



# **THE ROLE OF KIRKUK IN RESHAPING IRAQ- KRG RELATIONS**

**ELAAF HADI**





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**Abstract:** Since September 25, 2017, when the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) held its referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan region and the disputed areas, the world had been waiting for a federal government response intended at preserving a unified Iraq. However, the Iraqi government has also been calling on the KRG to repeal the referendum results and enter into a dialogue on a constitutional basis. The KRG has not complied with Baghdad's demands. Therefore, Haider al-Abadi, the Prime Minister of Iraq, ordered federal forces to execute an operation in Kirkuk, which took place on October 17, 2017. In this context, two issues must be addressed properly by the Iraqi government to avoid potentially devastating outcomes that may affect regional security. These issues are the battle against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), and the secession of Kurdistan. Still, one other issue has often been raised by politicians and experts: the worrisome role of non-state actors in Iraq's political and security spheres.

This paper aims to identify the dynamics that are steering events in Kirkuk, to address the extents to which the Iraqi prime minister will be willing to fulfill his constitutional duties, and to discuss the prospect of dialogue between the federal government and the KRG.





## Introduction:

Weeks have elapsed since the Iraqi government carried out a military maneuver on Monday October 16 to impose federal power in Kirkuk, the latest move in the political struggle between Baghdad and Erbil. As Iraqi troops rolled into the city of about one million inhabitants, the Counter-Terrorism Service, supported by army tanks, the Federal Police, Popular Mobilization Units and special forces, took over the K1 military base, the governor's palace, the Kirkuk Provincial Council headquarters, the North Oil Company and North Gas Company headquarters, the Kirkuk Regional Air Base, and key road junctions. In addition, federal forces restored control over the oil fields of Dibis district, which have been held by the Kurdistan Democratic Party since 2014. These fields produce 275,000 barrels of oil per day, or nearly half the 620,000-barrel output of the KRG. The federal army also seized control of the city's international airport, in addition to another oil field, the strategic K1 military base, and the Taza Khormatu district southeast of Kirkuk, Makhmour and Sinjar.<sup>1</sup>

The referendum, which took place on September 25, has now clearly backfired with federal forces retaking oil fields. The Kurdish region depends heavily on oil revenue, roughly 65 percent of it comes from Kirkuk.<sup>2</sup> Still the conflict is not over, federal forces are fighting on two fronts, dragging out IS while seeking to secure major cities, especially oil-rich Kirkuk. Neither battle is over. But, what happened on October 16 is that Peshmerga forces loyal to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) withdrew peacefully under an agreement with Baghdad. The agreement provides the grounds for peaceful withdrawal on the condition that the federal forces would not enter the city center. Furthermore, the peshmerga should hand over to the Iraqi federal forces all the areas they had gained control over since June 2014. In return, Baghdad would guarantee to give the PUK the upper hand in Kirkuk in the aftermath

of the military operation.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the Kirkuk operation also exposed deep divisions within the Kurdish bloc. Some critics accused Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, of staging the vote to deflect attention from the Kurdish region's troubled economy and what they consider to be Barzani's authoritarian rule. Another trend accused some PUK leaders of treason.<sup>4</sup> Amid this chaos, about 100,000 Iraqi Kurds have fled the city out of fear.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has made it clear that the military operation was conducted to protect the city's people.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, people in Iraq overwhelmingly agreed with a statement by Iraqi President Fuad Masum, who said the Kirkuk operation came about as a bold move in response to the controversial referendum held by Erbil calling for residents to approve independence.<sup>7</sup> One can add to this that Kirkuk security was at its best when handled by a joint security headquarters that included Kurdish and federal forces. In this regard, the majority of the city's residents—the Arabs and Turkmen—had called several times for the federal power to impose its power in Kirkuk.

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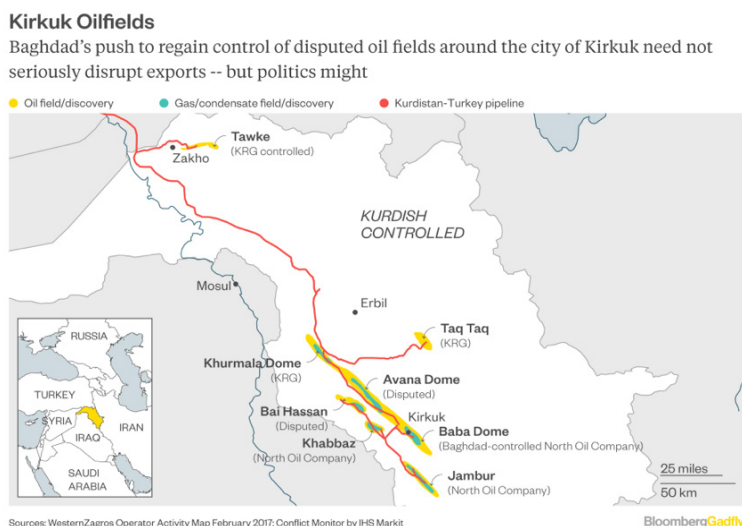
## Why is Kirkuk so important?

Two controversial strategic projects were in conflict over Kirkuk. The first is Baghdad's constitutional duty to preserve the state's unity, while the second is the Kurdish dream of establishing an independent state. But first there is a need to shed some light on the city's capacities and privileges. Kirkuk is important due to its vast energy resources (oil and natural gas) and the ethnic heterogeneity



of its citizens. Kirkuk is one of the two main oil-producing areas of the country, and is believed to hold around four percent of the world's oil resources.<sup>8</sup> Kirkuk produces 550,000 barrels per day, which makes up 70 percent of Kurdistan's oil production.<sup>9</sup> Thus, without the oil produced by the Kirkuk fields, the Kurds cannot afford to leave Iraq, especially when the Kurdistan Regional Government already struggles to service its costs and debts, estimated at around \$30 billion.<sup>10</sup> An independent Kurdistan would now make less than \$8 billion per year—almost a third less than they had received when given just 12 percent of Iraq's total oil revenues.<sup>11</sup> This scenario puts the KRG in a dilemma in which they must try to become part of a viable federal oil revenue sharing system. Hence, Baghdad will need Ankara to guarantee that the KRG cannot export oil through Turkey without the approval of the federal authorities in Baghdad, because the only route to export oil produced in northern Iraq is through the pipeline to the Turkish border and then on to Ceyhan on Turkey's Mediterranean coast.<sup>12</sup> The map below (figure 1) shows how far the KRG losing revenues from the central government would be irreversible and disastrous now that Kirkuk has been lost.

*Figure 1: Oil & gas fields and pipelines in Northern Iraq*



**Source: Bloomberg Gadfly**

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The map also highlights the importance of Kirkuk for both Baghdad and Erbil. Erbil was shocked to hear that Baghdad had recaptured the main oil fields, which KRG had controlled since June 2014. The fields are the Bai Hassan field, the Avana Dome section of the giant Kirkuk field and the Khurmala Dome.<sup>13</sup> One more thing concerned Baghdad: the Kurds could prevent the flow of oil from the Baghdad-controlled fields, since the KRG had its hands on the sole pipeline that crosses northern Iraq.

However, for Baghdad, the importance of Kirkuk takes different angles. The recent developments in Kirkuk have shut down the Kurdish strategy and are re-empowering Baghdad's vision towards the city in particular and the unity of Iraq in general. The future stability of Iraq may turn on the fate of the oil city of Kirkuk. "Kirkuk is special, it is special because it is a microcosm of Iraq," al-Maliki said.<sup>14</sup> Some refer to the city [Kirkuk] as the "Jerusalem of the Kurds". Under article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, a referendum should decide the status of any disputed territories, including Kirkuk.<sup>15</sup> Yet the city has a mixed population, divided not only between Kurds and Arabs, but also Turkmens and Christians. The Kurds also face the claims of the Turkmens, who argue they are the original and biggest ethnic population in the city.<sup>16</sup> Besides ethnic disputes, the city has so far inflamed regional geopolitical rivalries and opened new chapters of struggle, making the game even harder to solve. Iran, Turkey, and Syria vehemently reject Kirkuk's annexation to the Kurdish region for many different reasons. Geographically Kirkuk province



located in the heart of the northern part of Iraq; it is located among four governorates which are Erbil, Sulaimaniya, Salaheddin, and Dyala, and so are close to Mosul.

