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# Interethnic relations in Northern Iraq

## *Brokerage, social capital and the potential for reconciliation*

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**abstract:** Ethnic relations in Iraq have been strained since the collapse of the Baath regime in 2003. Looking specifically at Kirkuk in northern Iraq, ethnic relations have been particularly uncooperative and violent. At the surface level, it is difficult to imagine interethnic reconciliation. The main conflict in the city, between Kurds and (settled) Arabs, goes back several decades. However, in this article it is argued that the situation is not necessary hopeless. Although ethnic groups in Kirkuk are largely separated by mutual distrust, they do not constitute entirely decoupled catnets. Despite residential segregation, there exists considerable room for social meetings across ethnic boundaries. Workplaces and, to some extent, voluntary organizations provide ethnically heterogeneous interaction spaces where interethnic brokerage may evolve. Many of these organizations are structurally constrained, making it likely that people will establish contacts with others sharing the same interaction space. In such settings, casual contacts have a potential to develop into true acquaintance contacts and, thus, into interethnic social capital.

**keywords:** conflict resolution ♦ ethnicity ♦ political sociology

## Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, ethnic conflict is still a pervasive phenomenon and one of the major factors obstructing democratization processes around the globe. With the weakening of strong states and authoritarian dictatorships, problematic ethnic relations have come increasingly to the fore, and the question of ethnic reconciliation has become acute. This article focuses on ethnic relations in Kirkuk – a city where ethnic

relations have been particularly problematic since the collapse of the Baath regime in 2003. The situation in Kirkuk has been characterized by insecurity and distrust both at the grassroots level and at the elite level, a situation that has been aggravated by the dysfunctional political institutions and lack of order (Sofi, 2009). As will be further described later in this article, ethnic relations in Kirkuk are generally violent and uncooperative, a factor that clearly obstructs democratization processes in the area.

How, then, can ethnic relations in Kirkuk be reconciled? Earlier research increasingly emphasized the importance of social capital, in particular interethnic social capital, as a condition for creating ethnic cooperation (e.g. Pickering, 2006; Varshney, 2002; see also Putnam, 1993, 2000). Social capital in this study is defined as micro-social relations characterized by mutual trust (Herrerros, 2004; see also Portes, 1998), and interethnic social capital is defined as social capital that bridges different ethnic groups. By promoting interethnic loyalties at the micro level and by making the information asymmetry between ingroup and outgroup less acute, it has been assumed that interethnic social capital counterbalances stereotypes and prejudices and thus works against elites' attempts to mobilize their own ethnic group by demonizing outgroups. In this article, we develop this hypothesis in relation to the special case of Kirkuk and northern Iraq. By taking a social networks perspective to ethnic relations, this article focuses on the conditions in which interethnic relations emerge, and the ways in which they might develop into mutually trusting, tolerant social relations; that is, into interethnic social capital. Foremost, we discuss to what extent interethnic social capital represents a possible path towards interethnic reconciliation in Kirkuk.

Empirically, this study is based on fieldwork conducted by the second author in 2006 (January to June). Fifty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted in the cities of Kirkuk and Erbil, either in Kurdish or in Arabic. Most of the respondents were politicians, representing various ethnic groups. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition, the second author met with about 200 representatives of political parties, state agencies, companies, voluntary organizations, as well as with ordinary people, for shorter, less structured interviews. The fieldwork also involved observations, sometimes participatory and sometimes not, aimed at learning more about everyday interactions. For example, the second author sat in on meetings in Kirkuk's local parliament, and he visited different voluntary organizations, services in mosques, families at home, and walked around in a variety of neighbourhoods. In addition, he collected statistics about ethnic composition in organizations and workplaces, where such were available.<sup>1</sup>

The article is structured as follows. In the first part, we give a general description of the situation in northern Iraq, and in Kirkuk more specifically,

focusing on historical and contemporary factors of relevance to interethnic relations. In the second part, we present the theoretical framework, based on social network theory, in order to assess the opportunity for interethnic reconciliation in the area. We point to the importance of ethnically heterogeneous interaction spaces, or loci of activity, in which interethnic brokerage is more likely. Such brokerage is seen as a precondition for the development of interethnic social capital. We furthermore contend that – from a theoretical perspective – neighbourhoods, workplaces and voluntary organizations are the most likely interaction spaces where interethnic brokerage may evolve. In the final part of the article, we again turn to the empirical case of Kirkuk and ask to what extent is interethnic social capital a viable way to reconciliation between groups in Kirkuk. From the outset, the situation is problematic. Residential segregation is severe, and civil society in Kirkuk is largely structured along ethnic lines, since most voluntary organizations are extensions of party politics. In this respect, the likelihood of interethnic brokerage must be considered low. However, a closer look at voluntary organizations and workplaces makes us more optimistic. Despite the ethnic structuring of civil society in Kirkuk, many organizations are surprisingly heterogeneous. Moreover, although we see ethnic segregation in the labour market as well, enough workplaces are sufficiently ethnically heterogeneous to justify the belief that they could potentially yield interethnic brokerage and social capital.

### **Interethnic Relations in Kirkuk: A Historical Overview**

In the aftermath of the first Gulf War, in 1991, a protected zone was established in Iraq north of the 36th parallel (UNSCR 688, 5 April 1991). The purpose of the zone was to protect Kurds from further aggression. Because of this measure, the Kurdish part of northern Iraq developed in a more positive direction than the rest of Iraq over the following decade, and it gave Kurds (and other residents in the zone) some autonomy from the Baghdad government. A regional parliament and government were created in 1992. Kirkuk, however, was not included in the zone, and there harassment against Kurds and other ethnic minorities continued until the fall of the Baath regime in 2003.

The exclusion of Kirkuk from the zone was symptomatic. Its status has been a matter of contention for many decades. For Kurds, Kirkuk is traditionally considered one of the main regions in the Kurdish part of Iraq (Erbil being the other major region). For Arabs, on the other hand, and in particular for the national governments in Baghdad (past and present), Kirkuk is part of Iraq proper. As a result, Kirkuk is not officially part of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is today recognized by the Iraq constitution as an

autonomous federal state within Iraq, with a separate parliament and government (Constitution of Iraq, 2005: § 5/113). However, although officially under the jurisdiction of the national government in Baghdad, many institutions in Kirkuk are unofficially governed by the major Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and are thus under influence from Erbil. This situation adds to the ambiguous status of Kirkuk.

One main reason why Kirkuk is a matter of contention is its large oil reserves. The major part of all oil in Iraq is produced in Kirkuk. Although Kirkuk had earlier been a point of conflict, the situation took a dramatic turn for the worse during the Baath regime (1968–2003). The essential ideological principle for Baath was pan-Arab nationalism: that is, the will to create a single, ethnically homogeneous Arab nation (Makiya, 1998).

At the third congress of the Baath Party, in 1979, it was decided that Kurdistan was Arab territory (Muhammad, 2003: 6). This decision intensified the Arabization process. The purpose of Arabization was to establish an Arab majority population in the strategic, oil-rich areas around Kirkuk. The dominance of non-Arab peoples in the Kirkuk region was a source of political instability. Moreover, it was anathema to the pan-Arab ideology of the Baath regime. As a result, non-Arab peoples – mostly Kurds, but also Turkmens and Christians (i.e. Assyrians and Chaldeans) – were forced to leave their homes. Arabs took their place. Part of the Arabization process also involved changing Kurdish names (including names of streets, schools and neighbourhoods) to Arabic (Human Rights Watch, 2003). The Arabization policy was effective. In the Iraqi census of 1957, Kirkuk's population consisted of 48.3 percent Kurds, 28.2 percent Arabs and 21.4 percent Turkmens. Already in 1977, the proportion of Arabs had increased dramatically to 44 percent, whereas the proportions of Kurds and Turkmens had decreased to 37.6 and 16.3 percent, respectively (Muhammad, 2003: 27; Statistics Iraq, census 1957, 1977).

Later, during the 1980s, the Arabization process intensified further. At this point, the Baath regime founded all-Arab settlements around Kirkuk and other cities in the region. In addition to ensuring majority dominance, the Baath regime aimed at creating buffer zones in order to protect the oil fields from riots and other disturbances. Arab settlers from southern Iraq were promised about US\$30,000, some land or a house, and employment, if they moved to Kirkuk. These settlements gradually developed into monoethnic Arab suburbs and city districts and aggravated the city's segregation process (Human Rights Watch, 2004: 87; *Al-shuhada al-Turkman*, 1999: 58). Moreover, as is further discussed later, ethnic labour market discrimination was common in Kirkuk, in particular in state-owned and state-controlled companies, where it was considerably more difficult for Kurds to find jobs. Kurds and other non-Arabs were not allowed to

renovate their houses (Human Rights Watch, 2004: 79; *Al-shuhada al-Turkman*, 1999: 43). Children were not allowed to have non-Arabic names, and Arabic settlers were encouraged to move their ancestors' graves from southern Iraq to Kirkuk. During the 1990s, Kurds and Turkmens in Kirkuk were forced to change nationality to Arabs, and to join the Baath Party. Those who refused were forced to leave Kirkuk (Human Rights Watch, 2003, 2004: 35, 86, 157, 165; Middle East Watch, 1993: 50, 56).

