

Middle East Vortex: An Unstable Iraq and Its Implications for the Region

Ted Galen Carpenter

The United States seems committed to drawing down its forces in Iraq, with the goal of having all combat forces out of the country by the end of 2011. That is also the wish of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's government and a majority of the Iraqi people. The first step in that process was the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq's cities (with the exception of Mosul, where the anti-government insurgency remains potent) by 30 June 2009. It was a disturbing development, though, that a noticeable spike in violence occurred as the US forces redeployed and turned security responsibilities over to Iraqi military and police units.

Experts both in the United States and in Iraq worry that the relative calm that Iraq has enjoyed since mid-2007 might not last once US troops depart. Indeed, there are serious questions about whether Iraq can be a viable state over the long run. If Iraq becomes a cockpit of instability again, as it was during the first four years following the US invasion, the implications for the region are ominous. Unfortunately, the factors that might cause the country to unravel are largely beyond the control of the United States. In fact, the US ouster of Saddam Hussein and the long-governing Sunni elite was the catalyst that unleashed many of those forces.

In one sense, Iraq has already ceased to be a unified state. The Baghdad government plays no meaningful role in the Kurdish region in the north. Indeed, Iraqi Arabs who enter the territory are treated as foreigners—and

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not especially welcome foreigners.¹ Officially, Kurdistan is merely a region of Iraq that Baghdad allows to exercise “autonomy,” but Iraqi Kurdistan has its own government, flag, national anthem, currency, and army (the Peshmerga). The flag issue is particularly revealing. Even though Kurdistan is supposedly part of Iraq, it was illegal there to fly the Iraqi flag until early 2008, and such displays are discouraged even today. When Kurdish officials speak publicly, they typically refer to their area as merely a self-governing region of Iraq,² but when they speak privately, that cover story often disappears. With the Kurdish population, there is seldom even the pretense of an allegiance to Iraq. Media interviews and opinion surveys show overwhelming majorities in favor of full-fledged independence.³

Although the Kurds have not proclaimed an independent country, in every sense that matters Iraq’s Kurdistan region is de facto independent, and the “Kurdish regional government” is the governing body of a sovereign state.⁴ Moreover, it is a de facto sovereign state with far-reaching territorial goals. Within Iraq, the Kurds claim the northern city of Kirkuk and its extensive oil deposits. There have also been nasty clashes with Iraqi Arab factions in the ethnically mixed province of Nineveh, where Kurds insist that several villages should be part of the Kurdish region.⁵

Thanks to US assistance, Kurdistan has enjoyed de facto independence since the end of the Persian Gulf War in 1991. When Washington began to enforce a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, the Kurds took advantage of that protection to establish and consolidate their region’s self-rule. Unable to bring

1. Leila Fadel, “Iraqi Arabs Face Restrictions When They Move to Kurdistan,” McClatchy Newspapers, 17 February 2008.

2. Luke Baker, “Kurdish President Says Kurds ‘Stronger with Iraq,’” Reuters, 12 March 2009.

3. One survey that explicitly offered the option of independence was taken in 2005 and showed that more than 90 percent of Iraqi Kurds favored independence. See www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2005/2/independentstate38.htm. Also see Borzou Daragahi, “Iraq’s Sunni Leaders Reject Poll as Flawed and Unjust,” *Independent* (UK), 3 February 2005.

4. For a discussion of secessionist prospects, de facto and de jure, and the possible implications for Iraq and the region, see W. Andrew Terrill, *Regional Spillover Effects of the Iraq War* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, December 2008), 46–53.

5. Ned Parker and Usama Redha, “Arabs, Kurds Take Their Fight to Polls,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 January 2009; Leila Fadel, “Iraq’s Kurdish-Arab Tensions Threaten to Escalate into War,” McClatchy Newspapers, 18 February 2009; Daniel Williams, “Kurds Seize Iraq Land Past Borders in Blow to US Pullout Plan,” Bloomberg.com, 4 March 2009, www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=qeLL5YjuL18; and Corinne Reilly and Ali Abbas, “Kurdish-Arab Tensions Continue to Grow in Northern Iraq,” McClatchy Newspapers, 14 April 2009.

his air power to bear, Saddam Hussein could not reassert Baghdad's control, since the Peshmerga was more than a match for Iraqi ground forces. More recently, the Peshmerga have been strong enough to prevent infiltration by al Qaeda or Iraqi Arab Sunni and Shiite militias.

That relatively stable security environment has enabled Kurdistan to enjoy solid economic growth—in contrast to the rather dismal situation in the rest of Iraq. A construction boom has taken place in Kurdish cities, and Western firms in an assortment of industries seem eager to invest in Kurdistan.⁶ The current global economic recession has slowed the process, but just modestly. Foreign investment interest is most pronounced with regard to Kurdish oil production, but it extends to other economic arenas as well. It is especially revealing that companies wishing to do business in Kurdistan normally work through the regional government, not Baghdad. Despite vehement complaints from Iraqi leaders (and US occupation authorities), the Kurdish government continues to sign multimillion-dollar agreements with various Western companies.⁷ In addition, Iraqi Kurdistan is building its own oil refineries, a step that gives it further independence from Baghdad on energy issues.⁸

Despite its economic and political achievements, there is almost no prospect for international recognition of an independent Kurdistan. Washington opposes such a step, fearing that proclaiming Kurdish independence would not only lead to further fragmentation of Iraq but would antagonize all of Iraqi Kurdistan's neighbors, especially Turkey. That is a legitimate concern. The underlying problem is that the Kurds are the largest nationality in the world without an officially recognized state. Although the British government promised the Kurds a homeland following the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, London reneged on that commitment, and Kurdish territory was divided among Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. Any talk of an

6. Steven Mufson, "Kurdish Ministers Woo US Oil Firms," *Washington Post*, 28 November 2007; and Kirk Semple, "Pointing to Stability, Kurds in Iraq Lure Investors," *New York Times*, 27 June 2007.

7. Jay Deshmukh, "Iraqi Kurds Sign Seven New Oil Contracts," *Agence France Presse*, 7 November 2007; Michel Moutot, "Iraq Kurds Flex Muscles over Black Gold Reserves," *Agence France Presse*, 18 November 2007; and Mufson. The oil agreement reached in early 2009 between Baghdad and the Kurdish regional government did not significantly alter the dynamic.

8. Andrew Lee Butters, "Why Kurds vs. Arabs Could Be Iraq's Next Civil War," *Time.com*, 22 July 2009, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,191198,00.html.

independent Kurdistan sets off alarm bells in Tehran, Damascus, and especially Ankara, since fully 50 percent of Kurds live in Turkey.

Ankara is already less than pleased with the existence of a de facto Kurdish state in Iraq.⁹ And Turkish leaders have reason to be uneasy. The Turkish military has waged a war for some two-and-a-half decades against Kurdish secessionists, led by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Fighting flared during 2007, with PKK fighters striking targets inside Turkey and then taking refuge across the border in Iraqi Kurdistan. Ankara's patience finally ran out in late 2007, and Turkish military forces launched attacks on some of those sanctuaries. Turkey had actually threatened a much larger operation, and Washington feared that the incursions could lead to a full-scale war between Turkish military units and the Peshmerga. US officials prevailed upon Ankara to limit its military operations in exchange for US intelligence and other assistance against the PKK and a commitment from Iraqi Kurdish leaders to take action against PKK activities in their territory.¹⁰

The situation became especially tense when Turkey delayed withdrawing its forces until March 2008. There were also indications that those troops were targeting Iraqi Kurdish installations as well as PKK enclaves, and at one point Kurdish Peshmerga forces surrounded a Turkish unit and threatened to open fire.¹¹ After the Turkish withdrawal, angry Iraqi Kurds vowed to fight any future incursion—creating the prospect of a collision, since Ankara stated that its troops would return if the PKK establishes bases in Iraqi Kurdistan from which to attack targets inside Turkey.¹²

The potential for a major dust-up with Turkey over the PKK is not the only situation in which Kurdistan could be the catalyst for a regional crisis.¹³

9. For a discussion of Turkey's concerns and some suggestions for a more enlightened, cooperative policy, see Henri J. Barkey, "Kurdistanoff," *National Interest*, no. 90 (July–August 2007): 51–7.

