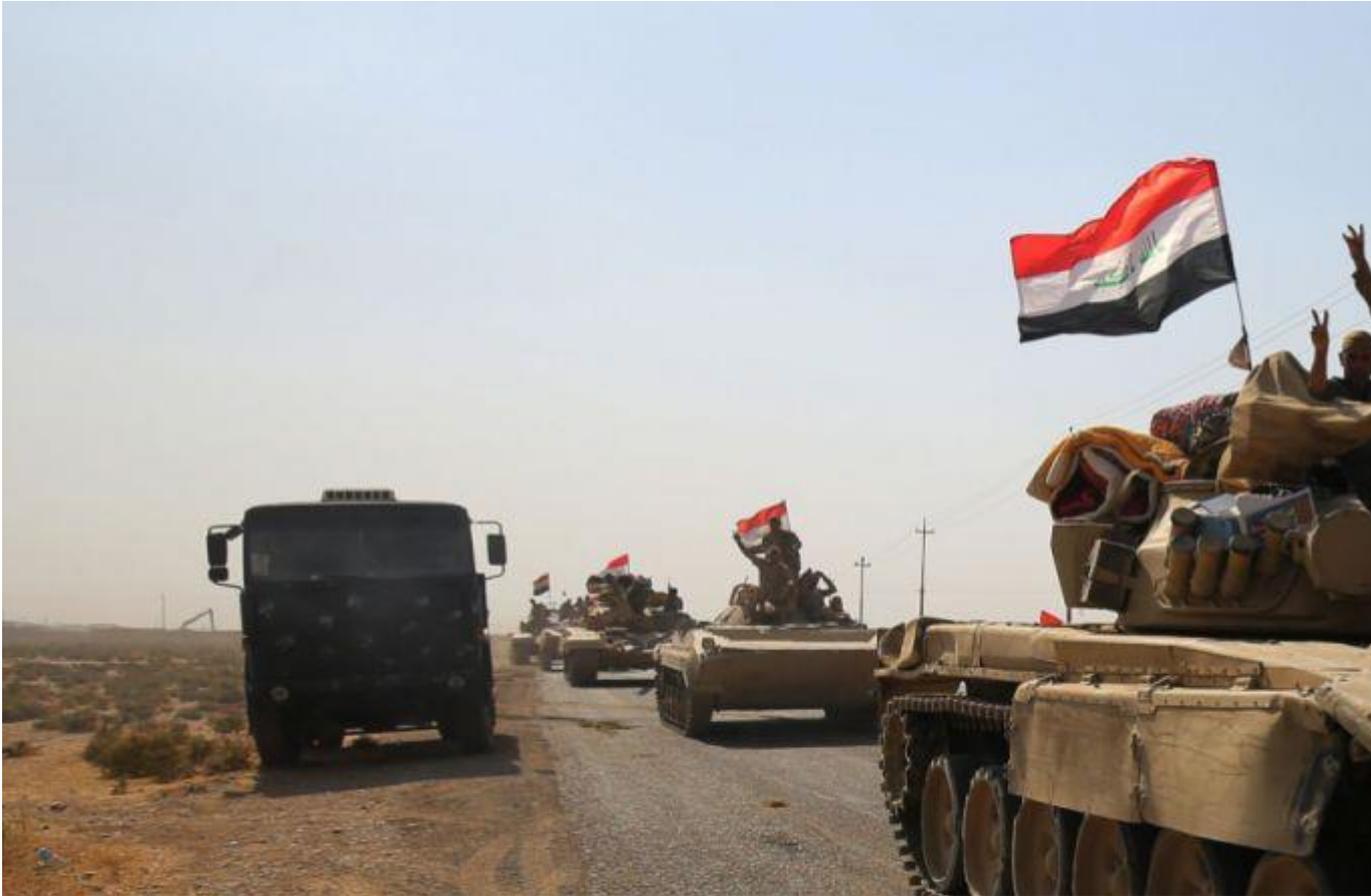


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## Clashes in Kirkuk Bring Societal Divisions Into Focus



(AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP/Getty Images)

### Highlights

- *Baghdad has exercised its military power swiftly in Kirkuk province, reasserting territorial control over critical infrastructure.*
- *A likely agreement between Baghdad and certain members of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) to leave areas of Kirkuk province protected will exacerbate divisions within the PUK party and between the PUK and the ruling Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).*
- *Conditions are ripe for civil conflict between not only the governments of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, but also between the Kurds and other ethno-sectarian groups, including Turkmen and Arab groups.*

Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have quickly [captured critical infrastructure points in Iraq's Kirkuk province](#) and in the surrounding areas. After [beginning its operation](#) overnight Oct. 15, the Iraqi military has reportedly taken control of the North Oil Company and North Gas Company headquarters, Kurdistan's K1 military base, the Bai Hassan oil field and the Baba Gurgur and

Avanah domes of the Kirkuk oil field. Currently, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) claims to still hold some of the oil fields in the area.

The Iraqi government's purpose for the operation is to reassert federal control over the disputed province of Kirkuk's most strategic assets, which fell under the control of the Kurdish peshmerga after the Islamic State rose to power there in 2014. But the pace of the ISF's advance appears to have been hastened by newly exposed splits within both the two main Kurdish political parties and the region's [powerful but divided peshmerga military](#).

### Iraq's Kurds, A Divided People

For years, the political scene in Iraqi Kurdistan has been dominated by two parties: the [KDP](#), which is closely associated with the powerful Barzani family, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which is tied to the similarly powerful Talabani family. In the Kurdistan Regional Government, the KDP is the ruling party, but in the eastern portions of Iraqi Kurdistan — including the heavily disputed province of Kirkuk — the PUK is dominant. Moreover, Kurdistan's peshmerga forces are divided between loyalty to the KDP and to the PUK. The majority of the region's peshmerga units remain directly controlled by either PUK or KDP political bureaus, and only a few report to the politically blended KRG government itself.

# Major Kurdish Groups in Iraq



**KDP** | Political Party

**The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)** was established in 1946. Its leader, Massoud Barzani, is the president of Iraqi Kurdistan.

**PUK** | Political Party

**The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan** was founded in 1975 by Jalal Talabani. It was involved in a civil war between the KDP and PUK from 1994 to 1998.

**Gorran** | Political Party

**Gorran**, the second-largest Kurdish party in Iraqi Kurdistan, split off from the PUK in 2009, undermining the PUK and KDP's dominance in Kurdish politics.