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Thus, the control of Kirkuk by the Kurds will encourage them to accelerate their steps towards independence. In the viewpoint of these regional actors, an independent Kurdish state will foster the separatist tendencies of the Kurdish ethnic minorities in each of these countries on the one hand, and will endanger water security for the region on the other. Concerning water security, one might question how Kirkuk would endanger the region's water stability. The answer is simple: The majority of the Kurdish population in Turkey resides in Southeast Anatolia, while the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers both originate in the Anatolian Highlands of Turkey and flow through Syria and Iraq. Turkey contributes 88 percent of the water flow of the Euphrates River and 43 percent of the Tigris, making Syria and Iraq heavily dependent on external supplies of water; and large-scale irrigation and hydro-energy projects, inside and outside Turkey depend on these rivers in the region.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Turkey in particular puts weight on its Southeastern Anatolia Project (acronymed GAP)— a series of hydroelectric dams and other infrastructure in the Kurdish-majority southeast—to help resolve its Kurdish conflict. Thus, any the annexation of Kirkuk to the Kurdistan region of Iraq would put the national security of Syria, Turkey and Iran at great risk.

### **The international hard front towards a unified Iraq**

In the aftermath of the referendum, KRG officials found themselves isolated without any support for their demands. They have faced a united solid front that consists of Baghdad, Turkey, Iran, and the international community, whether individually, per individual states' positions, or collectively. All have clearly opposed the referendum; no single state has come out in support of the secessionists. With regard to regional actors, they have overwhelmingly rejected the referendum and considered it as an unconstitutional step that puts the regional peace under huge risk. Iran and Turkey have agreed to deploy several various tools to deter the KRG. They have escalated their reactions in accord with Baghdad.

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The Iraqi government has made it clear that it opposes any move individually conducted by any regional actors that would expose Iraqi citizens to risk. All regional actors have agreed to take actions in order to put the KRG's financial capacity under siege. Baghdad has imposed a ban on international flights in the region and ordered it to hand over all airports and border crossings. Meanwhile, Turkey and Iran have already taken several punitive measures such as closing border crossings intermittently, by Iran in particular, while Turkey has threatened to shut the KRG-operated pipeline at Baghdad's request. In this context, Jabar al-Luaibi, Iraq's oil minister, announced on October 10, 2017, that preparations would begin on the process of restoring and reopening the Kirkuk-Ceyhan



pipeline.<sup>18</sup> Much time had elapsed since the referendum but it shows the strong tendency for Iraq and Turkey to co-operate to deter secession.

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In terms of international perception, the United States condemned the vote, fearing it would fuel further ethnic divisions, lead to the breakup of Iraq and hinder the fight against ISIS. Iraqi government troops and Kurdish forces, who are known as Peshmerga, are both essential elements of the American-led coalition battling IS. Both forces have been trained by the United States. On the other bank of the Atlantic, Federica Mogherini (High Representative of the European Union) has urged Baghdad and Erbil to resolve their outstanding issues through a peaceful and constructive dialogue leading to a mutually agreed solution based on the full application of the provisions of the Iraqi Constitution.<sup>19</sup> The EU's position was based on two justifications: complying with its commitments towards a sovereign Iraq; and expanding economic relations with Iraq, since the EU is Iraq's second-biggest trading partner behind China. In 2015, the EU accounted for 18.4 percent of total Iraqi trade. Total bilateral trade between the EU and Iraq amounted to over €13.9 billion in 2016.<sup>20</sup>