10. Ann Scott Tyson and Robin Wright, "US Helps Turkey Hit Rebel Kurds in Iraq," *Washington Post*, 18 December 2007; and Helene Cooper, "For Turkey and US, a Delicate Issue of Cooperation in Combating Militant Kurds," *New York Times*, 20 December 2007.

11. Leila Fadel and Yasseen Taha, "Kurdish Troops Surround Troops in Worst Confrontation Yet in Iraq," *McClatchy Newspapers*, 21 February 2008; and Mohammed Abbas, "Interview: Turkey Targets Iraq Kurds, Not Just Rebels—Kurd PM," *Reuters*, 28 February 2008.

12. "Iraqi Kurds Vow to Take Up Arms if Turks Come Back," *Agence France Presse*, 7 March 2008.

13. Heath Druzin, "The Other Iraq War: In Kurdish Iraq, Hostilities Simmering with Iran, Turkey," *Stars and Stripes*, 28 July 2009.

Another flash point involves the future political status of the city of Kirkuk and its oil riches. Kirkuk is an ethnically mixed city of Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen (kinsmen that Turkey has pledged to protect). During Saddam Hussein's rule, Baghdad pursued a blatant policy of Arabization, expelling Kurdish families and replacing them with Arabs. Since his overthrow, that process has been reversed, with Kurdish authorities expelling Arabs (and some Turkmen) and Kurds moving in.

The Kurdistan government keeps pressing for a referendum among voters in Kirkuk on the city's political status, with the goal of incorporating it into Kurdistan's jurisdiction. That referendum, which the Iraqi central government originally promised to hold before the end of 2007, has been repeatedly postponed—much to the annoyance of Kurdish authorities. It will not be possible to avoid that issue forever, though.

Kurdish officials seem to be running out of patience and have begun to take a harder line on Kirkuk and other matters. Regional president Masoud Barzani spurned a UN proposal to resolve the contentious internal border disputes. The principal option pushed by UN officials was to make Kirkuk province into an autonomous region—not under the direct control of either the Baghdad government or the Kurdish regional government. American officials have repeatedly expressed support for a UN-brokered solution.

Barzani has no patience for such a scheme. Indeed, the Kurdish government is moving decisively in the opposite direction. In June 2009, the region's parliament approved a draft constitution that extended Kurdish political and economic rights to all disputed territories, including Kirkuk. That constitutional provision asserted unequivocally that the disputed territories are inseparable from the "geographic and historic entity" today known as Iraq's Kurdistan region. Barzani also issued a chilling warning: "If any regional country, or even Baghdad, interferes in an internal matter, and individuals inside the region conspire against the region's security and well-being," he stressed, "actions will be taken in accordance with the law against those who want to undermine the unity of the Kurdish house."¹⁴

Whatever the result of the referendum on Kirkuk when it is finally held, there is likely to be trouble. If the Kurds lose, the resulting anger throughout

14. Quoted in Sam Dagher, "New Kurdish Leader Asserts Agenda," *New York Times*, 29 July 2009.

Kurdistan would probably eradicate any lingering facade of loyalty to the Iraqi state. But given the ongoing ethnic cleansing, the Kurds are almost certain to win, and that result would have explosive potential on multiple fronts.

