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Preventing Arab-Kurd Conflict in Iraq after the Withdrawal of U.S. Forces

Summary

- Since the fall of the former regime, in 2003, there has been continuous concern that fighting might break out between the Arabs and the Kurds over Kirkuk and the boundary of the Kurdistan Regional Government.
- In response to requests to help manage tensions between the different security forces, General Odierno, then Commanding General of United States Forces-Iraq, developed a Joint Security Architecture, bringing together Iraqi Security Forces, Kurdish forces, and US forces to work against their common enemy, the al-Qaeda.
- US forces are due to start pulling out of their conflict prevention role along the 'trigger line' that divides the Kurds and the Arabs in the disputed territories, by the summer of 2011. Unless new conflict prevention mechanisms are put in place, there is a real risk that tensions could boil over as people tire of waiting for a political resolution.

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Iraqi and Kurdish Security Forces: Face Off and Stand Off

In August 2008, tensions between the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the *peshmerga*—Kurdish regional guard—increased around the disputed city of Khanaqin in Diyala province, near the Iranian border. The 1st Division of the Iraqi army entered towns in the Khanaqin district and demanded the withdrawal of the *peshmerga* within 24 hours. The commander of the 34th Peshmerga Brigade refused to withdraw, saying he had orders from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to remain in place. The Iraqi government ordered the movement of tanks to the area. U.S. officers had to intervene to calm down tensions.

In Ninewa, the provincial elections of 2009 brought to power Athil Najafi as the governor, leading the al-Hadba Gathering whose agenda was to push back the control that the Kurds had gained since 2005. In protest at being denied posts, the primarily Kurdish Ninewa Brotherhood List withdrew from the Ninewa provincial council and mayors of Kurdish dominated towns declared their secession from Ninewa. In May 2009, Governor Najafi decided to attend a kite flying festival in Bashiqa, a Kurdish-majority town. The *peshmerga* received orders that Governor Najafi should be shot at sight! Again, U.S. officers and diplomats mediated a resolution.

While the ISF and the *peshmerga* were busy facing off against each other, the al-Qaeda was able to exploit the seams between them to attack the minority communities in the disputed territories. Al-Qaeda's intent was to attack those it regarded as 'infidels,' such as the Yezidis, to show that the

Iraqi government was weak and incapable of protecting its people, and to provoke the Kurds and the Arabs into a civil war. Further complicating matters, Sunni nationalist insurgents, such as those associated with Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi, focused on pushing back what they regarded as two occupations—the U.S. occupation and the Kurdish occupation.

During this period of heightened suspicion and distrust between Prime Minister Maliki and President Barzani, both separately turned to General Odierno and requested his help in de-escalating tensions between the ISF and the *peshmerga* and increasing the security of the Iraqi people, in particular, the minorities living in the disputed territories. Both understood the critical importance of improving security and putting in place the necessary security measures in the run-up to the national elections.

Establishing the Joint Security Architecture

General Odierno set about developing practical steps to manage tensions in the disputed territories and prevent conflict between the different security forces. He set up a Ministerial Committee comprising of himself as chair, Minister of Defense Abdul-Qadir al-Obeidi, Minister of Interior Jawad al-Bolani, Chief of Staff of the Army Babakir Zebari, KRG Minister of Interior Karim Sinjari, and the Minister of Peshmerga Sheikh Jaafar. General Odierno's approach was to develop a common vision around the future. He wanted to ensure that each province had its own police force working for the governor, with the army and the *peshmerga* withdrawn, and intelligence officials working for national intelligence. During the first meeting of the Ministerial Committee on August 16, 2009, General Odierno proposed six principles to guide their work:

1. The security of the Iraqi people is paramount.
2. Security forces in the disputed territories should work jointly together to ensure that there are no seams for terrorists to exploit.
3. Force levels should be adequate to meet security needs.
4. Security forces should be representative of the communities they serve.
5. Effective intelligence is key to preventing terrorism. Intelligence agencies should be transparent and work together; they should not work for any political party.
6. Effective rule of law is needed to put terrorists behind bars.

With agreement on the overall principles, General Odierno, in a subsequent meeting, set out a two-phased approach to achieving the overall vision. Phase I involved getting the different forces in the disputed territories to work together within a Joint Security Architecture which needed to be in place prior to the elections. During Phase I, planning needed to begin on the recruitment of additional police and army for Ninewa as it did not have sufficient security forces. Phase II involved the integration of the newly recruited forces with the provincial forces and national intelligence, and the withdrawal of the Iraqi army and the *peshmerga* from internal security.

The situation in Ninewa remained of particular concern. In a meeting in July 2009, the Iraqi National Security Council discussed the deteriorating security situation in Ninewa and designated then Deputy Prime Minister Rafi Issawi to head a Ninewa Committee to investigate the cause of the problem and work a solution. As soon as he was appointed to this role, DPM Issawi began consulting with a wide range of stakeholders from Ninewa to understand their concerns and show that the central government cared and was willing to help. Through his consultations, DPM Issawi identified nine outstanding issues between the al-Hadba Gathering and the Ninewa Brotherhood List and the necessary steps needed to resolve them. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team worked hard to assist with bridging the

differences between the groups. Their aim was to get the provincial council back together and secure freedom of movement for Governor Najafi within his province.

The proposed Joint Security Architecture was contested in Ninewa. The al-Hadba Gathering feared that it would legitimize the presence of the *peshmerga* below the Green Line. Addressing the governor and members of the provincial council, General Odierno and DPM Issawi persuaded that it would not be possible to remove the Kurdish security forces immediately. Eight thousand police and six thousand army personnel needed to be recruited in Ninewa. This would lead to the development of the integrated security forces that would represent the entire population of the province. Only then would the withdrawal of the Kurdish forces—not yet integrated with the provincial or federal police, nor the national intelligence agencies—be possible. Governor Najafi was frustrated that he had no input in the management of security in his own province and yet was held responsible by the public whenever attacks could not be prevented.

In Kirkuk, the Arab and Turkmen communities also protested the proposed Joint Security Architecture and there was an uptick in security within the Arab areas of the province. It became apparent that they were concerned the Joint Security Architecture would give the *peshmerga* a stranglehold of the city. The area of joint patrol was therefore revised into a horseshoe shape, ensuring that Kirkuk was not encircled. Tensions eased off.

The U.S. was also able to offer assistance to train and develop Kurdish forces that came under the KRG and were part of the recognized defense architecture of Iraq. This proved to be a big incentive for the Kurds to merge their *peshmerga* into one force under the KRG rather than maintaining them separately under the political parties of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party. PM Maliki signed a memorandum instructing the two Kurdish brigades to be integrated with the Joint Security Architecture in the disputed territories. This gave the U.S. the legal basis to train and equip them as federal forces.

As the elections approached, stakes were high within the disputed territories. However, through U.S. organized joint training, the Arabs and the Kurds got to know each other, had fun doing activities together, and built working relations. On the trilateral checkpoints, U.S. soldiers ensured that everyone worked well together and focused on the job at hand. Through the combined coordination centers, the different forces were aware of each other's movements, hence reducing rumors and mistrust that had the potential of sparking conflict. Phase I of the security plan went into effect prior to the elections.

Despite these measures, a crisis occurred in Ninewa in February 2010 which threatened to put in jeopardy not only the elections in the province and Arab-Kurd relations, but also U.S.-Kurd relations and even threatened to draw in Turkey.

Ninewa Crisis of February 2010

Progress on resolving the political issues in Ninewa got held up as politicians were drawn into tense negotiations over the election law, where there were differences on how Kirkuk should be handled and the number of seats to be allocated to the three Kurdish provinces. Recruitment of the additional forces to Ninewa also got delayed in the political wrangling and coalition building in the run-up to the elections.

A key component of the plan was to ensure freedom of movement for the governor, to be worked through the coordination centers. Determined to test the new Joint Security Architecture at the earliest, Governor Najafi decided to make a trip to Tel Kayf, within the disputed territories, on February, 2010. The visit was coordinated in accordance with the rules that had been agreed upon in the Joint Security Architecture. Ignoring Kurdish objections, the U.S. forces decided that the visit

should go ahead and that they would support it. In response, the Kurds brought down reinforcements and tried to prevent Najafi's trip from taking place. Crowds of Kurds gathered to block the governor's convoy and in the resulting melee shots were fired. The U.S. commander on the ground, fearing his soldiers were under threat, moved in tanks to protect them and ordered F-16s overhead to buzz the crowd. The police detained eleven Kurds for incitement and on suspicion of attempting to assassinate Governor Najafi. In response, the Kurds 'detained' some Arabs and withdrew from the Joint Security Architecture. Rumor reached Ankara that the Kurds had invaded Mosul!

