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All fights for Kirkuk have and will be about its oil

By Arif Qurbany

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In their oft-repeated statements Kurdish leaders say their claim on Kirkuk is not about its oil but rather its Kurdish identity. But this is not true. The heart of the problem is indeed its oil and that very oil is now about to burn the Kurds themselves.

It was oil that attached Kirkuk as part of Mosul to the state of Iraq after the First World War and since then oil in Kirkuk has been a major factor in all disputes between the Kurds and Iraq's successive regimes. If we look back at the past several decades we will see that oil has been one reason that no negotiation ever yielded any results. The Kurds have always tried to annex Kirkuk to the rest of Kurdistan and Baghdad has tried to keep it outside that geography and treat it as a non-Kurdish issue. In all negotiations Iraqis have been ready to meet all Kurdish demands except Kirkuk.

Negotiations of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in the early 1970s, negotiations between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Baath regime in the mid 1980s and the efforts of the Kurdistan Front after 1991 with Baghdad all failed over Kirkuk. Even after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and during the writing of Iraq's constitutions disputes between the Kurds and Arabs were always about Kirkuk. No Arab leader has ever been willing to let go of Kirkuk. And for them too, it is about oil.

More than the size of Kirkuk province of Kurdish land elsewhere, especially in the Garmiyan south, have lost their Kurdish identity and features. But where is the concern about that? More than the population of Kirkuk of Kurds are fading away in Baghdad and yet the Kurds haven't shown the slightest concern. All that we have done in the past, now and in the future for Kirkuk has all to do with its oil.

In fact much of the suffering and hardship between the Kurds and Baghdad has been caused by neither side being willing to let go of Kirkuk. If Iraq had in the March 1970 deal with the Kurds had acknowledged Kirkuk as part of the autonomous Kurdish area it would not have had to cede any part of its territory and waters to Iran in the Algiers Agreement five years later for Tehran to withdraw support from the Kurdish fight. Iraq renegading on that Agreement later on caused it a costly and devastating eight-year war with Iran and later the invasion of Kuwait in order to repay its international debt. The outcome of that invasion was the allied invasion of Iraq and the removal of the regime two decades later and so on and so forth. So, like the rings of a chain these events have been connected to each other and to Kirkuk.

For the Kurds too, had they solved the Kirkuk issue in the 1970 deal with Baghdad they would not have had to restart the revolution which later led to its collapse. If in the mid 1980s the talks between the PUK and Saddam's regime had solved Kirkuk there would not have been the war that resulted in the Anfal campaign and chemical attack on Halabja. All Kurdish sacrifice has been connected to Kirkuk and its oil.

We should not shy away from the fact that Kirkuk's oil is a decisive issue. Whoever controls the oil of Kirkuk holds the solution for Kirkuk. Baghdad ran Kirkuk's oil for ninety years and now if the Kurds can have full control of its oil they will have taken Kirkuk from Iraq.

The situation after the emergence of ISIS was a golden opportunity for the Kurds and what the Kurds have done in a few stages was seizing that very opportunity. Kirkuk cannot be taken from Baghdad with military force only. Its economy has to be taken, too. The Kurds have so far done this successfully and if they manage to make it a de facto in the post-ISIS era Baghdad will then have no much hope for Kirkuk and will hand it completely over to the Kurds. The Shiites largely looked away when Kurds gained strength in Kirkuk, arguing that if its oil is not for the Shiites, it had better be for the Kurds than a source of income for the Sunnis.

The Shiites may well take the same stance in the future and be lenient towards the Kurds' control of Kirkuk. Therefore what the Kurds need to do is tread carefully and correctly read and analyze the situations which could make it possible for a complete possession of Kirkuk.

But Baghdad's leniency so far not only has not led the Kurds to some visionary and strategic planning, the oil has in fact turned into a powder keg that is about to explode among the Kurds themselves which, unfortunately, obliges us to revisit and redefine our whole history of revolutions and Peshmerga wars as well as all the claims of the PUK and KDP leaders on that disputed city.