The government in Baghdad understandably worries about losing the revenue from Kirkuk's oil. Both Shiite and Sunni Arab leaders also suspect that a Kurdish regional government with a dramatically enhanced source of revenue would be even more inclined to pursue independent policies on a wide range of issues. Kurdish-Arab tensions have already grown so severe that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made an unexpected trip to Iraq to urge both sides to back away from a dangerous confrontation. General Ray Odierno, the top US commander in Iraq, admitted that the Arab-Kurdish feud—especially over the status of Kirkuk—is the “number one driver of instabilities” in the country.¹⁵ Tensions in both the area around Kirkuk and in Nineveh province became so pronounced in August 2009 that Odierno suggested that US troops be deployed to create a buffer between Kurds and Arabs to prevent an explosion.¹⁶

Turkey is agitated about the prospect that its Turkmen brethren might become an even more discriminated against minority than they are now.¹⁷ Even more important, Ankara fears that control of Kirkuk's oil wealth would enable Kurdistan to become a major economic and political player in the region and allow Kurdish leaders to cast off all pretenses that Kurdistan is anything other than an independent state. Such an entity, Turkish officials worry, would be an irresistible magnet for Turkey's own restless Kurdish minority and risk fragmenting the country.¹⁸ Ankara has repeatedly indicated that it might take forcible action if Kirkuk is incorporated into Kurdistan.¹⁹

15. Quoted in Jim Wolf, “Gates, in Iraq, Seeks to Ease Kurd-Arab Tensions,” Reuters, 29 July 2009.

16. Kim Gamel, “US Commander in Iraq Wants Troops in Disputed Land,” Associated Press, 17 August 2009.

17. There are indications that the Turkmen in Iraq have the same fears. See Timothy Williams, “Turkmens in Contested Oil-Rich Province Vow to Boycott Iraq's National Census,” *New York Times*, 24 July 2009.

18. Indeed, even without incorporating the wealth of Kirkuk, Iraq Kurdistan is already an economic magnet for Kurds in Turkey. Selcuk Gokoluk, “Turkey's Kurds Look to N. Iraq for Jobs, Trade,” Reuters, 9 January 2008.

19. For an early, detailed discussion of the Kirkuk issue and its potential to cause tensions on multiple fronts, see International Crisis Group, “Iraq and the Kurds: The Brewing Battle over Kirkuk,” *Middle East Report*, no. 56, 18 July 2006.

To make matters even more volatile, Kurdistan's own political stability is less certain today than it was in previous years. A new party, Goran (Change), cut into the dominance long exercised by the two major parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), winning more than a quarter of the vote in the July 2009 elections. Among other effects, that outcome may cause both the PUK and the KDP to intensify their appeal to Kurdish nationalist sentiments as a way to prevent further erosion of their political strength. A key plank in Goran's platform was that the two leading parties had done a poor job of standing up for Kurdish interests in dealing with the Baghdad government.²⁰ In any case, the positions adopted by the Kurdish regional government are no longer as predictable as they were under the stable political duopoly that existed before the July vote.²¹

In addition to the fracture of Iraq caused by the existence of a de facto independent Kurdish state with ambitious territorial claims, there are serious questions about the degree of stability in the rest of Iraq. True, the carnage that afflicted the country following the US invasion, and which reached especially severe levels from early 2006 to mid-2007, has declined. Nevertheless, the casualty rates are still disturbingly high. Al Qaeda in Iraq, while weakened, remains a factor, and nervous Iraqi and US officials see indications that terrorist fighters are returning to some of their old haunts.²² The indigenous Sunni insurgency against the Shiite-dominated government also remains a worry. And general Shiite-Sunni sectarian tensions simmer just beneath the surface—a situation that continues to worry Obama administration officials, in addition to their concerns about the growing Kurdish-Arab animosity.²³

Even the improvement in the casualty numbers should not be overstated. According to Iraq's Ministry of the Interior, there were 437 deaths in July, and another 1,103 Iraqis were wounded.²⁴ Both totals were a decline from

20. Andrew Lee Butters, "New Kurdish Party Could Bring Instability to Northern Iraq," *Time.com*, 27 July 2009, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1912983,00.html.

