Kurds' Return To City Shakes Politics in Iraq
By EDWARD WONG

KIRKUK, Iraq

Muhammad Ahmed realized how wide the chasm between Kurds and Arabs here had grown when he recently ran into a former classmate on the serpentine streets of this troubled city.

Mr. Ahmed, a Kurd, and his friend, an Arab, had studied together at Kirkuk's oil institute nearly two decades ago. But shortly after Mr. Ahmed started work at the state-owned North Oil Company in the late 1980's, the government of Saddam Hussein, intent on solidifying Arab control of Kirkuk, forced him out of his job and made him and his family move north, where they joined tens of thousands of other Kurds exiled from this city.

That mass relocation planted the seeds for a bitter ethnic antagonism that has grown into the most incendiary political issue in Iraq outside of the Sunni-led insurgency, and the one that more than any other is delaying formation of a new government. When Mr. Ahmed met his classmate again, he discovered his friend was still working for North Oil, one of as many as 10,000 employees helping to tap the region's vast troves of oil, estimated at 10 to 20 percent of the country's reserves.

"He had a great salary and a good job all these years," said Mr. Ahmed, 41, musing on the luxuries of his old friend's house. "Arabs, Turkmen and Christians were hired, and Kurds were not." He spoke from his own home: a cinder-block building hastily erected in a squatter camp inside the city's soccer stadium, where he and his family have been living alongside thousands of other returning Kurds since the fall of Mr. Hussein's rule. "We wish we didn't have oil in Kirkuk," he said. "If the oil wasn't here, we'd have a comfortable life now. All our problems are because of this damned oil."

Mr. Ahmed's plight encapsulates the growing struggle over Kirkuk, a drab city of 700,000 on the windswept northern plains. Efforts to restore Kurds to their jobs and property without disenfranchising Arabs are fraught with the possibility of igniting a civil war. The debate has so inflamed passions that Kurdish and Shiite Arab negotiators trying to form a coalition government in Baghdad may have to put off any real decision on Kirkuk's future.

"As far as Kirkuk is concerned, because of the different ethnic groups in it, we have to apply a permanent solution, not a temporary solution," Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the Shiite nominee for prime minister, said.

Kurdish leaders call Kirkuk their Jerusalem, saying they should control it -- and its oil fields -- because it was historically Kurdish. The Kurds are pushing Shiite leaders like Dr. Jaafari to help quickly give property back to Kurdish returnees, evict Arab settlers and employ more Kurds at North Oil, the only major government institution here that the Kurds have been

unable to dominate since the American invasion.

The Kurdish political parties have huge leverage. Kurds turned out in large numbers to vote on Jan. 30, securing more than a quarter of the seats in the 275-member national assembly and making themselves a necessary partner for the Shiite bloc that won the largest number of seats.

But with the oil in Kirkuk at stake, the Kurdish and Shiite parties have been unable to agree on how to carry out Article 58 of the interim constitution, which provides vague guidelines for settling the property disputes here. Equally vexing is the question of who will administer Kirkuk -- the national government or the autonomous regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan.

In the 1960's, Baath Party officials began packing Kurds and, to a lesser degree, Turkmen into trucks and evicting them from Kirkuk. As the displacement continued, the Kurds who worked for North Oil, like Mr. Ahmed, rose to the top of the relocation list. The government, dominated by Sunni Arabs, imported mostly Shiite Arabs from the impoverished south into the Kirkuk area.

Kurds began returning in large numbers nearly two years ago, when the Hussein government was toppled. Some Arab families fled, but most heeded the reassurances of American soldiers who, trying to avert an ethnic war, urged them to stay and urged the Kurds to await a legal solution.

"From my perspective, the Arab settlers who were brought into Kirkuk were also victims of Saddam Hussein," said Barham Salih, the deputy prime minister and a top Kurd. "But the question is, if we're talking about a new Iraq, does this mean the elite of Iraq, the democratically elected elite of Iraq, are willing to acknowledge the terrible mistake that was made and put it right?"

