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Key Takeaway: *A battle is underway between the Iraqi Government, backed by Iran, and Iraqi Kurds for control of Kirkuk, Iraq. Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Counterterrorism Services (CTS), Federal Police, and Iranian-backed popular mobilization forces (PMF) launched a combined offensive with intent to seize the KI military base, the Kirkuk airport, and Kirkuk's oilfields from Kurdish Peshmerga forces at 2:00 a.m. on October 15th. The offensive follows two days of failed negotiations after the government of Iraq (GOI), backed by Iran, demanded Kurdish forces withdraw. US efforts to de-escalate failed. Iran's role in the offensive further strengthens its influence within Iraq, sidelines the U.S., and will increase Arab Shiite popular support for Iranian-backed candidates in Iraq's upcoming elections, currently scheduled for April 2018. Iran's use of an Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFP) against U.S. forces in Salah al Din Province, southwest of Kirkuk, on October 1 likely signals Iran's resolve to use force to deter the U.S. from taking a direct military role. ISW is monitoring the situation and will provide regular updates.*

What happened: Elements from a combined force of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Counterterrorism Services (CTS), Federal Police, and Iranian-backed popular mobilization forces (PMF) south of Kirkuk City launched a probing attack against Peshmerga forces southwest of Kirkuk at 2:00 a.m. on October 15th. The Iranian-backed units include the Badr Organization's Turkmen Brigade (the 16th PMU brigade) and three brigades from Asai'b Ahl al-Haq (the 41st, 42nd and 43rd PMU brigades). Clashes are ongoing in the industrial zone southwest of Kirkuk City at the time of writing.

Context: The Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the government of Iraq (GoI) have been in a standoff after the KRG held a referendum on September 25, 2017 to affirm its right to declare independence. The governments of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey have strongly opposed the Kurdish referendum and took action to compel the KRG to stop short of declaring independence. The Iraqi Supreme Court declared the referendum illegal on September 18th, pending legal review. The Iraqi government and Iran both prohibited flights to Kurdistan. Iraq held military exercises with Iran along the latter's border with Iraqi Kurdistan on October 1 and conducted symbolic military exercises with Turkey on September 26 in order to demonstrate solidarity against the referendum. Iraq's Council of Representatives (CoR) voted on September 27 to authorize Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi to retake Kirkuk and its oil fields, prompting a Kurdish boycott of the CoR.

The Iraqi Kurds have thus faced a decision about whether to declare outright independence from Baghdad after receiving a popular mandate to do so through the referendum. Intra-Kurdish divisions both within Iraq's main Kurdish political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), complicated the Kurds' way forward. KRG President Masoud Barzani, the President of the KRG and head of the KDP, has been the referendum's staunchest supporter. His chief lifetime rival, Jalal Talabani, died on October 3, 2017 after a stroke in 2012 and protracted hospitalization. Talabani's death accelerated a pre-existing competition for leadership over the PUK movement between his family and a separate sub-faction led by KRG vice president Kosrut Rasoul. The battle for Kirkuk will unify the PUK and KDP in defense of the

Kurdish region despite their political differences. Its outcome will likely affect the timeline of KRG elections currently scheduled for November 1, 2017.

What changed: The government of Iraq backed by Iran began to compel Iraqi Kurdistan into withdrawing its armed forces from Kirkuk on October 12. Baghdad and Tehran separately issued ultimatums to the KRG. Prime Minister Haider al Abadi and leader of the Iranian-proxy Badr Organization, Hadi al Ameri, both issued statements on October 13 demanding Kurdish forces relinquish unilateral control over Kirkuk. Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani traveled to Iraq and likely delivered a direct ultimatum from Ayatollah Ali Al Khameni to Kurdish leader. He also delivered a message of Khameni's support to Abadi. He remains in Iraqi Kurdistan at the time of writing, according to local reports.

The joint Iraqi-Iranian demand followed the deployment of a combined force of Iranian-backed militias, Federal Police, and the 9th Iraqi Armored Division to frontline positions with the Kurdish Peshmerga south and west of Kirkuk City on October 12th. Local Kurdish Peshmerga commanders claimed that the local PMF and ISF commanders demand Peshmerga forces withdraw from oil installations, the Kirkuk airport, and the K1 military base within 48 hours, citing a decision from Prime Minister Abadi. The KDP and PUK immediately deployed as many as 6,000 reinforcements to Kirkuk and withdrew from areas west and south of Kirkuk City in order to consolidate a new defensive perimeter. A lethal Iranian proxy group, AAH, attacked the headquarters of the PUK in Tuz Khurmatu, a disputed Kurdish and Shiite Turkmen town, overnight on October 13. The attack signaled Iran's commitment to fight if the Kurds refused to back down.

Iraqi Kurds initially attempted to de-escalate the situation in Kirkuk without relinquishing control of the installations and facilities demanded by Abadi. The Kurdish President of Iraq Fuad Masum traveled to Suleimaniya on October 14 to mediate a possible resolution of the standoff in Kirkuk. He later met with leadership from both the PUK and the KDP in Dokan, Suleimaniya province and then delivered a five-point proposal to Baghdad. Baghdad rejected the proposal.

Implications: The attack against Kurdish forces in Kirkuk could lead to full-scale war between the KRG and government of Iraq. Iran's role in the offensive further strengthens its influence within GoI and will increase Arab Shiite popular support for Iranian-backed candidates in Iraq's upcoming elections, currently scheduled for April 2018. It also sidelines the U.S. Iran's likely use of an Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFP) against U.S. forces in Salah al Din Province, southwest of Kirkuk, on October 1 likely signals Iran's resolve to use force to deter a direct U.S. military role, if necessary.