

In Iraq, Kurdish militia has the run of oil-rich Kirkuk

By Tom Lasseter
McClatchy Newspapers



An Iraqi soldier rides in the back of a truck in convoy of Peshmerga militia and Iraqi army soldiers in Kirkuk, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. (Tom Lasseter/MCT)

[More photos](#)

- [Corruption, incompetence plague Iraqi forces, reporter finds](#)
- [Mahdi Army gains strength through unwitting aid of U.S.](#)
- [Soldiers in Iraq view troop surge as a lost cause](#)

KIRKUK, Iraq - Lt. Hiwa Raouf Abdul is not supposed to be in Kirkuk. The oil-rich city, which many fear is teetering on the brink of civil war, is off-limits to Kurdish Peshmerga militia members.

And yet, on Tuesday, the slender, 26-year-old Peshmerga officer breezed through one checkpoint after the next on his way into Kirkuk, exchanging waves and salutes with Iraqi army soldiers and policemen as he rode with a truckload of Peshmerga gunmen.

Abdul is stationed in the nearby Kurdish city of Sulaimaniyah, where the Peshmerga enforce strict security through a series of checkpoints, and his visit to Kirkuk came only because his commanders asked him to escort a reporter there.

But the ease with which a pickup truck carrying seven Peshmerga members, most of them wielding AK-47s, passed into Kirkuk says volumes about the challenge of pacifying flashpoint towns like Kirkuk and, ultimately, Iraq.

When he passed by the Iraqi army checkpoint on the edge of Kirkuk, Abdul looked at the soldiers saluting him and said, "They get their orders from the Iraqi army, but their loyalty is to the Kurds, to us."

As with Shiite militias in Baghdad, the line between militia members and Iraqi security troops in Kirkuk is so thin that it at times doesn't exist. And U.S. plans to build Iraq's security forces - a process that has cost more than \$15 billion nationwide - seem to have strengthened militias instead of discouraging them.

The issue of loyalty with Iraqi security forces is proving to be the Achilles' heel of American plans to stabilize the war-torn nation. Without neutral Iraqi soldiers and police, an American withdrawal would almost certainly lead to greater sectarian bloodshed than Iraq is currently experiencing.

In June 2004, the American Coalition Provisional Authority issued an order outlawing militias and calling for their members to integrate into Iraq's security forces. An exemption was made for the Peshmerga,

provided that they remained in Kurdistan, a semi-autonomous state in northern Iraq, and not move to outside areas like Kirkuk.

Armed groups across Iraq reacted to the 2004 measure by enlisting in the army and police and maintaining large contingents of stand-alone militia groups, making them significantly more powerful.

Kirkuk is a tinderbox of sects vying for control of an area with billions of dollars worth of oil, but the Iraqi army isn't a neutral presence, and many of its soldiers make no secret that their loyalty is to the Kurdish nation.

"I joined to defend my city and my people, who are Peshmerga," said Iraqi Army Pvt. Kamaran Ahmed, a 31-year-old Kurd from Kirkuk. "From the time of the first prophet God sent to Earth, Kirkuk has been a part of Kurdistan and it will return to Kurdistan."

Ahmed continued: "If it is not returned to Kurdistan, things will get very bad."

To make his point clear, Ahmed juted his arm into the air and said, "For instance, I have this watch on my wrist. If you take it from me, I will do whatever is necessary to take it back."

American and Iraqi officials are adamant that Iraqi troops are heading in the right direction.

Asked by e-mail whether there were concerns about the Peshmerga influence on Iraqi troops around Kirkuk, U.S. Lt. Col. Michael Donnelly answered: "No. Our relationship with the IA (Iraqi Army) division is well established since our arrival here six months ago."

Donnelly, a spokesman for the 25th Infantry Division, which is responsible for Kirkuk, continued: "When the soldiers join the IA, they are taught in training and in day-to-day regimen of being a soldier that sectarian lines are not for the army. They are an army of one, if you will, for one nation."

