate media sought to downplay the scale of the clashes Monday, the Iraqi army's advance will have explosive consequences and poses the danger of a renewed wave of sectarian bloodletting that could rapidly engulf the entire region. Both sides have not only been armed to the teeth and trained by the US and its imperialist allies over recent years, but are contesting areas which are of major economic and geostrategic significance. Added to this, the extremely fragile situation in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, as the US and European imperialist powers jostle to advance their interests and regional powers like Turkey, Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia are drawn ever more closely into a complex web of alliances that are increasingly in flux, and the true

extent of the danger posed to the region's long-suffering population becomes clear.

Kirkuk was a prize possession of the KRG. The oil-rich city and surrounding oilfields have been under Kurdish control since 2014, when Iraqi forces fled before the advance of ISIS. In last month's referendum, Barzani controversially included the ethnically diverse city in the area considered to be part of an independent state, hoping thereby to seize control of its oil wealth. Baghdad responded furiously, vowing to use the military to restore its control.

Primary responsibility for the ethnic and sectarian conflict lies with US imperialism and its allies, which have systematically encouraged Kurdish regional ambitions in northern Iraq since the illegal US-led invasion in 2003. At the same time, Washington helped establish a Shia-dominated puppet regime in Baghdad that conducted a brutal crackdown on Sunni areas of Iraq, while refusing to countenance any move by the Kurds towards independence.

Having destroyed Iraqi society, creating the political and social conditions within which regional and ethnic conflicts could assume such malignant forms, US imperialism is now hypocritically seeking to pose as a neutral arbiter between Baghdad and Irbil, appealing to both sides to show restraint. Its main goal in this is to prevent all-out civil war in Iraq, since this would cut across Washington's broader agenda in the Middle East of pushing back Iranian influence and consolidating an alliance with the Gulf states and Israel to secure US dominance over the energy-rich and strategically important region.

However, US actions are the most destabilizing factor. While backing both the KRG and Iraqi central government with financial and military resources, as well as personnel on the ground, Washington is relying chiefly on Kurdish allies in Syria to oust the Islamic State from its rapidly shrinking territory, and, much more significantly from the Washington's point of view, prevent forces loyal to Iran and the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad from emerging in control of eastern Syria. This would facilitate Tehran's establishment of a land bridge to Damascus, Lebanon and the Mediterranean coast, a development which would be a major strategic blow to the US, and its major Middle East ally, Israel.

Though the Syrian Kurds are not on good terms with Barzani, instead aligning themselves with the Turkish Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), Ankara, Baghdad and Tehran all view the emergence of strengthened Kurdish autonomous areas in northern Syria and Iraq as intolerable. Turkey has once again over recent days sent troops into northern Syria to block the emergence of a contiguous Kurdish territory on its southern border, prompting sharp protests from the Syrian government that its sovereignty is being violated. Further escalating tensions in Syria, the Israeli Air Force carried out a strike on a missile battery near Damascus Monday morning, claiming it had fired at Israeli reconnaissance planes over Lebanon.

Ankara condemned Barzani's independence referendum and held talks with Iran about a possible military intervention. It has pledged to hand over border crossings between Turkey and the KRG to the Baghdad government. With a Turkish military base in northern Iraq not far from Mosul, Ankara could also be drawn into the fighting if it spreads.

A Turkish government statement praised the Iraqi offensive, claiming that it was necessary to drive out PKK forces which were allegedly being harbored by the KRG. It noted, in what amounted to a threat of a direct military invasion, that Ankara is "ready for any form of co-operation with the Iraqi government in order to end the PKK presence in Iraqi territory."

This follows the provocative declaration by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the wake of the Kurdish referendum that Irbil's actions could spark an "ethnic war."

The Iraqi offensive comes just days after US President Donald Trump vowed to blow up the 2015 nuclear accord with Tehran, unless the pact is renegotiated to meet Washington's demands. His announcement not only aggravated tensions between the US and Iran throughout the Middle East, with Washington's commitment to target the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) operations in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, but brought to light the widening rift between US imperialist policy and that of its European rivals.

Should the fighting in Iraq spread, Iran faces the immediate prospect of being dragged into the conflict. Substantial numbers of Iranian military personnel, including members of the Revolutionary Guards, have been embedded in the Iraqi military to strengthen it in its operations against ISIS, a fact which was reportedly important in preventing Trump from designating the IRGC as a "terrorist organization" in his Iran speech Friday.

In addition, the Shia militias which have joined the Iraqi army advance into Kirkuk are under Iranian influence. The *Guardian* reported that Qassem Suleimani, head of the IRGC's Quds force, helped direct the offensive.

Unconfirmed reports Monday indicated that ethnic strife has already begun. Kurdish commanders claimed that advancing Iraqi forces had burned villages south of Kirkuk. Large numbers of people were said to be fleeing the city, while the Kurdish governor of the region appealed to everyone with arms to resist Baghdad's advance.

The Iraqi government has asserted that the Shia militias or Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), who are notorious for anti-Sunni and anti-Kurdish attacks, have agreed not to enter Kirkuk itself, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious city including Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds. But already by Monday afternoon, there were reports of two senior PMU commanders entering the city to watch Iraqi flags being raised over government buildings.

Al-Abadi released a statement Monday proclaiming that the military operation sought to "protect the unity of the country" and urged Kurds not to resist.

An indication of the violence in store for the region is given by the fact that the Iraqi advance was led by elite forces from Baghdad's Counter-Terrorism Force, which led the murderous assault on Mosul that, in conjunction with US air strikes, laid waste to much of the city and claimed tens of thousands of civilian lives.

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