Russia's stance on the vote was a two-fold position: it respected the national aspirations of the Kurds on one hand and continued its commitment towards a unified Iraq on the other.<sup>21</sup> Russia's political position is a subject of criticism inside Iraq, mostly because Iraqis believe that Russia is now expanding its oil investments in Iraqi Kurdistan without getting approval from Baghdad. Russian spending in the area's oil and gas industry has reached at least \$4 billion.<sup>22</sup> In this

regard, one can refer to growing relations between the KRG and the giant state-owned oil company Rosneft. In 2017 and in particular in the aftermath of the referendum crisis, Russia has become the top foreign investor in oil industry in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.<sup>23</sup> For instance, in early June, Rosneft signed a 20-year deal to buy Kurdistan's oil and refine it in Germany. The parties also inked a contract to explore and develop five oil fields "with substantial geological potential" in Iraqi Kurdistan. On September 18, Rosneft made public a project to finance the construction of Iraqi Kurdistan's gas pipeline infrastructure, with an expected export capacity by 2020 of 30 billion cubic meters a year.

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The KRG and Russia's oil major Rosneft have decided to extend the scope of their previously signed Investment Agreement to include the construction of a natural gas pipeline to export gas to international markets such as Turkey and the EU. The capacity of the gas pipeline is expected to be equivalent to 6 percent of Europe's total gas demand.<sup>24</sup> The parties agreed to implement the geological exploration program and to start pilot production as early as in 2018.<sup>25</sup> What should be monitored is that Russia is eager to gain more political leverage in the Middle East, which will increase along with its economic weight. However, the Iraqi response to a more robust Russian presence in Kurdistan may affect Russian investments in the rest of Iraq.



### **Does the U.S. still support a unified Iraq?**

In this context, it would be preferable to cite the statements of American officials: Laura Seal, the Pentagon spokeswoman, and coalition commander Maj. Gen. Robert White have urged against destabilizing actions that distract from the fight against IS and further undermine Iraq's stability.<sup>26</sup> Secretary of State Rex Tillerson without any hesitation declared the administration position was that the United States was committed to support a unified Iraq. Heather Nauert, State Department Spokesperson, announced that the United States was following up on recent developments in Iraq with deep concern and urged Baghdad and Erbil to hold dialogue as to the best option to defuse ongoing tensions and longstanding issues in accordance with the Iraqi constitution.<sup>27</sup> In addition, noteworthy progress was that the international coalition against IS that categorized the Iraqi military operation surrounding Kirkuk as "coordinated movements, not attacks." as Col. Rob Manning, U.S. defense spokesman, described. Still the U.S. administration has confirmed its commitment to avoiding the risk of further clashes. Thus, it is ready to steer the situation into one in which the joint command of Kirkuk by federal government and the KRG can work together under a unique power-sharing deal.

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Accordingly, one conclusion can be highlighted which is the independence dream of Iraq's Kurds may be over, at least in the near future. Many experts in Iraq, along with David Philips, a former State

Department adviser who worked on Iraq for 30 years, believe that the Iraqi government would not have been able to conduct Kirkuk operation without receiving the green light from the United States.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, one question may be raised is "did the U.S. abandon its Kurdish ally in favor of Baghdad, even with the assumption that this stance would advance Iranian interests in Iraq?" To answer this question, this stance is due to Washington's priority of limiting IS in Iraq at whatever costs. U.S. Army Col. Ryan Dillon, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition, tweeted "Finish the fight vs. IS, the biggest threat to all." Thus, our point of view is that the U.S. administration would be keen to ensure sufficient coordination between Baghdad and Erbil over disputed territories and urge Baghdad not to try to enter Erbil.

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Despite all allegations against the participation of Major General Qasem Sulaimani, Commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, the federal government has firmly handled operations in Kirkuk and has conducted a successful foreign policy in supporting its position.<sup>29</sup> For instance, the U.S., Turkey and Iran all clearly supported the federal government to fulfill its constitutional commitments through preserving a unified Iraq. An important perception has resonated in the U.S. decision making process towards Iraq. This perception is that U.S. interests may ultimately be met, and Iranian influence reduced, by a stronger al-Abadi and a stronger Iraqi nationalism. Thus, the United States should play an assertive role in ensuring a



peaceful constitutional approach must be honored by both Baghdad and Erbil.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Kurdish political reaction to the recent developments in Kirkuk**

