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The Future of Kirkuk

Governor Najmaldin Karim, Marina Ottaway
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Few places embody the challenges of today's Iraq better than the governorate of Kirkuk. Home to large communities of Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs, the region is torn by both ethnic and religious divides. An oil-rich province, Kirkuk has struggled to gain financial independence from Baghdad and deliver basic services to its citizens. The security situation remains unstable, a point underscored by a recent terrorist attack that killed at least 29 people and wounded over 90 others. Many of Kirkuk's citizens wish to join the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan, but a referendum to determine Kirkuk's status remains a flashpoint that threatens Iraq's future stability.

Kirkuk Governor Najmaldin Karim, recently appointed to lead the difficult province, discussed the current situation in Kirkuk and its future prospects. Carnegie's Marina Ottaway moderated.

Negotiating a Multi-Ethnic Region

- **A History of Ethnic Cleansing:** Beginning in the early 1960s, a process of government-supported ethnic cleansing drove large numbers of Kurds and Turkmen out of Kirkuk. They were replaced by Arab settlers. Since 2003, many of those displaced under Saddam Hussein's rule have returned to Kirkuk but the settlers have remained, creating tensions between older and newer residents.
- **A Flawed Council:** The governing council of Kirkuk was elected in 2005, but a partial boycott of the elections left Arabs severely underrepresented. Both the current council and the population have recognized the need to elect a more representative body, Karim said, but disagreements over the composition of the voter list and a lack of action from Baghdad have delayed new elections.
- **Power-Sharing:** A recent power-sharing agreement has split the top government positions among the three major ethnic groups. As a result, Kurds control the governorship, Arabs hold the deputy governorship, and Turkmen chair the governing council. Turkmen were previously excluded from the top posts. Some Arab representatives have objected to the new arrangement and boycotted council meetings. Yet the overall political environment has improved significantly in the past few months, the governor said.

- **Common Interests:** Karim argued that the primary problem in Kirkuk has never been ethnic tensions, but rather state repression of Kurds and Turkmen. He noted that Kurds have not engaged in revenge killings against Arabs despite multiple opportunities. Moreover, all of the ethnic communities in Kirkuk share common concerns, namely better services and more security. Improving services for everyone will make it easier to bring people together politically, the governor concluded.

Central Government Control

- **Unclear Powers:** Since Kirkuk has not successfully held elections since 2005, it never passed new laws outlining government powers. As a result, there is considerable confusion about how to run the governorate. Further complicating matters is the need for Baghdad to approve all of the Kirkuk government's decisions. Factions in the capital have not reached a decision on elections or other key issues, delaying local progress.
- **Financial Dependence:** Kirkuk receives a budget from Baghdad, but is required to spend the money within a certain period of time or lose it. Yet the bureaucratic procedures set up by the central government make it very difficult to spend the money and deliver services to the people, explained Karim. All of the communities within Kirkuk agree that they need to loosen Baghdad's grip on the governorate, he added.
- **Oil Development:** About 15 percent of Iraq's oil is exported from Kirkuk and the region still has considerable oil reserves. Yet these oil resources have not been properly maintained or developed and remain under central government control. Kirkuk currently receives one dollar for every barrel of oil exported from these fields, but Baghdad still dictates how the money should be spent.

Security Concerns

- **Terrorist Threats:** Kirkuk faces threats from three different groups: al-Qaeda, which has conducted high-profile suicide bombings; Ansar al-Islam, which has detonated a majority of the car bombs in the region; and remnants of the Ba'ath Party, which have carried out targeted assassinations. Terrorist attacks have been on the rise in recent months, said Karim, possibly in an attempt to sabotage improvements in the political environment.
- **Joint Security Coordination:** Kirkuk is currently protected by the Iraqi Army's 12th Division, as well as Kurdish troops, the U.S. military, and local police. These forces do not always get along, and tensions between them spiked in February when Kurdish soldiers moved closer to the city of Kirkuk in response to a terrorist threat. Following this incident, U.S. mediation helped reduce friction between the forces, and a new committee has been formed to coordinate security between all groups.
- **U.S. Forces:** There is consensus among Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen that U.S. forces should stay in Kirkuk, said the governor. The United States plays an important role as a mediator in the region and, if it leaves, the security situation could get much worse. This is especially important in disputed areas such as Kirkuk but is also true for all of Iraq, Karim said. No one has the courage to admit that Iraq can't defend its borders, protect its skies, or preserve internal security without U.S. assistance.

Kirkuk's Future

- **Article 140:** Article 140 of Iraq's constitution was passed in 2005 to deal with disputed territories. It has three phases: normalization, census, and a referendum. Kirkuk is still in the midst of the normalization phase and needs more funds from Baghdad to complete this process, said Karim. The next step will then be some agreement on the census and on the subject of the referendum. The census is very controversial because the leaders of the different ethnic communities are worried it will reveal that their percentage of the population is smaller than they claim, explained Karim.
- **Joining Kurdistan:** The majority of Kurds in Kirkuk would like to join Kurdistan, Karim said, but any referendum on joining Kurdistan would need to clarify exactly what that would mean for Kirkuk. Before a vote takes place, the Kurdistan Regional Government must recognize that Kirkuk will have different needs than other parts of the region and guarantee the rights of Arabs and Turkmen. This could include rotation of top posts between the different communities.

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