

## JIC Assessment, 14 December 2006

### IRAQ: THE KURDISH NORTH

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 13 December 2006*

#### Key Judgements

- I. [...] few Kurds subscribe to a sense of Iraqi nationhood. [...]
- II. The Kurds' very strong bargaining position within the national government means they are well placed to secure many of their key objectives. They will resist any changes to the Iraqi constitution which threaten the autonomy of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the position of the Peshmerga as a regional guard force, or the KRG's ability to control regional oil resources and revenues.
- III. The Kurdish north is the most stable region in Iraq. [...] Stability will be maintained after transition to Iraqi (Kurdish) control, now likely in January. There is greater violence in more mixed areas on the periphery of the KRG such as Kirkuk, Tal Afar, Sinjar and Mosul.
- IV. *[Redacted text indicated that the Kurds retained ambitions to bring Kirkuk into the KRG but would seek to extend their political and security influence within the city.]* But continued efforts to oust mostly Arab residents risk serious violence, both in the city and in other mixed areas.
- V. [...]
- VI. [...] Like the Turks, the Iranians will take a measured approach [...]

## IRAQ: THE KURDISH NORTH

*This paper was commissioned by the Iraq Senior Officials Group to examine Kurdish objectives, the implications for other Iraqi political groupings, and how Turkey and Iran may respond.*

### The 'Kurdish' north

1. Kurds make up around 20% of the Iraqi population. Whilst predominantly Sunni Muslims, their approach to politics is overwhelmingly driven by ethnic considerations. They voted in vast numbers in the December 2005 elections, almost exclusively for the two main Kurdish political parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Kurds have taken up 20% of the seats in the federal Council of Representatives and hold key ministerial and executive positions in the Iraqi government, including the President. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) functions largely autonomously administering an area inside the "green line" (see map at Annex A). Although the economy remains fragile, better security in the KRG has enabled reconstruction and investment: income per capita has doubled in the last three years. Compared to the rest of Iraq, urban areas in the Kurdish north are flourishing.

2. The Kurdish north is the most stable region in Iraq: insurgent attacks account for 1% of the recorded national total. The limited Coalition presence is welcomed in the largely homogenous Kurdish provinces. The Kurdish militia (Peshmerga), some incorporated into the Iraqi Army, are among the most capable forces in Iraq; [...] We judge stability will be maintained after transition to Iraqi (Kurdish) control, now likely in January. Jihadists will continue to be the principal threat, led by Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) and Kurdish elements of Ansar al-Sunna, backed by their facilitation networks in Iran. Their last significant attack, killing nine civilians in Sulemaniyah, was more than a year ago. There is greater violence in more mixed areas on the periphery of the KRG such as Kirkuk, Tal Afar, Sinjar and Mosul.

### What the Kurds want

3. [...] Their declared territorial aspirations extend well beyond the current boundaries of the KRG (see map at Annex B), but we judge the Kurds themselves do not realistically expect to achieve them any time soon; controlling Kirkuk is their overriding immediate objective. Kurdish leaders accept that the political and economic conditions for an independent Kurdish State are lacking at present: the KRG still depends almost entirely for revenue on its 17% share of the Iraqi budget; Iraq's neighbours – on which a Kurdish State would depend for trade and transport routes – are universally hostile; and international opinion is overwhelmingly in favour of a unitary Iraq. [...] They will remain in the national government as long as they are making progress towards their objectives. But deteriorating security and spiralling sectarian violence in adjoining Sunni provinces and Baghdad risks accelerating Kurdish political and economic disengagement.

4. We judge that the Kurds' very strong bargaining position within the national government means they are well placed to secure many of their key objectives. They are the major partners of the Shia United Iraqi Alliance: their withdrawal could bring down the government. They enjoy better relations with Prime Minister Maliki than they did with his predecessor Jaafari. But their main strategic alliance is with SCIRI, which aspires to mirror Kurdish autonomy in the Shia south and is more likely to support Kurdish federalist demands. [...] For their part, many Iraqi Arabs – both Sunni and Shia - resent the Kurds' relative wealth and are deeply suspicious of their political intentions.

