
TURKMEN PROTEST RAISING OF KURDISH FLAG IN IRAQ'S KIRKUK

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Turkmen protesters gathered outside the northern Iraqi city's provincial headquarters decrying a recent move to raise the Kurdistan Regional Government's flag as unconstitutional. Tags: Turkmen, Kirkuk, KRG

Turkmen residents of the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk took to the streets on Wednesday in protest at the recent decision by local authorities to raise the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) flag in the city.

Protestors gathered outside the Kirkuk Provincial Council's (KPC) headquarters in Kirkuk decrying a move they claim is a violation of constitutional law.

Demonstrators carried the Turkmen flag, and vowed to continue their protests until they received a response from the KPC.

On Tuesday, the Kirkuk Provincial Council (KPC) voted in favour of a motion to hoist the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) flag on public buildings in the province.

In comment to Kurdish TV station NRT Ali Mahdi, head of the Turkmen Front within Kirkuk's Provincial Council said that the decision to raise the KRG flag had been taken without the consent, or approval of local Turkmen and Arab citizens.

Tuesday's vote to raise the KRG flag was vetoed by most Arab and Turkmen members of the KPC.

"We are concerned by the decision of Kirkuk Provincial Council," said Mahdi. "We are not against the Kurds but we are against any decision which is against the constitution."

View image on Twitter Translation: Turkmen demonstrators heading towards the Kirkuk Provincial Council building in protest against the raising of the Kurdistan flag over government institutions.

Speaking to The New Arab on Tuesday Turkmen MP Hassan Toran said that his bloc will challenge the move in the federal court, saying it does not fall within the powers of the KPC.

Opposition to the raising of the KRG flag has also been expressed by Turkey, notably by Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.

A statement from Turkey's Foreign Ministry on Tuesday described the move as "contrary to the notion of a constitutional process," adding that such an approach would have "an adverse effect on the country's stability and security".

Former Turkish Prime Minister Abdullah Gul has also criticised the KPC's move as

"unconstitutional" in a post on Twitter.

Kirkuk is a multi-ethnic province 280 kilometres north of Baghdad designated since 2003 as 'disputed', and the decision is likely to stoke tensions between its communities as well as with the central government in Baghdad and Iran-backed militias deployed in some areas of Kirkuk.

The move, endorsed by the Kurdistan Union Party led by Jalal Talabani, is likely to be seen as a prelude to annexing Kirkuk to the KRG and a possible future Kurdish state.

Kurdish Iraqi politicians have defended the move, citing the role played by Kurdish forces in repelling the Islamic State group in Kirkuk province.

"We find it surprising that some are bothered by the KRG flag. The (Kurdish) Peshmerga force have defended all the communities of the province from (Islamic State) attacks, said MP Mohammed Kamanl, speaking on Tuesday.

The Iraqi government continues to be silent regarding the future of around 20 thousand square kilometres of territories Kurdish factions currently hold in Kirkuk, Nineveh, Diyala, and Salah al-Din.

"The position of the government is fixed, namely, returning to the borders of June 2014, and there are US guarantees to dissuade the Kurds," an Iraqi official told The New Arab over the phone on Tuesday, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Opening the issue at the time of the war with IS is not right," he added.

The KRG is planning a referendum later this year, but officials say the results of the referendum will be advisory and not trigger statehood automatically.

Kaynak/Source: