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Analysis

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Kirkuk Conflict: The Underlying Energy Dimension

Hriday Sarma

Introduction

The Kurdish people within northern Iraq have a complicated relationship with the state of Iraq, as they are currently a semi-autonomous region within it. However, there are many other regions and cities surrounding this area that are “disputed” between Iraqi Central Government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Since oil was discovered in this part of the country, it has fueled the tensions in this region. The rich oil reserves in the disputed region of Kirkuk have created a focal point of the governance of oil question and the ongoing Kurdish-Iraqi territorial disputes. This paper will review the Kurdish-Iraqi conflict from the environmental resource perspective in order to find recommendations that will mitigate or prevent further conflict in the region.

Kirkuk and its oil

As Kirkuk has a disproportionately large supply of oil, with 112 billion barrels or 12% of the Iraqi reserves, it serves as the focal point of the environmental resource influence in this conflict (Katzman 2010) (ICG 2006). Since the early 20th century when the British recognized the strategic importance of Kirkuk, the politics and populations of the city have been manipulated. Saddam Husain's “Arabization” process occurred where Arabs were settled in strategic locations in order to displace and remove Kurdish peoples and hence claims to the land, and since his regimes downfall, the KRG has facilitated the return of Kurdish populations to this region. However, the status of the Kirkuk district today is blurred between the central Iraqi government authority in the south and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authority in the north-east (Sevim 2013). At present, the exact composition of the ethnic groups in the city of Kirkuk and Kirkuk province is not accurately known, as the last proper census in Iraq was done in 1957. Still, commonly accepted national and international sources suggest that Kirkuk, even

today, remains as the fourth largest city in Iraq, with the Kurdish population far exceeding that of other nationalities but falling below a 50% majority. Located south of Turkey, east of Iran and west of Syria, Kirkuk, despite being landlocked, is also positioned in an economically favorable location for the trade of oil.

Kurdish claims

The Kurdish people have ancient claims to the land spreading across modern Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. After the partition of the Ottoman Empire following the end of the First World War, the Kurdish lands were divided amongst the aforementioned nations. The Kurdish claims to the land have empowered the Kurdish people to fight for independence throughout this region, and have eventually lead to the semi-autonomous region in Northern Iraq today. In particular, the Kurdish people recognize a historical affiliation with Kirkuk, a city that some have referred to as their “Jerusalem” (Sevim 2013).

Kurdish Goals

The goals of the KRG appear to be the eventual achievement of complete autonomy and independence from Iraq. In order to do this, it is thought that the KRG must absorb Kirkuk and utilize its oil reserves; otherwise a completely autonomous Kurdish Republic may not be economically feasible as it would still require substantial dependence on Iraq (Sevim 2013). The KRG has received strong pressure from various neighboring countries (including the biggest customer of Kurdish oil, Turkey) not to push for independence, which in 2010 swayed Kurdish leaders who have since said they will not push for independence (Katzman 2010). This is important as the Kurdish Region is landlocked, and therefore dependent on the trade with its neighbors, who would not accept a Kurdish attempt of annexation over Kirkuk (ICG 2006) (Katzman 2010).

Iraqi claims

The Iraqi Arabs strongly advocate for any Kirkuk governance to have limited power as they consider Kurdish governance of Kirkuk as synonymous with Arabic discrimination (Wolff 2007). In 2007, the Iraqi government center in Bagdad objected to the KRG signing international energy deals (Sevim 2013) which Iraq’s Oil Minister Hussein Shahrastani called “Illegal” (Wolff 2007). These deals are continuing today between KRG and Turkey. As a consequence, in 2008, the Iraqi Arab leaders tried to cut back the oil revenue to the Kurds from 17% to 13%, however this did not succeed (Wolff 2007).

Iraqi goals

The central Iraqi government has its eyes set on the oil in Kirkuk, and for regional stability. As Iraq currently has control over the national oil pipeline grid,

“The Kurds are dependent on the central government to be able to exploit their energy resources because oil exports need to flow through the national oil pipeline grid”

(Katzman 2010).

The Conflict

Famously, the Iraq War left many of the oil production facilities severely damaged across Iraq. Before the US-led war started in 2003, Iraq was producing 680,000 barrels per day, while after the war began, only 200,000 barrels per day were able to be produced (Sevim 2013). Due to conflict-related oil infrastructure damage, the net gain of the region has been dramatically lowered.