In April 2004, the Americans created the Iraqi Property Claims Commission to rule on restitution. By the end of 2004, the commission had received 10,044 claims from Kirkuk's province, Tamin. The commission's statistics show that judges have decided only 25 cases.

The head of the commission said in an interview that only two judges, both Kurds, were working on cases in Kirkuk. The commission has been unable to assign more judges because Kurdish political parties insist that only Kurds review the claims, limiting the number of qualified people, said the commission head, who declined to be identified by name because one colleague had been assassinated and another kidnapped.

Turkmen and Arab officials here accuse the major Kurdish parties of having moved people pretending to be returnees into Kirkuk before the Jan. 30 elections in order to bolster the Kurdish vote. The main Kurdish coalition won 26 of 41 provincial council seats, and a Kurd will almost certainly be installed as governor.

Each ethnic group claims demographic dominance, but no reliable census has

been taken since 1957. Mutual suspicions are intense.

"The families who were kicked out of Kirkuk had homes in Kirkuk," said Suphi Sabir, a senior official in the Iraqi Turkmen Front. "If these people were from Kirkuk, why did they not return to their homes? Why are they staying in the stadium?"

In the Kirkuk neighborhood of Qadisiya, from which Kurds were evicted in large numbers, a group of Arab men said on a recent afternoon that the city would remain peaceful -- as long as no one tried to seize their homes.

"Those people are not from Kirkuk," a tall man in a dark blue robe, Muhammad Awad, said of the Kurds. "They came from Turkey and Iran. They're not Iraqis. Maybe the old regime kicked out 1 or 2 percent of the Kurds, but those people came from outside the country."

At the stadium, one glance at Mr. Ahmed's home shows why he has grown so impatient. Water runs along the floor when it rains. Children rummage in garbage barrels outside. A small kerosene heater is the sole source of warmth, and a television set the only entertainment.

Insurgents attack the stadium every week or two. On election day, a rocket landed near Mr. Ahmed as he stood outside his home, decapitating a 16-year-old named Yusef.

"We are willing to pay with our blood, like water on the floor, because Kirkuk is a Kurdish city and should stay part of Kurdistan," said Yusef's mother, Sabrir Kareem Muhammad, as her husband kissed a photo of their son.

About 440 families live in the stadium, at least 100 more than a year ago, said Ismail Ibrahim, an unofficial mayor of the camp. Thousands of other Kurdish returnees are living in dozens of sites in and near Kirkuk, local officials say, scattered in dirt fields, abandoned government buildings and former military barracks. Many returnees started off in tents, but this winter built spartan cinder-block or mud-and-brick homes.

"Nobody is supporting us," Shakur Ahmed, 44, said as he sat on Mr. Ibrahim's floor. "Baathists are still occupying our land."

For many Kurds, employment at the oil company is as important as winning back their property. But securing jobs there is not easy, either. Muhammad Ahmed, who worked as a supervisor of oil pumps and turbines for 10 months before he was relocated, said he was among 180 experienced Kurds who recently applied together for jobs at North Oil. Mr. Ahmed had an interview two months ago, he said, but has heard nothing.

A senior official at the Oil Ministry said he had sent to North Oil nine lists of people, half of them Kurds, who should be given jobs.

The Kurds complain that they have seen little or no results. "It's chauvinism," Mr. Ahmed said. "They don't want Kurds to work in oil. It's the same as under Saddam's plan."

On the edge of the city, out of sight of the stadium, the flames from oil processing plants leaped into the sky in the gathering dusk, the brightest light for miles around.

Images: Photos: Kurds prepare for dinner in a home in a Kirkuk stadium. The family of Shirin Ahmen, passing glass, was exiled from the city by the Hussein rule. (Photo by Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times)(pg. A12); Formerly exiled Kurdish families live in squalor inside a soccer stadium in Kirkuk as many seek restitution for property taken from them. (Photo by Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times)(pg. A1)

Correction: March 15, 2005, Tuesday

A picture caption yesterday with the continuation of a front-page article about the tensions in the northern Iraq city of Kirkuk between Arabs and returning Kurds, who were evicted during the rule of Saddam Hussein, misspelled the surname of a Kurdish woman shown passing a drinking glass during dinner preparations in a refugee camp. She was Shirin Ahmed, not Ahmen.

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Shiite Morality Takes Hold In Iraq's 2nd-Largest City

By EDWARD WONG

BASRA, Iraq

The loudest sounds emanating from musicians' row these days come from explosions.

Ahmed Ali walked through a shop that sold musical instruments before it was gutted by a bombing a week earlier, the latest in a series of mysterious attacks in this narrow alley in the last half-year, he said. The men here, just a block from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, sell instruments by day and perform at weddings in the evening.

"They say it's forbidden by Islam," Mr. Ali, 18, said as he went back to his own shop, its shelves stocked with drums. "We're afraid of everything. I'm afraid of it all. I'm afraid even when I'm talking to you."

The once libertine oil port of Basra, 350 miles south of the capital and far from the insurgency raging in much of Iraq, is steadily being transformed into a mini-theocracy under Shiite rule. There is perhaps no better indication of the possible flash points in a Shiite-dominated Iraq, because the political parties that hold sway here also wield significant influence in the central government in Baghdad and are backed by the country's top clerics.

Efforts to impose strict Shiite religious rule across Iraq would almost certainly spur resistance from Sunni Arabs and the more secular Kurds. But here in Basra, the changes have accelerated since the January elections, which enabled religious parties to put more radical politicians into office.

Small parties with names like God's Vengeance and Master of Martyrs have emerged. They work under the umbrella of more established Shiite groups, but many Iraqis suspect them of being agents of the Iranian government. One of the leading parties was formed in Iran by an Iraqi cleric living in exile during the reign of Saddam Hussein.

The growing ties with Iran are evident. Posters of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Iranian revolution, are plastered along streets and even at the provincial government center. The Iranian government opened a polling station downtown for Iranian expatriates during elections in their home country in June.

The governor also talks eagerly of buying electricity from Iran, given that the American-led effort has failed to provide enough of it.

"The political situation is very confused and very mixed up," said Saleh E. Najim, the dean of the engineering college at Basra University. "Most of the radical Islamic parties are concentrated in Basra. The people feel very upset about these parties. They are wasting our time."

This city of two million, Iraq's second largest, is not yet entirely in the grip of fundamentalism -- pirated copies of American movies like "Showgirls" and "Striptease" can still be bought in the market.

But conservative rule has affected daily life. Thursday and Friday have been designated the official weekend, rather than Friday and Saturday as in Baghdad, because Saturday is the Jewish day of rest.

The biggest issue for Iraqis is security, and here the line between the order kept by the local government and the one imposed by shadowy religious militias loyal to the governing parties is blurred. Posters of clerics, including Moktada al-Sadr, who ignited two uprisings against American-led forces, adorn concrete barriers at police checkpoints. Leaders of the militias say their fighters now make up a large part of the uniformed security forces.

There is an upside. Basra, though trash-strewn and impoverished, is much safer than Baghdad and other cities beset by the Sunni-led insurgency. The riverfront walkway known as the Corniche buzzes with life at night. Even foreigners can openly walk the streets.

But insecurity is a constant for many Iraqis who do not conform to a strict interpretation of Shiite Islam. In the music bazaar, a tattered warning sign appears on a shuttered instrument shop owned by a famous musician known as Kareem Trumpet. The sign denounces as "soldiers of Satan" the city's "whorehouses and dealers in porn DVD's and gambling shops and music stores."

The bazaar is just blocks away from a strip where sidewalk alcohol vendors

once thrived, before armed vigilantes and policemen drove them away.

At least three former officials of the Sunni-dominated Baath Party were gunned down in separate incidents, and a Sunni Arab cleric was kidnapped near his mosque and shot dead. Days later a Shiite cleric was fatally shot while going home.

Few women walk around without a head scarf and full-length black robe. A young woman who gave her name as Layla said she could wear jeans without a robe a year ago. But seven months before, as she strode from her house, a group of men came up to her and warned her that she was improperly dressed.

She says she no longer goes out in public without a robe.

Religious Shiites do not have to legally enshrine Shariah, or Koranic law, to exercise their will. Enforcement of Islamic practices is done on the streets, in the shadows. "We're trying to do it culturally rather than impose it by law," said Furat al-Shara, the local representative for the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a Shiite political party, known by the acronym Sciri, that holds powerful positions in the national government.

"In the mosques and universities where people learn, we tell them it's a negative thing to do," Mr. Shara said of drinking alcohol or of women appearing in public without scarves.

Sheik Abdul Sattar al-Bahadli, a senior official in the Sadr movement, which is prominent in the National Assembly, summed up the conservative viewpoint: "If Shariah exists everywhere in the world, in China, Korea or Japan, for example, and not just in Iraq, everyone will be happy."

Clerics like Sheik Bahadli and Mr. Shara do not operate on the margins of society here. Increasingly, people are going to them to sort out day-to-day problems. As this reporter sat in Sheik Bahadli's office one evening, three men walked in to ask him to settle a dispute between a renter and his landlord.

Politicians loyal to Sciri and to Ayatollah Muhammad Yacoubi, a radical cleric close to the Sadr movement, dominate the 41-seat Basra provincial council as a result of the January elections. The two religious groups are rivals. The governor, Muhammad al-Waeli, belongs to the ayatollah's party.

A faded poster of the white-bearded Ayatollah Yacoubi appears on a gate

outside Mr. Waeli's fortified office, ordering Iraqis not to buy or sell American, British or French cigarettes. Beside it hangs a poster of Ayatollah Khomeini with even harsher words: "All the problems of Islam stem from colonialism and the Great Powers."

Inside, Mr. Waeli said in an interview that Iraqi officials were negotiating to buy electricity from Iran to alleviate an electricity shortage and chronic blackouts.

Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, the head of Sciri, praised that proposal on a visit to Basra in June. Arriving in a convoy from Iran, he said Iraq -- particularly the south -- could benefit from closer ties to its Shiite neighbor. "The great Islamic Republic has a very formidable government," he said at a news conference. "It can be very useful to us, and it has a very honorable attitude toward Iraq."

But even in the south, many people still distrust Iran and political parties linked to it. Nearly one million people died in the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, which started in 1980 over control of the Shatt al-Arab, the waterway here that flows into the Persian Gulf. If the residents of this region begin to feel that Iran is exerting too much influence, they could turn against the governing Shiite parties.

An even more pressing concern is whether those politicians will be able to deliver on basic promises like electricity, water and jobs.

In the town of Fao, 50 miles southeast of Basra on the Shatt, a group of fishermen mending nets one afternoon lamented the lack of progress, even though they voted for the religious parties.

"Some people have jobs with big salaries, and other people are unemployed," said Shamkhi Khallawi, 53. "Everybody works for their own benefit. The politicians work for themselves, not for the people."

Images: Photo: This music store in Basra was bombed, and the owners suspect that the crime was committed by extremists who consider music to be un-Islamic. (Photo by Alan Chin for The New York Times)

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THE STRUGGLE FOR IRAQ: THE REBELLION; 8 Months After U.S.-Led Siege, Insurgents Rise Again in Falluja

By EDWARD WONG; An Iraqi employee of The New York Times, whose name is being withheld for security reasons, contributed reporting for this article.

FALLUJA, Iraq, July 12

Transformed into a police state after last winter's siege, this should be the safest city in all of Iraq.

Thousands of American and Iraqi troops live in crumbling buildings here and patrol streets laced with concertina wire. Any Iraqi entering the city must show a badge and undergo a search at one of six checkpoints. There is a 10 p.m. curfew.

But the insurgency is rising from the rubble nevertheless, eight months after the American military killed as many as 1,500 Iraqis in a costly invasion that fanned anti-American passions across Iraq and the Arab world.

Somewhere in the bowels of Falluja, the former guerrilla stronghold 35 miles west of Baghdad, where four American contractors were killed in an ambush, and the bodies of two were hanged from a bridge, in March 2004, insurgents are building suicide car bombs again.

At least four have exploded in recent weeks, one of them killing six American troops, including four women. Two of five police forts being erected have been firebombed. Three members of the nascent, 21-seat city council have suddenly quit and another member has stopped attending meetings, presumably because they have been threatened.

Just as disturbing, even Falluja residents who favored purging the streets of insurgents last November are beginning to chafe under the occupation.

"Some preferred the city quiet, purified of the gunmen and any militant

aspect," said Abdul Jabbar Kadhim al-Alwani, 40, the owner of an automotive repair shop, expressing a widely held sentiment. "But after the unfairness and injustice with which the city's residents have been treated by the American and Iraqi forces, they now prefer the resistance, just so they won't be humiliated."

In a state of perpetual lockdown, Falluja is far more secure today than it was before the November invasion, and safer than nearby Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province, the heartland of the Sunni Arab insurgency. In the elections in January, when only 2 percent of Anbar's eligible voters went to the polls, a reasonably secure Falluja was a singular bright spot, with about a third of eligible voters taking part. The city had 30,000 residents then.

But Falluja is approaching a turning point, American officials acknowledge, precariously balanced between rebuilding or degenerating into the urban battlefield it once was.

Tribal sheiks say they are urging residents to vote in the national elections set for December, one of the most positive signs that rebellious Sunni Arabs may be brought into the political process. But there is no doubt that the homegrown insurgency still has popular support here.

"It's a key moment right now for Falluja," said an American diplomat who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of government protocol. "We're starting to see friction, and we're starting to see the insurgents try to rebound. As more people come back into the city, the likelihood of infiltration increases."

Regaining control of Falluja from the American and Iraqi forces is a critical goal for the insurgency, American military commanders here say. For much of last year, this city of 300,000 was the largest haven in Iraq for the guerrillas, suspected of being the source of suicide car bombs in Baghdad and videos showing the beheadings of foreigners.

It came to represent resistance to American power, not just for people in Iraq but for many Arabs throughout the Middle East. Now, the city is emerging as the most important test of whether recalcitrant Sunnis can be forced to submit to rule by Shiites and Kurds, who hold the major seats of power in Baghdad.

Lt. Col. Rip Miles, executive officer of Regimental Combat Team 8, the 4,300-strong Marine unit charged with controlling the Falluja area, said the insurgents "believe it's valuable to them."

"Rightly or wrongly, Falluja means something," he said.

The Americans took control of the city last November, when the military engaged in the fiercest urban combat it had seen since the Vietnam War. Dozens of troops died and hundreds were wounded in the eight-day siege, and half of Falluja, once hailed as the "City of Mosques," was destroyed, while another quarter suffered structural damage.

Much of it remains in ruins. The cityscape is punctuated by the stumps of minarets, their tops having been blown off by American bombs or missiles. Rubble spills from many buildings along Highway 10, the main east-west artery that bisects the city. The industrial neighborhood to the south, Shuhada, is in such bad shape that families cannot move back. Electricity levels are still below what they were last November, and blackouts are frequent.

Yet, visible rebuilding is taking place. More than 140,000 of the city's original residents have returned. Groups of men hammer away at buildings, and shops and restaurants have reopened in some neighborhoods. American officials say more homes have running water now than before November.

Right after the siege, the Americans doled out $8 million to 20,000 people as an initial reconstruction payment. Iraqi engineering teams estimated that 32,000 homes needed repairs and that the total cost of reconstruction would be $500 million. The government of Ayad Allawi, the former prime minister, ordered a fifth of that to be paid out, and it was flown by helicopter to the main Marine base, called Camp Falluja.