In the aftermath of Kirkuk operation one might believe that the Kurds' dream of independence has been shattered.<sup>31</sup> To get independence, Kurdish leaders in the KRG like Masoud Barzani and others have conducted specific operations over the last decade as follows:<sup>32</sup>

**Firstly:** reconciling of their two rival political parties: the PUK, and the Goran ("Change") Party;

**Secondly:** Holding a public referendum;

**Thirdly:** Attempting to reach an understanding with Baghdad so as to facilitate the Kurdish region's secession from the Iraqi state;

**Fourthly:** Developing close ties with Turkey, which had already started in 2008;

**Finally:** Cultivating the Kurdish leadership's image as a pro-Western state with a strategic alliance with the U.S.

Meanwhile, many experts have assumed that the recent developments may have catastrophic outcomes on the Kurdish coalition and that the possibility of civil war may rise to the political surface. This naïve assumption is based on allegations of treason against some PUK leaders. Time was able to relieve the Kurds and help them to absorb the shock of losing Kirkuk. In reality, two camps have flourished in this political scene: the first is led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party and includes the old guards of PUK such as Kusrat Rasool and Najm aldeen Kreem; while the second camp combines the "change movement", the Islamic Movement, the Coalition for Democracy and the PUK. Both

***Still, responsibility for the withdrawal of Peshmerga from the disputed areas does not mean that the KRG will surrender soon, e.g. the negotiations cannot be deemed a surrender. The KRG is seeking to deploy some key tools to force Baghdad to listening to its demands***

camps agreed on three things: preserving the unity of the Kurdistan region; entering into a dialogue with Baghdad on a constitutional basis; and supporting an U.N.-backed plan for negotiations with Baghdad.

Still, responsibility for the withdrawal of Peshmerga from the disputed areas does not mean that the KRG will surrender soon, e.g. the negotiations cannot be deemed a surrender. The KRG is seeking to deploy some key tools to force Baghdad to listening to its demands. The first tool is propaganda. The KRG declared that the operation in Kirkuk was an unprovoked attack following days of Iraqi military deployments to Kurdistan's borders, as Hemin Hawrami, a senior KRG advisor said on Twitter. The main aim of this propaganda is to gather the Kurds around one political position. It is a message which tells Iraqis and foreigners that Masoud Barzani is the strongest figure to make the Kurdish case.

The second tool is the political persistence to trigger article 140 of the Constitution in Kirkuk to help "determine the future of the disputed territory between the Kurdistan Region and Iraq". The third tool is a show of power. Hard and popular support is necessary for KRG to back up its position in front of Baghdad. Nonetheless, the greater the hard tools that are deployed by KRG, the greater threats it will get as feedback from Baghdad. Thus, moderation even in terms of military resistance would give the KRG enough space

***Barzani wants to show the world that he is still able to steer events in his favor, despite his resignation from his official position as the president of the Kurdistan region***





for balancing the political situation with Baghdad. For instance, Barzani called on the Kurds to march throughout the whole world and expose their refusal to the takeover of Kirkuk by the federal government.

***Furthermore, the Iraqi federal government has allocated 12.67 percent of its 2018 budget to the KRG instead of 17 percent, while the KRG is calling on Baghdad to not ratify this "unilateral" 2018 budget draft***

Barzani wants to show the world that he is still able to steer events in his favor, despite his resignation from his official position as the president of the Kurdistan region.<sup>33</sup> Barzani's resignation sends two messages or assumptions: The resignation does not mean that Barzani will be out of the political game in Kurdistan, but still this move has given the KRG the room for political maneuver to mitigate Baghdad's pressure on the region. For instance, the federal Iraqi troops deployed on October 31, 2017 at one of the main border crossings with Turkey, gaining a foothold at the Kurdish-held frontier for the first time in decades and imposing one of Baghdad's central demands on the Kurds.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the Iraqi federal government has allocated 12.67 percent of its 2018 budget to the KRG instead of 17 percent,<sup>35</sup> while the KRG is calling on Baghdad to not ratify this "unilateral" 2018 budget draft.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the KRG has warned that if negotiations fail with Baghdad then clashes will spread everywhere in the disputed areas.<sup>37</sup> In this context, the fourth tool is the intervention of the international powers, whether unilaterally or collectively, to monitor dialogue, prevent escalation between Baghdad and Erbil, and to deter any attempt by the federal forces to enter the territory of the Kurdistan region. In this regard, KRG will try to provoke such an intervention to preserve its current privileges as a quasi-independent state, or it may ask for confederation.<sup>38</sup> Within this dilemma it is