Although relatively peaceful conditions since the Iraq War ended in 2007 have enabled oil production to increase (Kandiyoti 2008), there are clear signs of disagreement between the KRG and the Iraqi Government. As mentioned earlier, the 2007 failed attempt of the Iraqi government to reduce revenue to the KRG has potentially led to the KRG developing its energy sector, independently "despite the lack of comprehensive agreement" (Katzman 2010).

Oil companies, too, have been "taking advantage" of the conflict in the northern semi-autonomous Kurdistan region (Baroud 2013). Various gas corporations have moved in and "struck lucrative deals that are independent from the central government in Baghdad" (Baroud 2013). This has led to the central government amassing its military along the disputed territories which contain abundant oil supplies, which has been met by the Kurdish government doing the same (Baroud 2013).

Resolution (Recommendations)

The conflict over the oil-rich Kirkuk region has been described as a middle-eastern dispute over territory second only to Jerusalem, however, this case has the added element of oil reserves. In 2007, Wolff said "the challenge that Kirkuk poses is also one that threatens stability in Iraq and potentially in the wider region." In this section, various recommendations will be discussed.

There are two main factors that must be taken into consideration: 1) regional stability and 2) Kurdish aspirations to sovereignty. Currently, these two options appear to be contradictory, and this was recognized in the international crisis group publication in a 2006 recommendation for the "Kurdish community to postpone the constitutionally referendum on Kirkuk's status *due to reason of those day's environment and tensions*" [Italics added] (Sevim 2013). Two years later, in 2008, the KRG "grudgingly accepted" the urgings by the US government to postpone the referendum, as the US managed to convince the KRG that a delay may prevent the tensions from turning into "major violence" (Katzman 2010).

The KRG has also offered their own recommendations regarding oil and sovereignty. They have argued that the best framework would be under the circumstances where Kurdistan has "a system of royalty and oil revenue allocation" (O'leary et al 2005). This would give the KRG control over the resources that lie within their borders, however

having to pay a percentage of the revenue to the federal Iraqi Government (O'leary et al 2005).

In 2009, the UN recognized the complications associated with the territorial disputes and oil sharing (UN 2009). However, they recommended that at least some revenue sharing must occur in order to prevent Iraq from being "permanently at risk of being pulled back or dragged into a fundamentally destabilizing conflict" (UN 2009).

Another recommendation to mitigate the conflict suggested is the differentiation between oil and non-oil resources (O'leary et al 2005). This would allow for the federal population to benefit from the oil found nationally, equally, but allow regional control of other resources such as water in order to prevent the suffocation of Kurdistan's development (O'leary et al 2005), i.e. a trade of oil control for land. This may be the only way in which to legitimately discern the Kurdish aspirations for Kirkuk being ethnic heritage rather than a grab for oil and nationalistic purposes, an agenda that others in the region have considered a "red line" (Kandiyoti 2008).

Amongst the complications regarding the disputed territories and control over the oil, due to the history in the region, it is clear that conflict itself hurts the oil industry, especially when the function of pipelines and pumping stations are at risk of damage, expulsion of hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities and heavy casualties (Talabany 2007). Therefore, any solution must incorporate regional stability, and if that comes at a compromise of the Kurdish peoples' aspirations for complete sovereignty, then it will benefit them to wait, as their current trading partners such as Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq are "vehemently opposed – possibly to the point of armed conflict" (Katzman 2010).

A holistically shaped approach may already be in its infancy. Turkey and Iran, despite their opposition to Kurdish national control of Kirkuk, and their having contesting it in the past, now trade with the KRG (Kandiyoti 2008). "A coalition [...] In favor of regional natural resource ownership may develop", despite the opposition of Kurdish annexation of Kirkuk (O'leary et al 2005).

Considering the world's growing population and seemingly ever increasing demands for oil, a holistic approach to resource utilization, such as the current national pipeline in Iraq, may be beneficial to replicate across the Middle Eastern region. With respect to oil allocation in contentiously disputed territories, the KRG appear to be preventing conflict with their neighboring countries, though they are in direct dispute with the central Iraqi government. As the major issues between the KRG do not appear close to being resolved, it appears that international communities (UN) recommendations to the status quo, strengthening democracy and human rights as well as international pressure to achieve a lasting peace, stability and prosperity may not be enough to prevent further escalation between the Kurdish North and the Central Iraqi government to its south. For this reason, it appears that an interconnected approach to resources, similar to the Jordan-Israel water pipeline may be beneficial in harmonizing the two peoples until a political solution to the dispute over Kirkuk can be successfully implemented.

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Hriday Sarma is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (Tel Aviv, Israel).

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