Requests for comment from four senior U.S. military public affairs officers in Baghdad were unsuccessful.

The dispute over who will ultimately control Kirkuk, which has oil fields with reserves of at least 8.7 billion barrels, is a contentious and potentially catastrophic one, with the city's Arab, Kurd and Turkmen communities all claiming rightful ownership.

"The Kurds who surround Kirkuk claim to be Iraqi army, but their extensive presence on the outskirts of Kirkuk is designed to affect the ethnic balance of the city," said Ali Mahdi, a senior Turkmen political leader in Kirkuk and a member of the provincial council. "They are protecting their sect and working for the benefit of the Kurds in the city and not the others. This is dangerous for the future of the city."

The situation has serious geo-political implications: Neighboring Turkey, a crucial U.S. ally, fears that the Kurds will eventually declare independence if they gain Kirkuk, a move that could lead the large Kurdish population in Turkey to agitate for secession.

Former dictator Saddam Hussein displaced tens of thousands of Kurdish families from Kirkuk, replacing them with Arabs, mainly from the Shiite south.

Iraq's constitution provides for a referendum to decide the matter of who will control Kirkuk by the end of this year; meanwhile, tens of thousands of Kurds have moved into the city since 2003, urged by Kurdish political parties to set up homes there.

And the Peshmerga have continued to have deep ties with the Iraqi security forces.

"If the heavy presence of Peshmerga in Kirkuk and its outskirts continues as it is now, it will lead to a civil war in Kirkuk," said Abdullah al Obeidi, a Sunni Arab tribal leader and a member of the Kirkuk provincial council.

After bringing a McClatchy reporter into Kirkuk, the Peshmerga - literally, "those who face death" - troops next stopped at an Iraqi army base there.

Iraqi army Maj. Shawqi Mohammed, a former Peshmerga commander, was at the base, and he greeted the Peshmerga members warmly.

"Kirkuk is Kurdistan; that is the only point worth making. We have given thousands of lives for Kirkuk," Mohammed said.

Asked whether Kurdish troops would break ranks if fighting broke out between Kirkuk's sects, Mohammed said, "It's true that we are Iraqi army, but we are also Kurds. ... We will do whatever the Kurdish leadership tells us to."

A McClatchy reporter interviewing Kurdish troops in the Iraqi army during late 2005 heard similar remarks. The Iraqi defense ministry issued a press release at the time saying there was no substance to the issue of Peshmerga infiltration of army units in Kirkuk.

Senior Kurdish leaders have said in public that they'll pursue only peaceful means to wrest control of the city.

That same leadership has intentionally stocked Iraqi security forces with Peshmerga, said Fadil Haider, a senior member of the Kurdistan Islamic Union, a small but powerful political party, and a former member of the Iraqi national parliament.

The two main Kurdish parties - the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) - have done so as an insurance policy, he said.

"I can give you two scenarios: If Iraq is in an all-out civil war, then the PUK and KDP have put themselves in a position to protect Kurdistan by very quickly taking Kirkuk and making it a part of an independent Kurdistan," Haider said. "Or, if we exhaust the peaceful, political means of gaining Kirkuk for Kurdistan, we will take it by force."

Kurdish officials are confident that when Kirkuk becomes a part of the Kurdish regional government, its security will be maintained by Peshmerga, a process that presumably would be made easier by the fact that so many Iraqi police and army there are former members, said Suzanne Shahab Nouri, a member of the regional Kurdish parliament.

"The Kurdish Peshmerga forces are the strongest (Iraqi) military force in Iraq," said Jafar Mustafa Ali, the minister state for Peshmerga affairs - essentially a defense minister - in Sulaimaniyah. "If they (Kurdish opponents in Kirkuk) don't respect the democratic process, we could take over Kirkuk and they could do nothing."

On the Web: A member of McClatchy's Baghdad staff blogs about her trip to Baghdad's morgue to recover the body of her nephew in "Inside Iraq" at www.washingtonbureau.typepad.com/iraq/