5. Kurdish political leadership has rarely been cohesive; tensions continue to simmer below the surface. But we judge that both KDP leader Barzani and PUK leader Talabani are determined not to let their historic and dynastic feuds threaten Kurdish long-term goals. The Kurds are the most organised political bloc in Iraq, using this strength to mould favourable national legislation. They will resist any changes to the Iraqi constitution, which threaten the autonomy of the KRG, the position of the Peshmerga, or the KRG's ability to control regional oil resources and revenues. [...]

## The Peshmerga

6. The status of the Peshmerga is a major security issue for the Kurds. Multinational force MNF-I estimates Peshmerga strength at around 100,000 with 50,000 reserves (plus 10,000-15,000 Kurds serving in the Iraqi army, mostly in Kurdish dominated units). Numerically it is stronger than the Iraqi army. Diplomatic reporting shows the Kurds are insisting on retaining authority over deployment of Iraqi army units inside the KRG, maintaining the Peshmerga at current strength and retaining unilateral command of them. [...]

## Kirkuk

7. Kirkuk will remain a deeply emotive issue. Most Kurds regard the city as inherently Kurdish and an essential asset for an independent Kurdistan (with Kirkuk's potential oil wealth<sup>1</sup> enhancing its economic viability). Kirkuk currently sits outside the boundaries of the KRG: [...] The federal constitution gives them legal means: Article 140 stipulates the need for a census and referendum before the end of 2007. But Kurdish plans will be opposed. The Turkomen still claim Kirkuk as their cultural capital. There are also sizeable Arab Sunni, Arab Shia, Assyrian and Christian communities: most want special status for Kirkuk as a federal region under some form of power sharing arrangement. Polling in September indicated that a Kurdish majority would be likely in any referendum. But to ensure success, the Kurds are trying to use constitutionally legitimate 'normalisation' measures – re-settling displaced persons and offering Arab 'newcomers' (many of whom have been resident since the late 1980s) financial packages to leave – to alter the demographic profile. Some Turkomen and Arabs have been forced out by violence, bribery and intimidation.

8. Violence has been increasing; since June there have been several suicide attacks mostly targeting PUK/KDP offices. Ethnic and sectarian fighting has also escalated. The bulk of the violence can be attributed to Sunni nationalist insurgents and jihadists, but elements of Jaysh al-Mahdi and SCIRI's Badr Organisation have also been implicated. [...] both the PUK and KDP may accept that in the current uncertain political environment a referendum is likely to be delayed. But they are in any case increasingly in *de facto* control of Kirkuk. They dominate local political and security structures [...] We judge that the Kurds are likely to find ways to accommodate the Turkomen politically (helped by divisions among the Turkomen themselves). But continued efforts to oust mostly Arab residents risk serious violence, both in the city and in other mixed areas.

## Turkey

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<sup>1</sup> One of Iraq's largest oil fields, containing 13.5 billion barrels of proven reserves, 12% of Iraq's total is on the north west outskirts of Kirkuk.

