
KURDISH ROLE COMPLICATES FIGHT AGAINST ISIS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

30.03.2017

The Irish Times (30 March 2017)

The Turkish government has warned officials in the Iraqi province of Kirkuk against flying the Kurdish regional banner alongside Iraq's national flag over government buildings.

Turkey expressed concern that the Kurds were taking unilateral steps ahead of annexing oil-rich Kirkuk to Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region, a move which has been condemned by Baghdad.

Turkey sees itself as the protector of Kirkuk's Turkomen (ethnic Turks), and foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said it would not be correct to change that region's ethnic composition. He said Turkey was supporting Iraq's and Syria's territorial integrity.

The UN has also said raising the Kurdish flag over the citadel in Kirkuk city could exacerbate tensions among religious and ethnic communities living in the province. The decision was taken during a meeting on Tuesday of the provincial council attended only by the 25 Kurdish members. The 16 Arab and Turkmen councillors boycotted the session.

The composition of Kirkuk's ethnic population, estimated at about one million, changed after the 2003 US occupation due to the expulsion of Arabs from the south who settled there during the late 20th century, leaving Kurds and Turkomen as the largest communities.

Turkmen and remaining Arabs oppose the incorporation of the province into the Kurdish region while Kurds allied to regional president Massoud Barzani are locked into a dispute with those loyal to Barzani's rival Jalal Talabani over control of Kirkuk.

The Barzani government laid claim to Kirkuk after Kurdish peshmerga militiamen defended it from capture by Islamic State during 2014 when the jihadis swept into northern Iraq and seized Mosul. Peshmerga have since prevented Christian and Yazidi civilians, who were expelled by Islamic State, from returning to their towns and villages.

Both Iraqi Kurds and Turkomen, who have deployed fighters in the battle for Mosul, seek to control specific neighbourhoods in that largely Arab city once Islamic State is routed. Turkey has vowed to support Turkomen ambitions, risking clashes with Barzani, Ankara's ally, and Baghdad.

Decentralised system

Across the border in northern Syria, Saleh Muslim, co-chairman of the Kurdish Democratic Union (PYD), has said the north-central city of Raqqa is expected to become a part of a decentralised system of governance once liberated from Islamic State. We expect [this] because our project is for all Syria . . . and Raqqa can be part of it, he said.

The main military formation involved in the Raqqa campaign is US-backed Democratic Forces dominated by the armed wing of the PYD, a grouping Turkey claims is an offshoot of the separatist Turkish Kurdish Workers party. This is why Cavusoglu has warned Syrian as well as Iraqi Kurds against unilateral action.

Muslim said citizens of Raqqa, who are overwhelmingly Arab, could freely decide to join the

democratic federal system the Kurds have already proclaimed for areas under their control.

The Syrian army has also advanced along the road to Raqqa with the aim of taking part in the offensive set to begin early next month. A Syrian official told The Irish Times that the Kurds cannot occupy a Sunni city. The Syrian government fears ethnic cleansing could ensue since Arabs have, reportedly, been excluded from villages in the wide band of Syrian territory along the Turkish border occupied by the Kurds.

Turkey also insists that the US assign its forces a role in the battle for Raqqa while building up a presence in Jarablus and al-Bab, strategic towns in northern Syria. Turkey has trained Syrian policemen to provide security in areas captured by Syrian insurgents bolstered by Turkish troops and tanks.

Turkey seeks to contain the Syrian Kurds and prevent them from creating an autonomous zone south of the border adjacent to areas where Turkish Kurdish insurgents have been fighting Turkey's army.

Kaynak/Source: