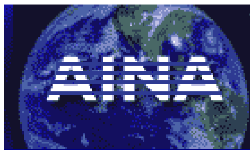

Kirkuk Reflects Challenges of Ethnic Conflict in Iraq

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KIRKUK, Iraq -- Hiwa Assad and his wife, Guller Sabbah, are still visibly in love after 20 years of marriage. They snuggle on the couch, exchange smiles as they talk and keep their sparsely furnished home ringing with laughter.

He is a Kurdish former guerrilla. She comes from a separate ethnic group, the Turkmen. Yet there is no sign that, just outside their door, their peoples are locked in a struggle for the city of Kirkuk.

Until, that is, she steps out of the room.

"If there is a fight," Assad quietly confides, "if the Turkmens try to take this city from us, I will take my weapons and I will fight for my people. I can never let my people lose what they've won.

"There will be a fight for Kirkuk," he adds. "Things are getting worse day by day."

Such warnings are becoming ever more common here: at violent street demonstrations, in the angry speeches of politicians, and even in previously harmonious places such as the Assad family home. The city's status has become one of Iraq's most urgent political issues, threatening to spark a new conflict just as security gains have been made in other parts of the country and debate intensifies about when to bring more American troops home.

The confrontation in Kirkuk comes down to who will control the city and the surrounding oil fields, which contain 40% of Iraq's massive reserves of crude. Nearly every ethnic and religious group in Iraq is present here -- the city of about 850,000 has been called "Iraq's Jerusalem" -- meaning an eruption of sectarian violence in Kirkuk could spread quickly elsewhere in the country.

This month, arguments over Kirkuk prevented the Iraqi parliament from reaching a deal on bigger national issues, namely scheduling a date for provincial elections that President Bush says are crucial to a long-term peace in Iraq. The war of words has since become more heated, with one leading politician in Kirkuk threatening to cut off his rival's head.

"Kirkuk is a minefield," says Redha Taki, a leading Shiite politician. "If we touch it and try to solve the problem, it will blow up. And if we continue ignoring and delaying it, it will also eventually blow up."

Kurds, who make up the city's majority, believe that Kirkuk should be incorporated into Kurdistan, the Kurdish-controlled region that lies just a few miles to the northeast and operates almost like a separate country from the rest of Iraq. Arabs and Turkmens, fearful of discrimination if that happens, want the city to remain under the power of the central government in Baghdad.

The political tensions have started to spill into the streets. Two weeks ago, a demonstration by Kurds was hit by a suicide bomber. Seeking revenge, the protesters overran the headquarters of the local Turkmen party, exchanged gunfire with the guards and set the building on fire. Twenty-two people were killed.

So far, the clashes are not of a scale similar to those between Sunni Arabs and Shiites that left tens of thousands of Iraqis dead in 2006 and 2007.

Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, commander of U.S. forces in northern Iraq, says Kirkuk is "relatively peaceful," but acknowledges the military is closely watching the "flash point there."

Indeed, some familiar warning signs are present: Al-Qaeda is trying to use its remaining foothold in northern Iraq to enflame sectarian tensions here, just as it once did in Baghdad, according to Hussein Kamal, head of intelligence at Iraq's interior ministry.

Yahya Barzangi, a 38-year-old photographer, was badly beaten during the recent demonstration when one of the protesters accused him of being a Turkmen agent.

"Suddenly there were 50 people hitting me, kicking me, shouting, 'Kill him, kill him,' " says Barzangi, who is not Turkmen but from a well-known Kurd family.

Friends were able to pull him away to safety, but not before he was wounded. Barzangi spent two days in the hospital.

"In the past it was just the politicians talking about fighting and civil war, but now the people are starting to follow," Barzangi says. "This is the real danger, and this is exactly what happened in Baghdad in 2006."

'They want to kill each other'

Just as Sunnis and Shiites in Baghdad once pointed to mixed marriages, jointly owned businesses and a long history of coexistence as proof that a civil war would never occur, Kirkuk's people make similar arguments now.

During a lunch of spiced rice and salted fish at the Assad house, the mix of languages -- jokes flew in Kurdish, Arabic and Turkmen -- reflects the patchwork of ethnicities and tribes that have long lived side by side.

"The problem is between politicians and political parties," says Rizkar Mohammad, Assad's brother-in-law and life-long friend, who also is married to a Turkmen.

"There are no problems between the people," he says.

Assad listens politely to such talk -- and later dismisses it, when no one else is around.

"Don't believe a word they say," he says. "With their tongues they say everything is all right, but in their hearts they want to kill each other.

"People in Kirkuk have two faces," he continues. "They sit with you and talk as if they're angels. They say, 'I have no enemies and don't hate other religions and nationalities.' But the minute they are alone with their own sect, they are the first ones to insult and hate."

Meanwhile, many Iraqi politicians have dropped any pretense of civility when it comes to Kirkuk. Kurdish President Massoud Barzani said last month that, if his people were denied control of the city, "there were other choices available," a possible threat to use force to take the city if politics didn't work.

Arab leader Mohammad Hussein al-Jabbouri countered that Arabs would defend Kirkuk. In response, the Kurds' senior leader in Kirkuk, Najat H.K. Manmi, vowed: "We will cut off Jabbouri's head. If he thinks he can beat the Kurds, he doesn't understand Kurdish history."

Together 'hundreds of years'

The rancor has surprised many city residents. "We've lived together for hundreds of years," says Abdel Razaq, an Arab arts professor. "But things are different today."

The confrontation is also pulling in people of all ages. Back at the Assad house, lunch is ongoing as his 17-year-old son steps in from the street. Some young kids just got into a fight, he says. It was Turkmens vs. Kurds.

Even between Assad and Sabbah, husband and wife, the ethnic tension occasionally surfaces. They are adept at laughing it off, but a sharp edge occasionally shows through.

"Your father always says bad things about the Kurds. He calls us thieves and hooligans, and I stay quiet out of respect," Assad says.

"You stay quiet because you know Kurds are bad," she counters.

Then, as if talking to a dog, she says: "Down Kurd! Down Kurd!"

They share a laugh, and then turn serious again.

"The Kurds think they should get special treatment because they suffered under Saddam (Hussein), but Saddam did the same thing to the Turkmens as he did to the Kurds," Sabbah says, prompting angry cries of protest from Assad.

"Noooooo!" he says. "Anfal, Anfal! It wasn't the same," he says, referring to Saddam's genocidal campaign against the Kurds in 1988 that killed tens of thousands of Kurds.

It is that history of persecution that makes Kurds so eager to control their own destiny in Kirkuk, and in Kurdistan just to the north. The Kurds have been largely left alone by Iraq's Arabs since the U.S. invasion toppled Saddam in 2003, but that is now changing as violence comes down elsewhere.

The Kurds "are doing everything they can now to secure their long-term advantage," says Sam Parker, an analyst with the Washington-

based U.S. Institute of Peace.

Iraq's constitution calls for a referendum in Kirkuk so the city's residents can determine whether to become part of Kurdistan. Voting has been postponed for years now because of fears that forcing a decision could spark violence, and Parker says "the best solution on Kirkuk is to just keep delaying it."

Whether that's a viable strategy, or whether Kirkuk's politicians and residents force a decision, remains to be seen. In the Assad family, though, the vote is for the fragile status quo.

"We don't talk about politics in the house so things remain calm," Assad says. "If we did, we'd have big problems."

By Charles Levinson
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