**Peshmerga** | Military Forces

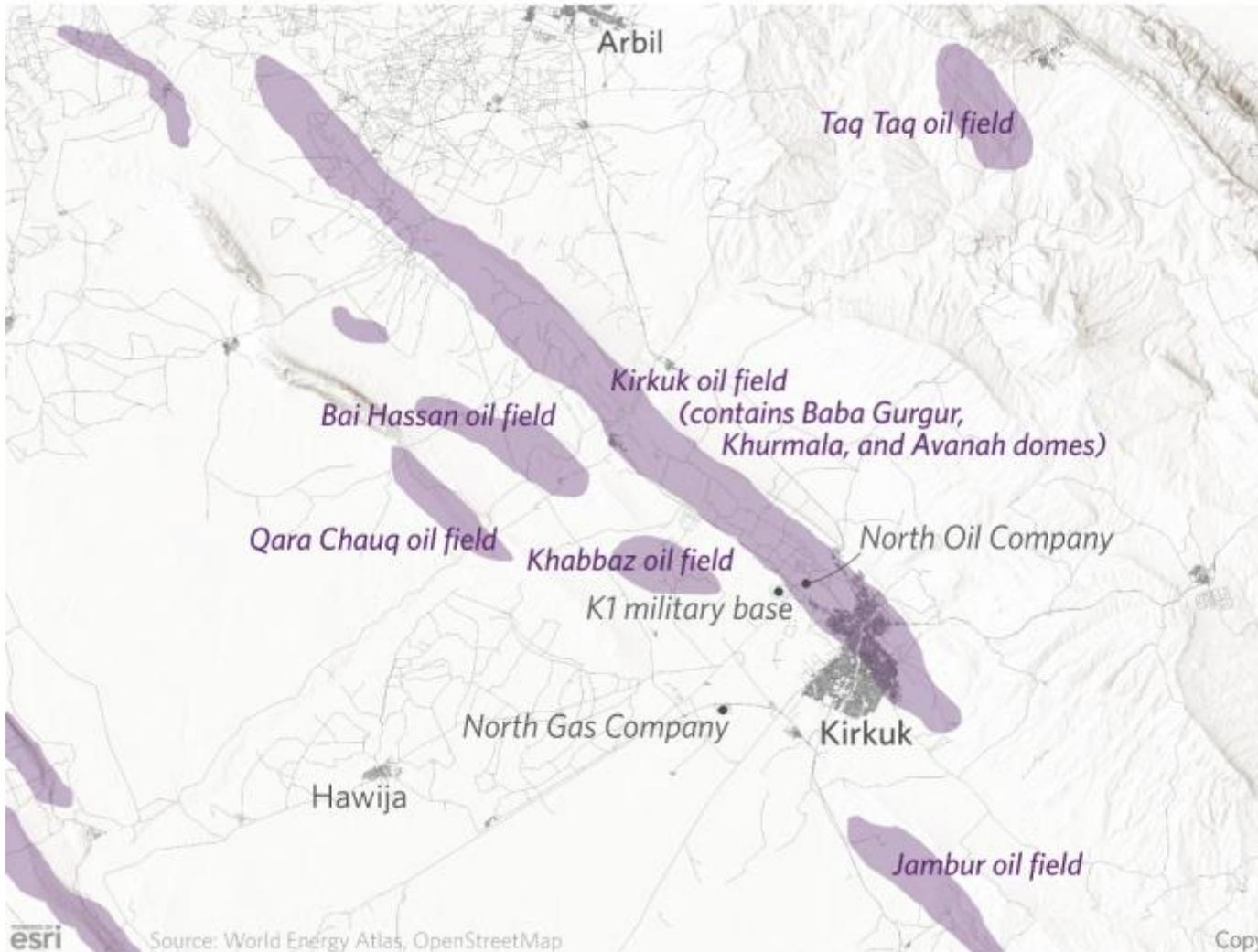
**The peshmerga** are militia groups from specific geographic areas or political groups. While many brigades are under the control of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, others are the military wings of the PUK and the KDP.

Source: Getty Images

These differing chains of command have led to conflict. Soon after the start of last night's ISF advance, peshmerga forces under the control of the PUK reportedly received orders to withdraw from Kirkuk and to allow Baghdad's forces to take control of various installations.

These events may have been the result of a prearranged agreement between the PUK's leadership — or, at least its Talabani factions — and the central government in Baghdad, which the Talabani family has courted closely. The Iraqi Oil Ministry's statement that both sides of the conflict agreed to avoid fighting around Kirkuk's oil fields provides further evidence that a deal was struck with the PUK.

## Oil Fields Around Kirkuk, Iraqi Kurdistan



The PUK's decision to withdraw has earned it intense criticism from the KDP, which has been sending in more KDP peshmerga brigades to reinforce Kurdish positions in Kirkuk. Right now, the PUK and the KDP seem more divided than ever, and there is a high risk of intra-Kurdish conflict during the coming days and weeks. In addition to reports of fighting between Kurdish and Iraqi forces, there have been indications of conflict between the PUK and the KDP's respective arms of the peshmerga. Eyewitnesses even report Kurdish civilians angrily protesting the perceived departure of PUK peshmerga forces from Kirkuk.