21. Patrick Cockburn, "Reformist Gains in Kurdish Vote Shake Iraq's Quiet North," *Independent (UK)*, 27 July 2009.

22. Mohammed al Dulaimy, "Iraqis Fear Latest Bombings Signal Return of al Qaida in Iraq," *McClatchy Newspapers*, 31 July 2009.

23. Dan De Luce, "US Defense Secretary Urges Iraq Foes to Make Peace," *Agence France Presse*, 28 July 2009.

24. Salim Faraj, "Iraqi Death Toll Down in July After US Handover," *Agence France Presse*, 1 August 2009.

the upward trend in casualties that occurred during the first half of 2009 (including 543 deaths in June).²⁵ The killings are dramatically lower (by about 75 percent) than they were during the horrid period in 2006 and 2007, but Iraq is still far from being a safe and peaceful country. Given that Iraq's population is only 25 million, even the July toll would translate into an equivalent of more than five thousand deaths from political violence in the United States—an annual rate of more than sixty thousand. Iraq is still in the throes of a civil war, albeit a relatively low-intensity one. That does not bode well for unity or even stability going forward.

A major reason for the decline in casualties since the summer of 2007 was the decision by then US military commander General David Petraeus to try to split indigenous Iraqi Sunnis from their al Qaeda allies. He did so by reaching out to—and generously funding—new Awakening Councils. Indeed, the US military provided weapons as well as money to those groups, despite uneasiness on the part of the Maliki regime.²⁶ As the United States has begun to draw down its forces and reduce its overall role in Iraq, however, Shiite hardliners in the Baghdad government have begun to harass the Awakening Councils. In late March 2009, government security forces even arrested prominent Awakening Council leaders—an action that produced a sharp increase in tensions and a scrambling US effort to mediate the dispute.²⁷

There is a significant chance that the already frosty relationship between Baghdad and the Awakening Councils will worsen once the United States completes its withdrawal. It is not even out of the question that full-scale sectarian fighting could erupt again. The continuing Shiite-Sunni rivalry also has regional implications. Before the Petraeus initiative, Iran and Saudi Arabia were at least mildly engaged in a proxy struggle in Iraq.²⁸ The Saudis,

25. Salam Faraj, "Iraq Death Toll Spikes as US Troops Leave Cities," Agence France Presse, 1 July 2009; Corrine Reilly, "More Baghdad Bombings Make April Worst Month in a Year," McClatchy Newspapers, 29 April 2009; and al Dulaimy.

26. Ted Galen Carpenter, "The Surge 'Success': The Triumph of Hope over Experience," *Chronicles*, May 2008, 23–5.

27. Leila Fadel, "Arrest of Sunni Leaders Raises Fears of Broader Clashes," McClatchy Newspapers, 29 March 2009; Alissa J. Rubin, "Arrests Deepen Iraqi Sunnis' Bitterness," *New York Times*, 12 April 2009; and Alissa J. Rubin and Rod Nordland, "US Military Expresses Concern about Perception of an Iraqi Crackdown on Sunnis," *New York Times*, 16 April 2009.

28. On aspects of the Sunni-Shiite proxy rivalry, see Terrill, 38–46.

with the blessing if not the active support of the royal family, supplied Iraqi Sunni militias with funds and weapons.

Shiite Iran played a more complex game, working to establish reasonably cooperative ties with the Maliki government while providing some financial and logistical support for more radical Shiite factions.²⁹ That strategy appears to have paid significant political dividends for Tehran. A graphic symbol of Iran's prestige and influence in Iraq came in March 2008 when Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad received an enthusiastic, red-carpet reception in Baghdad. In September 2007, President George W. Bush also visited Iraq, entering the country at a US military base in Anbar province with no advance public announcement. The contrast between those two visits could not have provided a clearer indication of which country was likely to have the greater long-term influence in Iraq.

