

Iraqi forces seize back more Kurdish-held territory

By James Cogan
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The US-backed Iraqi government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi is expanding military operations to take back territory being held by US- and German-trained and armed “peshmerga” militia loyal to the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Washington, Germany and other powers are applying immense diplomatic pressure on the KRG to submit.

Since early Monday morning, Iraqi government army, police and militia units have dislodged Kurdish forces from much of Kirkuk province, including the city of Kirkuk itself, its airport, nearby towns and, most significantly, some of northern Iraq’s largest oilfields.

Kurdish General Command issued a statement declaring Baghdad’s actions a “clear declaration of war against the people of the Kurdistan Region.” Apart from isolated incidents, however, reports indicate that the peshmerga have generally withdrawn without offering resistance.

Throughout yesterday, Iraqi forces in Nineveh province moved from the provincial capital Mosul into areas they did not control. A government-backed ethnic Yazadi-based militia occupied the strategic town of Sinjar on the Iraq-Syria border.

Reports indicate that as government troops advance, peshmerga are retreating from Khanaqin, a district in Diyala province that borders Iran to the south of the three provinces that formally comprise the KRG.

The KRG has long claimed that the areas now coming back under Baghdad’s control should be incorporated into its territory. KRG president and nationalist leader Masoud Barzani seized the opportunity to order peshmerga to occupy the disputed regions after the June 2014 offensive by Islamic State (ISIS) and the wholesale retreat of government forces from Mosul and large swathes of northern Iraq.

The KRG hailed the peshmerga taking of Kirkuk as a milestone for the Kurdish nationalist movement. The province sits above substantial oil reserves and is

considered crucial to the economic viability of any separate Kurdish state. Much of its Kurdish population was driven out by the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, leaving a legacy of ethnic tensions and animosities.

The status of the KRG, along with Kirkuk and other disputed territory, was never resolved under the post-2003 US occupation regime and its puppet government—in which the Kurdish nationalists played a particularly venal role. As a pay-off for Kurdish support, Washington pressured the Arab-based parties in Baghdad to agree to hold a referendum on Kurdish independence in 2007, but it was repeatedly postponed and ultimately never conducted.

Since the ISIS uprising, the US-backed factions in Iraq have been preoccupied with seeking to recapture the country’s north. With ISIS now largely destroyed, however, control of the disputed territories, and especially the oilfields of Kirkuk, has emerged as the focus of bitter conflict between the rival ruling cliques in Baghdad and the KRG.

The deployment of government forces was prompted by a September 25 independence referendum in the KRG and the disputed territory under its control.

The Baghdad government declared the referendum illegal. The vote was furiously opposed by Turkey, which has spent decades brutally suppressing separatist movements among its own large Kurdish population. Iran, which exerts major influence over the Shiite-based parties that dominate the Iraqi government, also denounced the ballot.

The Trump administration backed Baghdad and opposed the referendum. Germany, which has used financial and military backing for the KRG to establish a political foothold in the Middle East, condemned the vote as provocative and destabilising.

The referendum also brought to the surface

longstanding tensions between the main bourgeois nationalist parties in Iraq's Kurdish region—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headed by Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) previously headed by the recently deceased Jalal Talibani. The two factions fought a bloody civil war in the 1990s, with the KDP collaborating with Saddam Hussein's regime against the Iranian-backed PUK.

The opposition of the imperialist powers and regional powers led the PUK to publicly call for the referendum's postponement. Barzani refused to do so. The vote reportedly resulted in a 93 percent majority in favour of independence.

The Trump administration gave the green light for the Iraqi military operations against the Kurdish nationalists. On September 30, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared that the referendum and its result “lack legitimacy” and the US supported a unified Iraq. Two weeks later, columns of tanks and troops converged on Kirkuk.

Barzani and the KDP have accused the PUK-linked peshmerga of assisting the Iraqi forces by withdrawing and allowing them to occupy key facilities. Barzani asserted yesterday that Kirkuk was lost only because of “certain individuals in certain parties.” A KDP military commander accused the PUK of “treason.” The PUK denied the allegations and insisted its fighters were the only ones to suffer casualties.

A hospital in Suleimaniyah, the PUK's stronghold in the KRG, told Associated Press it received the bodies of 25 peshmerga killed in Kirkuk and is treating another 44 wounded.

US Army spokesperson Colonel Ryan Dillon told journalists in Washington the only casualties were the result of a “miscommunication” early Monday morning and there had been “no further reports of armed combat or conflict between the two groups.” He alleged that the entry of government forces was “supposed to be a coordinated movement” and a “peaceful handover of areas around Kirkuk.”

Unconfirmed reports, denied by the Iraqi government and the US military, indicate that sectarian Shiite-based militias and Iranian advisors are accompanying army and police units. In Kirkuk, Kurdish flags have been torn down and images of Barzani defaced. The KDP-linked Rudaw news agency alleged there was looting, homes burned and peshmerga fighters captured and beheaded.

Thousands of ethnic Kurd civilians initially fled the city, fearing violence. Reports indicate many are already

returning to their homes.

In highly charged and confused conditions, major clashes may yet break out between Iraqi and Kurdish forces, or between the rival Kurdish factions.

In Baghdad, Abadi gloated yesterday that the retaking of Kirkuk and the disputed territories meant the referendum on Kurdish separation was “finished and has become a thing of the past.” Barzani responded by declaring the vote “would not be in vain” and he would continue to pursue “the independence of Kurdistan.”

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