very difficult to predict what would happen next in Kurdistan. The outcomes would be very dangerous in different ways. A Kurdish counterattack to retake Kirkuk would be extremely risky. Another outcome is that the Kurdish political key parties may become divided among themselves. It seems that the Kurdish region of Iraq was under serious political pressure to make moves towards independence—which is almost impossible at this time—or towards the establishment of an interim government. The parliament in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region decided on October 24, 2017 to hold legislative elections in eight months although they had been due to take place on November 1.<sup>39</sup> What is certain is that the KRG and all political parties in the region express their readiness to enter dialogue with Baghdad under the supervision of the U.N. The question is: with whom is Baghdad going to negotiate?

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### **The federal government's choices and crisis management**

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi stated that the Kirkuk operation was aimed at protecting national unity. He confirmed that the referendum had been conducted at a time where the country was fighting against IS. The prime minister further assured Kirkuk's residents that their safety was Iraq's priority, while calling on the Kurdish forces to align themselves with the federal army.<sup>40</sup>

What is coming next depends on how Baghdad manages its easy victory. It is about what aims Baghdad are crafting in regards to the crisis with KRG. These aims are: keeping Iraq united and restoring state authority on a





***Barzani told a press conference in Erbil on November 6, 2017 that if Baghdad was ready to provide KRG with its 17 percent share of the federal budget; the KRG would hand over Kurdistan's oil and border crossings to the federal government***

constitutional basis. In this case, the Iraqi federal government is obliged itself to restore control over the border crossings, airports and oil exports of the region. To this end, the Turkish authorities pledged support to help Baghdad bring the borders under their federal authority.<sup>41</sup> Within this scenario, the KRG has found itself under popular pressure, since it has failed to manage its relationship with Baghdad in the aftermath of the referendum, and jeopardized Iraqi Kurdistan's economic situation. Hence, the KRG's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani has expressed Erbil's willingness to engage in talks with Baghdad to resolve pending issues, stressing that the issues cannot be settled by military force. Barzani told a press conference in Erbil on November 6, 2017 that if Baghdad was ready to provide KRG with its 17 percent share of the federal budget; the KRG would hand over Kurdistan's oil and border crossings to the federal government.<sup>42</sup>

On the opposite side, Al-Abadi has clearly revealed his top priority which is a unified Iraq. In this context, Al-Abadi has asserted that if KRG is ready to repeal its referendum results, Baghdad will enter into dialogue with the KRG. The prime minister has been obliged to overcome three problems since 2014: the financial crisis, IS and recently the attempt at Kurdistan secession from Iraq.<sup>43</sup> His approach has been characterized as peaceful, assertive and constitutional. Thus, he urges the leadership in Iraqi Kurdistan to enter into dialogue on a constitutional basis. To fulfill the prime minister's constitutional mandate and duties, there are some procedures he is expected to fulfil soon, such as:

1- The forming of a Joint Security Mechanism for the disputed areas.

2- Encouraging the provincial council to swiftly appoint a Kurdish governor in Kirkuk.

3- Encouraging the process of oil-sharing deals.

4- Employing economic tools to converge with the region's authority. For instance, lifting economic sanctions and a flight ban. Furthermore, al-Abadi has ordered the salaries of the Peshmerga and KRG civil servants to be paid. Al-Abadi, in a press conference on November 7, 2017, explained that Baghdad had not yet sent the salaries due to the lack of precise and integrated information.<sup>44</sup>

5- Baghdad demands a shared administration over Kirkuk including Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and Christians. It is believed that Kirkuk should be granted a special status for the sake of a unified Iraq.<sup>45</sup>

6- There is a need to negotiate the future of the disputed territories, as well as the constitutional relationship between federal authorities and the regional government.