After days of extremely intense negotiations brokered by the U.S. military, the crisis was diffused but only after the release of the Kurds and the Arabs detained during the incident. All sides learned from the Ninewa crisis. The provocations and overreactions were not repeated again. The Joint Security Architecture proved to be extremely successful in building relations between security forces on the ground and getting them to work together to protect the Iraqi people and prevent al-Qaeda from attacking minorities. Despite all the posturing and campaigning, the elections in Ninewa passed smoothly.

In fact, the government formation process and coalition building that followed the national elections, have, on one level, helped to manage tensions, with Iraqiyya and the Kurds sharing a common agenda in keeping PM Maliki's power in check. However, there is plenty of potential for miscalculations with security forces, once more, being used to impose outcomes in the absence of a political resolution.

New Mechanisms to Manage and Prevent Conflict

U.S. forces operating along the 'trigger line' will commence to draw down in the summer of 2011 in accordance with the Security Agreement. In order to maintain stability, Iraqi and Kurdish leaders should consider:

- Integrating security forces operating in the disputed territories. This will require transitioning from Phase I to II, ensuring that adequate police are recruited and trained, and national intelligence capacity built. Additionally, it will mitigate the risk of the joint checkpoints becoming another unofficial and contentious internal boundary.
- Declaring a demilitarized zone across the disputed territories, with neither the Iraqi army nor the *peshmerga* permitted to operate there. This will not only remove the chances of unpredictable escalation of tensions between the different forces, but also have a great psychological impact on the local population by increasing trust in local authorities and the rule of law.

In order to reduce the chances of conflict in the disputed territories and help create the necessary conditions to deal with the grievances, fears, and interests of the different communities, the international community should consider supporting:

1. *Conflict resolution mechanism.* Reactivate the UNAMI-sponsored High Level Task Force (HLTF) as a mechanism to resolve conflict over the disputed territories. The security ministerial committee should no longer stand alone, but become a subset of the HLTF. The HLTF should be the body which takes the political decision to move towards police primacy and a demilitarized decision across the disputed territories. The HLTF should also look to promote greater economic development across the disputed territories.

2. *Conflict management mechanism.* Appoint a UN Special Rapporteur for the disputed territories. In order to help manage conflict prior to a political resolution, an international Special Rapporteur should be appointed who should regularly visit the disputed territories to receive reports on what is going on, listen to the complaints of the different parties, and report back on the

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This PeaceBrief is written by Emma Sky, a fellow at the Institute of Politics, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. She was the chief political advisor to then United States Forces-Iraq Commanding General, Raymond Odierno, from 2008 to 2010.

progress made to the UN and the government of Iraq. Monitoring of human rights issues related to detainees, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, access to education in the mother tongue, resolving property disputes is important for recognizing and addressing grievances.

3. *Conflict prevention mechanism.* Develop a cadre of local leaders and networks. These leaders could be members of police, tribes, and civil society and could serve as first responders to tension brewing on the ground, in order to prevent conflict. They should be provided with training and nurtured as part of a network. Similar initiatives have proved successful in other troubled places such as Northern Ireland and South Africa.

The US Embassy, through adequately resourced and well-led branch offices in Kirkuk and Mosul, could support the work of the UN as well as develop a cadre of local leaders and networks.

Iraq's leaders will continue to grapple with the thorny issues that have bedeviled relations between the Arabs and the Kurds since the foundation of the state. For solutions to be sustainable, these issues will need to be resolved through politics and consensus—not through violence and imposition. As Kurdish and Arab leaders negotiate compromises, the international community can play a key role in supporting mechanisms to help prevent conflict as well as in exposing Iraqis to the experiences of other people in finding solutions to such complex problems.



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