

Competition over Kirkuk: Between Internal Conflicts and Regional Rivalries

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Brief Analysis

Kirkuk's future remains uncertain due to the lack of any consensus-based projects between the governorate's political actors. Even if these longtime rivals find a way to participate in the local government, it is possible that a slight grievance could devolve into political deadlock.

Since 2003, Kirkuk Governorate has been at the center of key Iraqi political conflicts. The cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity that makes this governorate unique has in many ways fueled the ongoing crises, as actors from across Iraq's political spectrum feel as though they have a stake in this coveted territory. Following a political impasse that lasted for more than eight months after Iraq's municipal elections, the major players in the new municipal council finally agreed on a new governor. Yet while some had hoped this appointment might calm tensions, sectarian and ethnic groups—both within Kirkuk and around the region—have only ratcheted up their attempts to exert their influence.

The Conflict in Context

Kirkuk Governorate is located in northeastern Iraq, about 298 kilometers away from the capital of Baghdad. It has a diverse population that includes different Iraqi minorities and is also home to significant natural resources. Kirkuk is considered part of the "disputed territories" between the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

According to the second clause of Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, the elected executive authority shall bear responsibility for the governorate once it achieves political normalization, conducts a census, and holds a referendum on Kirkuk and other disputed areas to determine the final legal status.

The KRG has pointed to this article to assert its claim to Kirkuk and the governorate's rich oil fields. In October 2017, the KRG held an independence referendum throughout the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and included Kirkuk despite Baghdad's opposition. This bold move was a miscalculation, with then-Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi ordering Iraqi troops to seize Kirkuk from KRG control in retaliation. Peshmerga forces under the KRG withdrew without firing a shot, and since then Baghdad has overseen the governorate's affairs. The KRG paid dearly for its ill-fated independence bid, losing one of its major sources of oil revenues and a large swath of its territory.

In the following years, the KRG has attempted to reclaim Kirkuk through various methods. According to [multiple sources, \(https://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/story/50325-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A6%25D9%258A%25D8%25B3-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D9%258A-%25D9%258A%25D8%25AC%25D8%25AA%25D9%2585%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A5%25D8%25B7%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D9%2586%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A%25D9%2582%25D9%258A-%25D9%2581%25D9%258A-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25BA%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF\)](https://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/story/50325-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A6%25D9%258A%25D8%25B3-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D9%258A-%25D9%258A%25D8%25AC%25D8%25AA%25D9%2585%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A5%25D8%25B7%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D9%2586%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A%25D9%2582%25D9%258A-%25D9%2581%25D9%258A-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25BA%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF) Masoud Barzani—the former head of government in Erbil—sought to form an alliance with Muqtada al-Sadr after the 2021 elections for the Council of Representatives in exchange for control of Kirkuk. After Sadr withdrew from the political process, similar negotiations were held with the new Coordination Framework in exchange for supporting Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani as prime minister.

Internal Conflicts

In many ways, Kirkuk is a microcosm of Iraqi society and politics, home to Sunni and Shia, Kurds and Arabs, and minority groups like Turkmen and Christians. As a result, all of Iraq's major political players are invested in Kirkuk Governorate, each with their own conflicting hopes and aspirations. For example, the two major Kurdish parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—both operate there. Generally speaking, the KDP has ties to the Turkish government, while the PUK is closely linked with the Shia Coordination Framework and Iran.

Various groups of Sunni forces have also been involved in this area. However, the popular base is usually split between two rival entities: the Progress Party, led by Mohammed al-Halbousi, former speaker of the Council of Representatives, and the Sovereignty Alliance, which is led by Khamis al-Khanjar. Shia political forces have also established offices in various parts of the governorate, and their base is generally aligned with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and Shia Turkmen.

Holding Elections

Amidst these conflicts, Kirkuk participated in Iraq's provincial elections at the end of last year, the second such elections held in Kirkuk since 2005. Although Iraq has held three rounds of local elections since 2003, the political disputes that have erupted between the main forces in Kirkuk have prevented holding any election or referendum there since the early days of post-Saddam Iraq. During this time, local authorities passed a law in which political power rotated between the various ethnic and religious groups, providing a temporary and tense remedy for the crisis.

On December 28, 2023, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) [announced](https://ihec.iq/%252525D9%25252586%252525D9%25252585%252525D9%25252588%252525D8%252525B0%252525D8%252525AC-%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252588%252525D8%252525B1%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252582-%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252582%252525D8%252525AA%252525D8%252525B1%252525D8%252525A7%252525D8%252525B9-%252525D9%25252585%252525D8%252525AD%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252581%252525D8%252525B8%252525D8%252525A9-%252525D9%25252583%252525D8%252525B1%252525D9%25252583%252525D9%25252588%252525D9%25252583/)

[\(https://ihec.iq/%252525D9%25252586%252525D9%25252585%252525D9%25252588%252525D8%252525B0%252525D8%252525AC-%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252588%252525D8%252525B1%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252582-%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252582%252525D8%252525AA%252525D8%252525B1%252525D8%252525A7%252525D8%252525B9-%252525D9%25252585%252525D8%252525AD%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252581%252525D8%252525B8%252525D8%252525A9-%252525D9%25252583%252525D8%252525B1%252525D9%25252583%252525D9%25252588%252525D9%25252583/\)](https://ihec.iq/%252525D9%25252586%252525D9%25252585%252525D9%25252588%252525D8%252525B0%252525D8%252525AC-%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252588%252525D8%252525B1%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252582-%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252582%252525D8%252525AA%252525D8%252525B1%252525D8%252525A7%252525D8%252525B9-%252525D9%25252585%252525D8%252525AD%252525D8%252525A7%252525D9%25252581%252525D8%252525B8%252525D8%252525A9-%252525D9%25252583%252525D8%252525B1%252525D9%25252583%252525D9%25252588%252525D9%25252583/) the final election results with the 16 governorate seats split

between the political factions:

Kirkuk is Our Strength and Will Alliance (affiliated with the PUK): 157,000 votes, 5 seats

Arab Alliance: 102,000 votes, 3 seats

Iraqi Turkmen Front: 75,000 votes, 2 seats

Leadership Alliance: 61,000 votes, 2 seats

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP): 52,000 votes, 2 seats

Al-Uruba Alliance: 47,000 votes, 1 seat

Babylon Movement: 1 quota seat for Christians

considered a potential flashpoint and backdrop for local and regional tensions in the coming months. ❖

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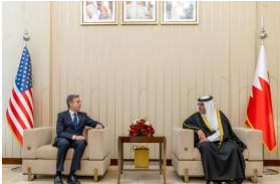
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September 9, 2024, starting at 11:00 a.m. EDT (1500 GMT)

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Sheikh Abdulla bin Rashid Al Khalifa

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