The city's residents are eager to see the rest of the $500 million. The government of Ibrahim al-Jaafari, a religious Shiite who took office in April, has not approved any more payments. That has raised concerns among local Iraqi leaders and Marine commanders, who say winning the trust of the Fallujans depends on a successful rebuilding effort.

"They've only given us a fifth of the reconstruction money," said Sheik Abdul Kadir Mamdoh Abdullah, 49, a stout white-robed leader in the Kubaisi tribe. "That's absolutely not enough. Why not give us at least half right now?"

Sheik Abdullah made those remarks to Marine commanders and a State Department official, John Kael Weston, at a recent meeting in the heavily fortified local government building in downtown Falluja. He was one of 23 sheiks who had come to discuss their grievances with the Americans. Their complaints ranged from the aggressive behavior of the Iraqi soldiers (mostly Shiite Arabs from the south) to the lack of electricity (as the meeting began, the power went out, forcing a shutdown of the room's single air-conditioner on a typical, 120-degree day).

But a glimmer of hope emerged as Mr. Weston asked the sheiks whether they intended to participate in the December elections for a full-term national government.

"The sheiks and the leaders are educating the people to vote," Hamid Farhan Abdullah, 50, of the Mohamda tribe, said as he sat across from Mr. Weston. "They have to participate in the Iraqi elections and play a big role in the Iraqi government. They didn't take part earlier, and they have no representation now in the Iraqi government."

Another sign of political engagement surfaced last month, when about 200

local leaders met at a concrete plant outside the city. The participants drafted a 15-point manifesto to be presented to American and Iraqi officials. The memorandum began with the most often heard Sunni demand -- setting a timetable for the withdrawal of American-led forces -- but included suggestions on politics, among them forming a national committee "to write a constitution that should include all the people's rights now and in the future."

The political process here could be short-lived, though. Three members of the city council formed in the spring have resigned in recent weeks, including Sheik Hamza al-Issawi, considered the grand imam of Falluja. A fourth sheik stopped showing up for meetings after insurgents detonated a suicide car bomb in his front yard last month.

In mid-June, guerrillas also used a suicide car bomb to attack Brig. Gen. Mehdi Sabeeh Hashim, the commander of 800 Iraqi paramilitary troops deployed here, in addition to the 2,800 regular Iraqi soldiers. He survived, but the explosion killed at least one Iraqi. It was the second attempt on General Hashim's life in two months -- insurgents tried to gun him down in Baghdad in May.

Colonel Miles said marines and Iraqi forces found or were attacked with homemade bombs almost every day, despite house-to-house searches last November that were supposed to have resulted in the seizure of all heavy weapons and explosives.

"There was so much stockpile in this city that it's not inconceivable that they can find plenty of materials to build bombs," he said.

As the level of violence has increased, marines and Iraqi soldiers are stepping up patrols and house raids. That is further alienating residents. The problem is compounded by sectarian tensions between the Shiite soldiers and Sunni residents. Virtually all of the Iraqi soldiers here are from the south, because previous militias of local residents turned out to be disloyal or fell apart when confronted by insurgents.

American officials say the plan is to draw down the American and Iraqi troop presence in the city as a 1,200-man Iraqi police force is installed by December; one-third of its members are to come from Falluja.

"The Iraqi Army is not trained," Sheik Thaier Diyab al-Arsan, 30, a thin man wearing a red headdress, angrily told Colonel Miles at the meeting downtown. "They're killing people. They're shooting people in the head. You're not in the street. You don't see what's happening."

Images: Photos: Capt. Todd Sudmeyer, center, and unidentified Iraqi soldiers studied a map of Falluja on Monday. Their presence has angered some residents.; Iraqi troops patrolled Falluja on Sunday. Despite their efforts, a 10 p.m. curfew and other security measures, the insurgents have been rebounding. (Photographs by Adam Nadel/Polaris, for The New York Times)(pg. A9)