The extent of the cordial ties between Baghdad and Tehran became even more apparent in the summer of 2009. Iraqi officials were noticeably quiet about the political turmoil in their eastern neighbor following Iran's disputed presidential election. American officials who thought that Iraqi democrats might back Iranian reformers against Ahmadinejad and the Islamic hardliners were soon disappointed. Both Iraq's Shiite clerics and government officials provided virtually no support, even rhetorical, for the demonstrators.³⁰ A short time later, Iraqi military forces moved to shut down the camp of a major Iranian exile group, the Mujahideen-e-Kalq, apparently at Tehran's request.³¹ The Iraqi government did not even inform the United States of that planned crackdown.

It is apparent that Iran's influence in Iraq has grown dramatically since the ouster of Saddam Hussein, and Tehran will not willingly relinquish that status.³² It is also apparent that the neighboring Sunni powers, especially

29. Contrary to the dominant mythology in the United States, Iran's principal political client in Iraq was not the radical cleric Moqtada Sadr but rather the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq. Sadr, in fact, seemed to be a rather strong Iraqi nationalist, which made Tehran uneasy.

30. Daniel W. Smith, "Iraqis Stay Silent on Protests in Iran," *Washington Times*, 9 July 2009.

31. Rania Abouzeid, "At Tehran's Bidding? Iraq Cracks Down on a Controversial Camp," *Time*.com, 29 July 2009, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,191339,00.html; and Charles Levinson and Yochi J. Dreazen, "Iraqi Troops Raid Iranian Dissident Camp, in Nod to Tehran," *Wall Street Journal*, 29 July 2009.

32. That was an inevitable result of Washington's decision to oust Saddam and Iraq's long-dominant Sunni governing elite. See Ted Galen Carpenter and Malou Innocent, "The Iraq War and Iranian Power," *Survival* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2007–8): 67–82.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, are not at all happy about Iran's ascendancy. The potential exists for a nasty Sunni-Shiite proxy struggle with Iraq as the main arena.

Given the Kurdish-Arab tensions in Iraq, the uneasy relations—to put it mildly—between Iraqi Kurdistan and neighboring states, simmering Sunni-Shiite tensions within Iraq, and the potential for a regional Sunni-Shiite proxy fight, the long-term prognosis for Iraq and regional stability is not good. Indeed, we may come to regard the period between mid-2007 and mid-2009 as a relatively quiet interlude between two turbulent and violent periods. Some members of the foreign policy community fear precisely that kind of outcome, and they advocate that the Obama administration abandon, or at least postpone, its plans to withdraw US forces from Iraq by the end of 2011.³³

Their diagnosis may well be correct, but their policy prescription is both futile and dangerous. The United States has already lost more than forty-three hundred troops (plus thousands more seriously wounded) and spent nearly \$700 billion in direct expenditures in its nation-building venture. Yet crucial systemic and structural factors make it unlikely that Iraq will ever be a stable, united, democratic country. Proponents of keeping US troops in Iraq indefinitely would simply have America spend even more blood and treasure in pursuit of an unattainable objective. The unpleasant reality is that, regardless of when American forces leave Iraq, both that country and the wider region are probably in for a nasty period of instability. Iraq is the vortex in a turbulent part of the world, and there is little the United States can do to prevent its destructive impact.

33. See Josef Joffe, "If Iraq Fell," *Hoover Institution Digest*, no. 1 (2008), www.hoover.org/publications/digest/13845242.html; Mark Harris and Chad Hazlett, "A Pledge to Honor in Iraq," *Washington Post*, 18 July 2009; Thomas Ricks, "Understanding the Surge in Iraq and What's Ahead," *E Notes* (Foreign Policy Research Institute), May 2009, www.fpri.org/enotes/200905_ricks.understandingsurgeiraq.html; and Barbara F. Walter, "Too Soon to Leave Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 August 2009.