In total, between 1963 and 1988 the inhabitants of several hundred Kurdish villages, with a total population of more than 100,000 people, were forced to move (Human Rights Watch, 2004; Middle East Watch, 1993: 19, 42–9, 409; Muhammad, 2003: 38–48). Moreover, during the 1990s, more than 100,000 Kurds were forced to leave Kirkuk, as were many Turkmens and Assyrians (Human Rights Watch, 2004: 35–6). During the peak of the later part of the Arabization process in the late 1980s – in the so-called Anfal campaign – tens of thousands of people (mostly Kurds) were killed (Makiya, 1993: Ch. 5; 1998: xiii; see also Gurr and Harff, 1994: 28–30; Marr, 2004: 200–2; Phillips, 2005: 23). Moreover, during the Anfal campaign, more than 1 million people were forced to move to camps around the big cities, or to neighbouring countries (Middle East Watch, 1993: 395–407).

One result of the Anfal campaign was that a large number of women became widows and even more children lost their father (see McDowall, 1997: 383, 391). Many of these children are adults today, and are living with the memory of their losses. Such memories probably obstruct interethnic tolerance between Kurds and Arabs (see Rydgren, 2007). A common saying among Kurds (and sometimes also among Turkmens and Christians), often heard during fieldwork in Kirkuk, is that they have 'tasted' Arab rule, and do not want to experience it again – because they are afraid that the same situation will evolve as during the Baath regime. On the other hand, the other ethnic groups – Arabs in particular – are afraid that Kurdish domination in Kirkuk will discriminate against them. According to one of our informants, 'the big mistake [of the Kurds] was that when they helped defeat the regime, they [also] attacked and assaulted the [Arab] people. How could they live [peacefully] together with people they harass and persecute?' This fear was aggravated by the fact that Kurds, when they became the political majority in Kirkuk in 2003, treated old Baath sympathizers and Arab settlers severely (Human Rights Watch, 2004: 88, 119–20). Although Kurds are currently the largest group in Kirkuk, with approximately 40–45 percent of the population, they do not constitute a majority. Arabs make up approximately 30–35 percent of the population, Turkmens 20–25 percent and 1–2 percent are Christians. These figures should be compared to Iraqi Kurdistan as a whole (including the Kirkuk region), where Kurds predominate with 75

percent of the population, followed by Turkmens (8–10 percent), Christians (3–5 percent) and approximately 10 percent Arabs.<sup>2</sup>

Even more generally, tension between ethnic groups, between Kurds and Arabs in particular, was growing at a grassroots level after the fall of the Baath regime in 2003. Some of the Kurds who were expelled have now returned to Kirkuk, but have not been able to get their homes back (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Many houses have more than one owner, since non-Arabs' houses were confiscated and given to Arab settlers (who might have sold them to somebody else). Since 2004, state authorities have dealt with 36,000 civil cases related to multiple ownerships of houses, of which 34,000 are still unresolved (Sbey.com, 2009). This situation has exacerbated direct conflicts of interest between Arab settlers and expelled Kurds.

### **Kirkuk after 2003: Corruption and Interethnic Violence**

There were hopes for a more peaceful, democratic development in the region after the fall of the Baath regime. In contrast to Iraqi Kurdistan – Erbil is a case in point – progress in Kirkuk has been disappointing. According to Transparency International, Iraq is among the most corrupt countries in the world ([www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org)), and Kirkuk is among the most corrupt cities in Iraq. According to a report on corruption from the International Republic Institute (IRI), in 2004, on a scale from 1 to 20 Kirkuk scored 18.98 and Erbil (for example) 6.94. In fact, Kirkuk was considered the second most corrupt region in Iraq (ITC, 2007).

Another sign of the problematic situation in Kirkuk is the lack of foreign investment in the region. This is in stark contrast to nearby Erbil, where foreign investment has been abundant. Between 2006 and 2008, foreign companies invested US\$11 billion in various projects in the Erbil region (Sbey.com, 2008). In 2008, 500 companies from 22 countries participated in the Erbil International Trade Fair, which has been organized annually since 2005. More than 11 countries, including Great Britain, France, Russia and the US, have open consulates and/or chambers of commerce in Erbil. Nothing of the sort is happening in Kirkuk. The reason, in addition to relentless corruption, is a lack of security.

