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**May 18, 2009****Tensions Stoked Between Iraqi Kurds and Sunnis****By SAM DAGHER**

BASHIQA, [Iraq](#) — Tensions between Sunni Arabs and Kurds are boiling over in Nineveh, the northern Iraqi province that includes Mosul, as Kurds fight the result of a provincial election in January that shifted power to Arabs.

Though strains between the groups are not new, in recent days Kurdish forces have blocked Arab officials from carrying out their duties, in a sign that the Kurds refuse to recognize the regional government's sovereignty over all of Nineveh. The Kurds have also pressured districts under their control to boycott the new Arab governor, and they said they might even resort to military force unless they were given several positions in the government.

American officials have long feared a military conflict in the north, where Arabs and Kurds have competing claims to territory and have legions of trained men under arms. The struggle for power has also fueled the insurgency in the north, giving groups like [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#) an opening to appear to back an Arab cause. And it comes as American combat troops are scheduled to withdraw from Iraqi cities by the end of June.

It is unclear whether the tensions will escalate, but several episodes in recent weeks have raised concerns.

On May 8, the newly elected Sunni Arab governor, Atheel al-Nujaifi, was prevented by Kurdish forces from entering Bashiqa, a Kurdish-controlled town northeast of Mosul. The governor said he received a call from an Iraqi officer in the joint Iraqi-American command center in Mosul informing him that the Kurds had issued a "shoot to kill" order against him if he went to Bashiqa. The episode ended when the governor turned back to Mosul.

The Kurds denied they had issued the order but said they were under instructions from the leadership in the semiautonomous Kurdistan region to halt Mr. Nujaifi's advance.

Last Wednesday, hundreds of armed Kurds stopped the Nineveh police chief, a Sunni Arab, from crossing a bridge into a disputed area of the province under Kurdish control. His convoy included Iraqi soldiers and police officers. A witness described the standoff, which lasted

almost three hours before the police chief's retreat, as "frightening."

On Saturday, Kurdish military forces fanned out on the road to Zumar, an area northwest of Mosul, following a rumor that the governor might visit, according to a local tribal leader. And on Sunday, a car bomb went off near the governor's residence in Mosul, killing a police officer, though it was unclear who was behind the bombing.

For almost five years, Kurds dominated the provincial government in Nineveh despite the fact that Arabs make up a majority of the population. The Kurds' grip on power was aided by the thousands of Kurdish forces that were sent to the province with American approval to shore up security in what remains one of the most violent spots in Iraq.

Last month Mr. Nujaifi, a wealthy businessman with ties to powerful Arab tribes, members of [Saddam Hussein's Baath Party](#) and possibly insurgents, was chosen as the new governor. His [predominantly Sunni Arab coalition](#), Al Hadba, which won 19 of the 37 seats on the provincial council, froze out the second-place Kurdish coalition from all senior positions in the new government.

The Kurds responded by boycotting the government, and they are now threatening to escalate the conflict unless they are given the posts of deputy governor and provincial council chairman.

Mr. Nujaifi says there will be no talks with the Kurds unless they recognize Nineveh's administrative borders and pull their forces back to behind the so-called Green Line, Iraqi Kurdistan's boundary before the American-led invasion in 2003.

The Kurds reject that request and say they will not budge before the fate of disputed territories north of Mosul is settled. They say they trust neither Mr. Nujaifi nor the central government in Baghdad, led by Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#), which has been seeking to assert its authority in northern Iraq at the expense of the Kurds.

"We do not trust these people, we know their intentions," said Khasro Goran, the Nineveh leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the most powerful Kurdish force on the ground.

Mr. Nujaifi recently called for Sunni insurgents to curtail attacks against American soldiers as they pull out from joint Iraqi-American garrisons in Mosul to Marez, their big base on the outskirts of town. He said that the insurgents "seemed to have responded" to his call, but that controlling Sunni Arab anger against Kurds might be more difficult.

Joost Hiltermann, an analyst who is advising the [United Nations](#) on territorial disputes in northern Iraq, said the Kurds had more of an interest in escalating the conflict. "It could be of Kurdish interest to provoke confrontation in order to persuade the Americans that if they abandon the Kurds, the consequences would be dire," said Mr. Hiltermann, a senior Iraq analyst at the [International Crisis Group](#).

The American military has played down the significance of the recent Kurdish actions.

Meanwhile, residents here on the Nineveh Plain, a mix of ethnic and religious groups, are bracing for the worst.

A checkpoint staffed by Kurdish military forces on the highway between Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan's capital, and Mosul was recently moved closer to Mosul. Kurdish observation posts along the plain's roads and hilltops have also been fortified. Near Bashiqa, dirt shields several roadside military outposts. Machine guns could be seen on the roofs of some buildings.

Mr. Goran said that no new forces were brought in, but that those "on vacation" inside Kurdistan were told to come back because of the heightened alert.

"We are a small sect, we do not want trouble," said Khodr Elias, 49, a resident of Bashiqa, which is dominated by Yazidis, [an ancient Kurdish-speaking sect](#). "We are squeezed between Arabs and Kurds, and we cannot open our mouths."

Kurds also appear to be pressing people in Christian enclaves of the plain to not recognize the governor.

In the towns of Tal Keif and Qaraqosh, municipal officials who want to cooperate with the government in Mosul say they are impotent in the face of a heavy Kurdish security presence.

Comments by a senior Kurdish police officer in Qaraqosh illustrated the problem. "We have terrorists in power," said the officer, who spoke anonymously because he was not authorized to speak with reporters. "God willing, there will be confrontation; otherwise there will be no solution."

*Mohamed Hussein contributed reporting from Baghdad.*

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