### Increasing Uncertainty

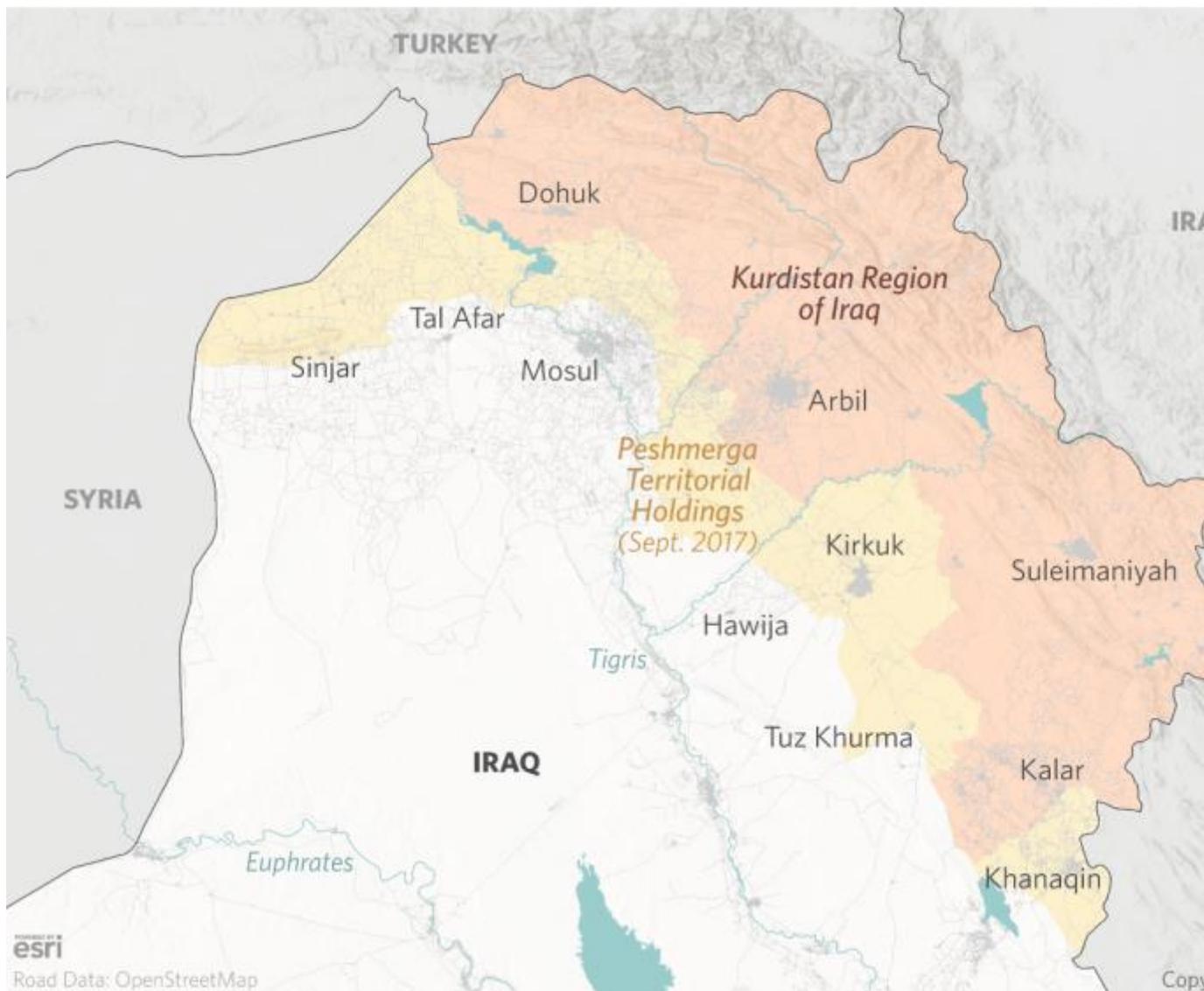
In the aftermath of last month's Kurdish independence referendum, the Talabani-led faction of the PUK has pushed to work closely with Baghdad, believing the referendum was an attempt for Kurdish President Masoud Barzani to consolidate political control. Indeed, Bafel Talabani, the son of recently deceased PUK leader Jalal Talabani, went on television Oct. 12 to call for a