7- Baghdad may enter into a dialogue with the PUK, Change movement, and Coalition for Democracy to empower political reform in the region in case the KRG insists on keeping the referendum results.

***Within this scenario, Iraq's hardliners such as the Dawaa parliamentary bloc might push for further measures to weaken the KRG. Interestingly, triumphalist language was used since a short period by some politicians in Baghdad***

Still, it is unclear whether the PUK will receive special treatment from the Iraqi government. This support may include giving the Talabani-led PUK the right to choose a new governor



for Kirkuk and reinstating federal government salary payments to public servants in Sulaimaniya.<sup>46</sup> This rapprochement between Baghdad and Sulaimaniya might shed a shadow over the Kurdish political bloc. Within this scenario, Iraq's hardliners such as the Dawaa parliamentary bloc might push for further measures to weaken the KRG. Interestingly, triumphalist language was used since a short period by some politicians in Baghdad. They have already called on al-Abadi to punish Barzani and demolish any chance for the KRG to adopt what Baghdad perceive as unconstitutional arrangements. However, al-Abadi's mid-term success will depend on his ability to prevent another victimhood narrative that will feed Kurdish grievances.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

The Kirkuk operation is a sign of Baghdad's willingness to impose its constitutional power over the KRG. Nonetheless, the Kurds' withdrawal from several locations after federal government troops entered the city of Kirkuk is a sign that reflects the fact that both Baghdad and Erbil are avoiding direct clashes. However, some vital questions cannot be ignored, such as with whom Baghdad will negotiate: the current KRG or a new interim government. I think the answer to such a question is related to another variable: the Kurdistan region de facto has two administrations while de jure Article 117 of the constitution admits only one region of Kurdistan. But Sulaimaniya will hardly push to combine Kirkuk in its prospected region. In that case, Arabs and Turkmen residents would refuse the option in a way that would embarrass the Iraqi prime minister and give room for the hardliners to impose another scenario in which the Kurdistan region would lose its semi-autonomous status.

My point of view is that the solution should be constitutional, guaranteeing a legal and peaceful exit in which all parties will be

satisfied. Therefore, no serious dialogue on the type of relationship Baghdad is seeking towards the KRG will come to light before the next legislative election. Until that time, political parties in Kurdistan will have to meet with Baghdad half way by establishing an interim government which will undertake the negotiation process. Within this scenario, Baghdad will urge the region to remain, showing modesty and moderation. In this context, Baghdad will assure that Kirkuk and the disputed areas will be put under joint administration in terms of political and security arrangements. A vital variable Baghdad will take carefully into consideration is the request of Iraqi president Fuad Masum to facilitate U.N. supervision of negotiations. It is not in the interest of any side to push forward towards an escalation of the dispute, which means that the Iraqi prime minister will reconsider the situation many times before taking a bold decision such as ordering federal forces to enter the region.

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Finally, this crisis is not the last which Iraq will confront in the near future. That is because, if al-Abadi successfully handles the situation with Erbil, then his political position will be boosted in the next election due to take place in May 2018. The most important thing is that any agreement with Erbil should shed light on al-Abadi's next mandate. Thus, he will be obliged to fulfill and meet all his constitutional duties, the most important of which is to evict any non-state actors from the political scene in Iraq.



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# The Role Of Kirkuk In Reshaping Iraq - KRG Relations

Since September 25, 2017, when the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) held its referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan region and the disputed areas, the world had been waiting for a federal government response intended at preserving a unified Iraq. However, the Iraqi government has also been calling on the KRG to repeal the referendum results and enter into a dialogue on a constitutional basis. The KRG has not complied with Baghdad's demands. Therefore, Haider al-Abadi, the Prime Minister of Iraq, ordered federal forces to execute an operation in Kirkuk, which took place on October 17, 2017. In this context, two issues must be addressed properly by the Iraqi government to avoid potentially devastating outcomes that may affect regional security. These issues are the battle against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), and the secession of Kurdistan. Still, one other issue has often been raised by politicians and experts: the worrisome role of non-state actors in Iraq's political and security spheres