

## Kirkuk: microcosm of Iraq

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Created 2005-03-21 00:00

Kirkuk is one of the world's richest oil regions, but two years after the war began, there is no end in sight to its suffering.

At its root is the legacy of four decades of intensive ethnic cleansing by Saddam's regime. But this has been compounded by the American failure to alleviate the hardship of the Iraqi people. In [Kirkuk](#) [1] there is an urgent need for action.

Forty years of Ba'ath policy created two groups in Kirkuk: the persecuted and the expelled. The Kurds, the demographic majority in the city, were the main target, followed by the Turcomans and Assyrians. The Arabs also suffered, though some benefited too from Ba'athist rule. Now, with regime change, they are threatened with the loss of any privileges they had been granted.

Because of these divisions, Kirkukis now face daily antagonism between different ethnic groups: Kurds, Arabs, Turkomans and Assyrians. The problems here are a microcosm of the wider complexities of Iraq.

Every Kirkuki seems to believe in the need for peace and democracy. Each ethnic group, perhaps understandably, has a different view on how best to achieve peace and democracy. But none is willing to listen to the views of the others or to consider them as an option.

Peace and democracy for the Kurds, for instance, must surely start with the respect for the rights of equal citizenship, and bringing the city's ethnic demography back into balance. Their main priority is to implement article 58 of the [Transitional Administrative Law](#) [2] which would promote the restoration of the demographic balance that Saddam altered. It will allow Kurdish families who had been forcibly displaced to return to Kirkuk, and would relocate the Arabs, who were moved into the area, back to their places of origin. For the Kurds the census of 1957 census is the base line – the last reliable census – and they refer to it to “decide” which of today's citizens of Kirkuk have right to call themselves so.

But Arabs and Turkomans also claim to be the majority groups of the city, and also hope for a democratic system that would give them power.

After all, even some Arabs had hopes that the war would be good for them. Mohammed Salih, 27, a teacher in Al-Haifa said, “we thought the war would eventually bring us peace and stability but not that it might cause us to lose our houses. We knew the land belonged to someone else, but we were also forced to come here. We were born and brought up here and we love this city. If Americans really want to have stability in the area they should offer compensation to the original owners to keep people happy”.

Between competing claims it is simply impossible to say who is right and who is wrong, since they are all partially both.

## Who lives where?

In the meantime, there are over 1,000 unprocessed “property claims” [3] sitting with the Iraqi Property Claim Commission (IPCC) of Kirkuk. The US, the real decision maker in Iraq, has put off dealing with this problem until after the new Iraqi constitution is approved in December 2005. This is not acceptable for Kurds: they believe that to postpone the issue means to accept that the “Arabization” of Kirkuk is irreversible.

Kurdish people are concerned that American inaction will generate even greater ethnic tension in Kirkuk.

The reality is that America’s main concern appears to be the monthly report on security issues in the city that guarantees oil production and exports.

As the world commemorates the war’s second anniversary, the Kurds are celebrating *Nowruz*, the Kurdish and Iranian New Year.

Today big fires will be lit on the highest places in the hills around Kirkuk, the 4,500 year old citadel where Kurds lived continuously until thousands of them were deported, and many killed, by Saddam.

Under the Ba’athist regime, *Nowruz*, which always falls on 21 March, was banned. The fact that the Kurds of Kirkuk can now celebrate in freedom marks major progress, but it is not enough to deal with the grief [4] they still endure.

There is a strong need for real action, especially on the outstanding property claims and disputes. Resolving these would have a direct impact on the lives of all the people of Kirkuk. We must try to leave behind party interests, especially if we think that those parties do not act on behalf of the people they claim to represent.

Equality and harmony between all these groups is certainly possible. So far the Kurds and Arabs have been patient, but they deserve more than just hoping and waiting.

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