9. Turkey fears an independent Kurdistan will reinforce separatist ambitions among its own Kurdish minority. [...]

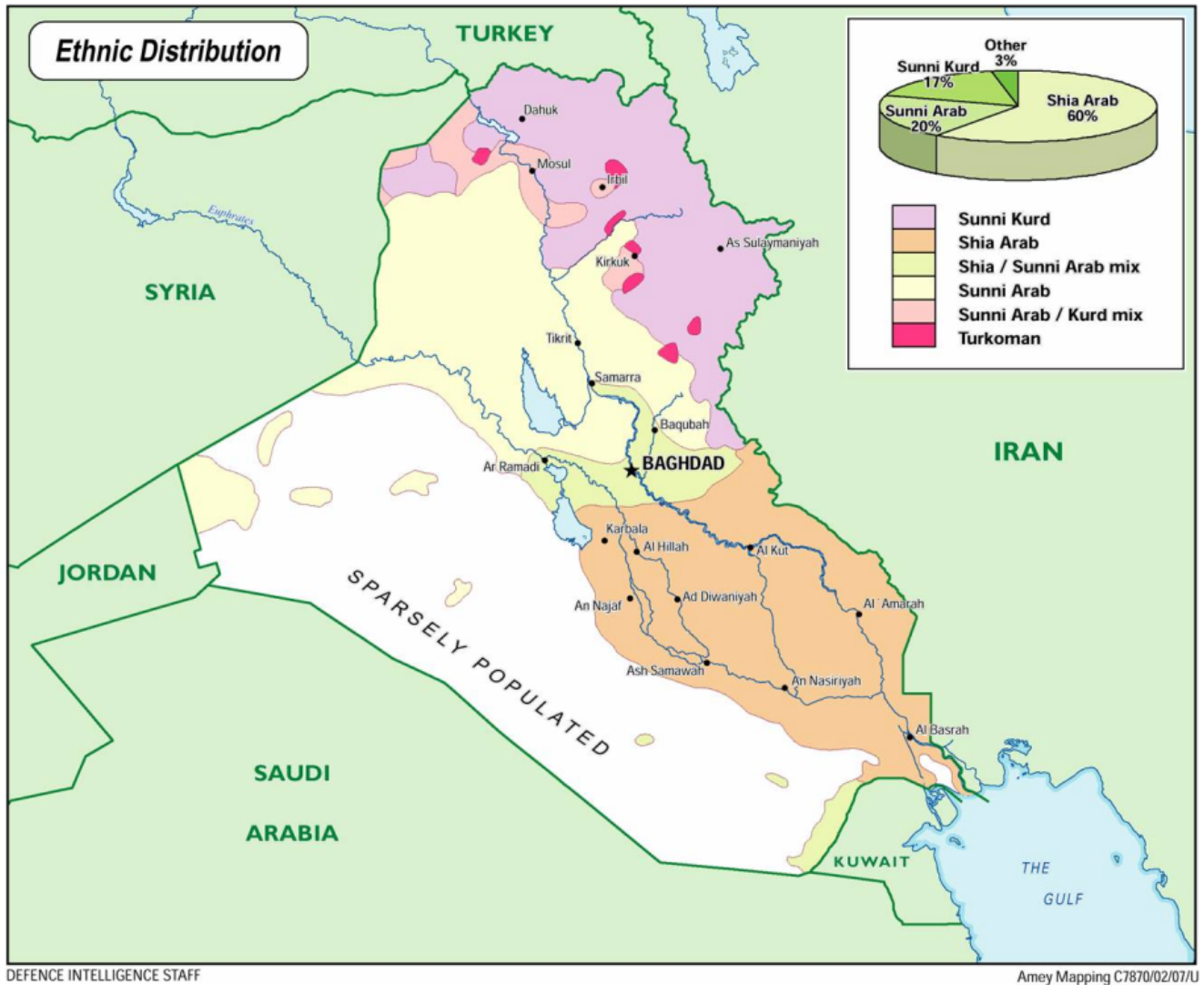
10. [...]

## **Iran**

11. We continue to judge that Iran wants a unified and stable Iraq. [...] We judge the Iranians will take a measured approach: continuing to develop political and economic influence where they can: maintaining good links with the KDP and PUK; providing much needed fuel and electricity [...] But Iran will also try to stir up intra-Kurdish trouble to prevent a unified Kurdish bloc becoming too strong. [...]

ANNEX A

IRAQ ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION





## ANNEX B

### NORTHERN IRAQ MAP DEPICTING THE KRG AND EXTENT OF KURDISH TERRITORIAL CLAIMS

