Iraq-Kurdistan Conflict

What is the issue?

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- There are tensions between Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.
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- This could undermine the fight against the Islamic State.
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What are the tensions between Iraq and Kurds?

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- Iraqi Kurdistan, officially called the Kurdistan Region by the Iraqi constitution.
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- It is a proto-state located in the north of Iraq and constitutes the country's only autonomous region.
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- Recently a conflict broke out in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk between Iraqi government troops aided by Shia militias and the Peshmerga, the military wing of Iraqi Kurdistan.
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- Both government troops and the Peshmerga are part of the coalition that is fighting the Islamic State in Iraq, and are also American allies.
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- The U.S. provides air cover in the war against the IS and offers military advice to Iraqi troops, besides supplying weapons.
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- Likewise, the Peshmerga has received arms from the U.S., Germany, the U.K. and other western countries.

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- But neither the common American factor nor the shared interests in the war against terrorists has prevented the conflict in Kirkuk, that was captured by the Peshmerga from the IS in 2014.
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What are the reasons for ongoing conflict?

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- The alliance between the Kurds and Baghdad is tactical rather than strategic.
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- Iraq and Kurds set aside their historical differences and joined hands against a common enemy.But the IS in retreat.
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- Most of the cities it captured, including Mosul, Iraq's second largest, have been freed.
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- This receding IS threat has exposed cracks in the alliance.
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- More immediately, the Kurdish political leadership's push for independence from Iraq has alarmed Baghdad.
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- President of Iraqi Kurdistan, wanted to mobilise the momentum created in the battle against the IS in favour of independence.
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- Despite strong opposition from Baghdad and western capitals, Kurds went ahead with a referendum in late September, in which Kurds overwhelmingly voted for independence.
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- Though the vote is not binding on the Kurdish regional government, it has undoubtedly strengthened Kurdish nationalist politics across borders.
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What lies ahead?

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- If the Kurds go ahead with plans to secede, it would invite a strong military response, the cracks in the coalition would be good news for the IS.
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- The only country that could constructively intervene in the conflict is the U.S., which enjoys good ties with Baghdad.
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- It should mediate between the two sides on the Kurdish national question.
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- Unless that is addressed, the chances for another civil war in Iraq remain high.
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Source: The Hindu

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