de-escalation of conflict between Arbil and Baghdad and to urge the creation of a joint administration between the two that would run Kirkuk. However, it also appears that some of the PUK's peshmerga are more loyal to a splinter faction of the group led by Kosrat Rasul. These forces have actually been working alongside the KDP, reinforcing the group's positions in Kirkuk.

It is possible that Baghdad's moves in Kirkuk province were not initially intended to culminate in seizing the city itself. Statements by PUK-linked officials suggested that the goal was to take over the K1 military base on the outskirts of the city, as well as the oil and natural gas fields located in the province's hinterlands. But strong military pushback from the Kurds could have led to an operational decision to make a move onto the city — something the PUK might not have bargained when it made its alleged deal with Baghdad. And at this point, an Iraqi or Kurdish civil conflict could be on its way, whether or not any party intended it.

## Actual and Claimed Territory of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Some of the peshmerga territorial holdings are contested between the Kurdistan Regional Government in Arbil and the central government of Iraq in Baghdad. The Sept. 25 independence referendum was conducted in some of this contested territory, which added to the inflammatory nature of



In the coming days, outside powers including the United States will likely try to exert pressure on Baghdad and Arbil to end the conflict. Meanwhile, Turkey has said that it backs Baghdad's moves against the Kurds, despite the fact that it has supported the KRG against Baghdad in the past. Turkey's choice can be attributed to its contentious relationship with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has also reportedly become involved in Kirkuk, as well as Turkey's overall disapproval of Iraqi Kurdistan gaining greater autonomy. The PKK was one of the Kurdish units to remain at the frontlines against the Islamic State the longest, and the group has even called for Kurds looking for an alternative means of resistance to join the PKK instead of the peshmerga. The more active the PKK becomes in the dispute, the more support Turkey will lend to Baghdad.

### **The Threat of Ethno-Sectarian Fighting**

The events in Kirkuk have developed rapidly and have sharpened divisions within military and government groups. But perhaps the biggest question surrounding the conflict right now is whether or not it will devolve into broader sectarian fighting. Underlying sectarian disputes in the region have recently been exacerbated by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's decision to replace the Kurdish governor of Kirkuk, Najmadin Karim, with the Sunni Arab Rakan Said. The move is an especially sensitive one, given the Arabization campaign that former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein led to curtail Kurdish nationalism.

Sectarian tension is set to grow even more if Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMUs) become more involved in the conflict in Kirkuk. The bulk of the PMUs in Kurdistan are made up of Brigades of Turkmen Shiite and Arab Shiite — and the Arabs and Turkmen were two of the largest regional minority groups to oppose [the Sept. 25 independence referendum](#). And though the PMUs have not been very involved in the fighting so far, they [participated in the takeover of Hawija](#) from the Islamic State in southern Kirkuk province. It's possible that the PMUs — particularly the Iranian-supported Turkmen brigades — will move into Kirkuk once the ISF consolidates control. There are already unconfirmed reports that Hadi Al-Amiri and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, two key PMU commanders, have entered the city. Finally, there is the sectarian conflict between the Shiites and Kurds and the Sunnis. Turkmen Shiites and the Kurds have both been accused of displacing and ejecting Sunni Arabs and Sunni Turkmen from both the region and their governments as a response to Islamic State's rise.

Even if outside powers can end the fighting between the ISF and the KRG, underlying tension between Kirkuk's rival factions and sects will likely endure. Over the last few years, a shared enemy, the Islamic State, forced many of these groups to cooperate. But now that the threat of the Islamic State is dwindling, [their differences](#) have been thrown into sharp relief.