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P A P E R



Managing Arab-Kurd Tensions in Northern Iraq After the Withdrawal of U.S. Troops

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Prepared for United States Forces–Iraq

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Summary

Though the United States has pledged to withdraw its combat forces from Iraq by the end of 2011, ethnic and sectarian fault lines will continue to divide the country. Tensions in northern Iraq—where Arab and Kurdish communities face off regarding disputes over land, resources, governance, and security—could easily, with the right catalyst, lead to armed conflict. The risk of violence is increased significantly by the presence of roughly 75,000 Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters and thousands of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in and around disputed areas.

To prevent violence between Arabs and Kurds, U.S. forces have supervised a joint security architecture that includes representation from the ISF, Kurdish forces, and USF-I. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) has also launched a range of CBMs to establish trust between the Arab and Kurdish communities and to defuse potential flash points.

Continuing to contain Arab-Kurd tensions will require a neutral third-party arbitrator that can facilitate local CBMs, push for national-level negotiations, and prevent armed conflict between Iraqi and Kurdish troops. While U.S. civilian entities could help implement CBMs and mediate political talks, the continued presence of U.S. military forces within the disputed internal boundaries would be the most effective way to prevent violent conflict between Arabs and Kurds.

This paper presents options for mitigating the risks of Arab-Kurd conflict both before and after the withdrawal of U.S. troops. It discusses the feasibility of establishing a range of CBMs that can help Arabs and Kurds build trust and avoid local conflicts that could derail efforts to resolve Iraq's fundamental political challenges through negotiations. It also suggests mechanisms through which U.S. government entities—both civilian and military—could work to alleviate tensions in northern Iraq.

The United States should encourage Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen leaders in northern Iraq, under United Nations auspices, to make incremental progress toward resolving issues that have been divisive—particularly topics on which parties can make concessions without undermining their positions on similar disputes being discussed at the national level. For example, agreements to share power in municipal government institutions, the establishment of inter-communal cultural exchanges, the resolution of the more clear-cut property claims, and pledges to protect the rights of minorities would help reduce the likelihood of violence in the region without setting a precedent for negotiations on national-level power sharing or normalization.¹ An interim agreement on the management of hydrocarbon resources would

¹ “Normalization” refers to efforts to reverse Saddam Hussein’s forced “Arabization” of predominantly Kurdish areas in northern Iraq, where Kurds were forced to leave and Arabs encouraged to settle. Article 58 of the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period (March 8, 2004) [hereinafter TAL] called for steps “to remedy this injustice,” including the restoration of property, the creation of employment opportunities, and—most important—changes to inter-

enable both the central government and the KRG to benefit from oil revenues while a permanent arrangement is pursued. Such steps would foster contact between the Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen communities, reduce ethnic and sectarian tension, and demonstrate that even small-scale cooperation can produce tangible benefits.

Regional and local CBMs have the potential to keep a lid on inter-communal tensions that will, without question, boil beneath the surface for a long time. They cannot, however, resolve what is, at its heart, a strategic political dispute that must be resolved at the national level. While regional conflicts have certainly taken on aspects of ethnic (Arab-Kurd-Turkmen) and sectarian (Sunni-Shi'a) conflicts, the prospect of Arab-Kurd conflict in northern Iraq is directly linked to Iraqi politicians' failure to resolve fundamental questions regarding federalism, the legal and political status of disputed territories, and the allocation of budgets and natural resources (especially hydrocarbons).

CBMs are thus unlikely to contain Arab-Kurd violence over the long-term absent a national-level agreement over these disputes. The key question is whether CBMs and other initiatives can prevent violence long enough for Iraq's politicians to resolve these broader issues.

nal administrative boundaries and a resolution to the status of Kirkuk. The implementation of these measures was further mandated by Article 140 of Iraq's 2005 Constitution.