Since the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, more than 1850 people have been killed and more than 6000 persons injured in various terrorist actions (2004–8), many of which were explicitly aimed at ethnic outgroups. In 2005, for example, Kirkuk witnessed more than 5000 bomb attacks. Between 2004 and 2008, almost 500 persons were kidnapped, and 149 demonstrations took place (data collected from Kirkuk police force and the Provincial Joint Coordination Centre, PJCC). Although not all of

these violent acts were ethnically motivated, they were often interpreted as interethnic hostility by the people concerned. Hence, interethnic violence is common in Kirkuk, breeding distrust and even hatred between the groups. This situation is aggravated by the state authority's inability to punish the perpetrators – a situation underpinning beliefs in conspiracies.

How, then, can this situation be reconciled? In what follows, we argue that the creation of interethnic social capital could be one way out of this situation of mutual distrust, intolerance and violence. We thus take a bottom-up perspective on conflict resolution, which is admittedly a simplification. For one thing, it leaves aside the question of whether it is possible to create more effective and just political institutions from the top down. We believe this simplification is justified, however. Without some rudimentary interethnic trust at the grassroots level, we doubt that reconciliation is possible, no matter what political institutions are created from the top.

### **A Network Approach to Ethnic Relations**

In this part of the article we turn from the empirical case of Kirkuk to presenting the theoretical framework. As indicated earlier, we argue from a social networks perspective (1) that interethnic social capital is fundamental for creating stable ethnic relations; (2) that interethnic social capital evolves from ethnically heterogeneous interaction spaces, or foci of activity, from which interethnic brokerage is more likely to develop; and (3) that neighbourhoods, voluntary organizations, and – in particular – workplaces are potentially effective in creating interethnic brokerage, which in turn may develop into interethnic social capital.

The strength of the social network approach is its ability to conceptualize interpersonal relations in a relatively simple way. It focuses on relations that link individuals. Such interpersonal relations are important as they simultaneously channel information and provide sources of social pressure and social support and may therefore influence people's beliefs and actions in fundamental ways (see Katz, 1957). The key assumption is that human interaction is localized, and to understand the influence that the social surround has on people's attitudes and behaviour we have to look at the concrete settings where most everyday interaction takes place.

The concept of catnet (i.e. category + network) (Tilly, 1978; White, 1965, 1992) is fundamental to studying ethnic relations, as ethnic relations are essentially connected to social categorization and identification. We all belong to a multitude of different social categories (based on gender, occupation, class, religion, ethnicity, life styles, etc.), and the salience of these categories is bound to vary according to context. Social categories crystallized 'around markers that have systematic implication for

people's welfare' (Hechter, 2000: 98), or that are at least believed to have such implications, can be assumed to be of higher salience than other social categories. The salience of ethnic categorization, then, is likely to depend on the extent to which the allocation of resources and rights – and risks – hinges on ethnic category belonging. Although contingent on situation-specific factors, ethnic categorization is often of high and relatively enduring salience and often constitutes a basis for social (group) identity. This is clearly the case in Kirkuk. However, ethnic categories can be of varying degrees of groupness (cf. Brubaker, 2005). In situations in which the salience of ethnic categories increases vis-a-vis other social categories, more people will define themselves in ethnic terms, and ethnicity will become more important for their beliefs and actions.

Moreover, catnets can be of different degrees of closure; that is, connected to individuals outside the catnet to varying degrees. In cases of extreme closure, an ethnic catnet is purely homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, and totally detached from other ethnic groups. Situations in which ethnic groups are decoupled from one another imply a high degree of groupness. As we see in the coming sections, the degree of closure of ethnic catnets has some important implications for understanding ethnic relations.

### **Contact, Trust and Tolerance**

In dealing with the questions of interethnic trust and tolerance, it may be useful to start by discussing the contact hypothesis: that is, the assumption that contacts between members of different ethnic groups will reduce prejudice and xenophobia (Allport, 1954). The reason for this assumption is that encounters increase first-hand information about ethnic outgroup members, which increases the likelihood that ethnic stereotypes and prejudice will be dispelled. Interethnic contact may also lead to increased awareness that ethnic outgroups are as heterogeneous as the ethnic ingroup; that is, that they are not all the same (see Rydgren, 2004). Hence, the contact hypothesis implies that an increase in interethnic contact will reduce the likelihood and amount of ethnic conflict. However, an alternative, apparently conflicting, hypothesis states that 'an increase in social interaction is likely to bring about an increase of hostility' and of friendship (Coser, 1956: 63), since people who never interact will find few opportunities to engage in conflicts with one another. For reasons presented below, these two hypotheses are only apparently at odds and may, when combined, contribute to an increased understanding of ethnic relations.

Allport (1954) was well aware that certain conditions must be fulfilled – especially the acquaintance potential criterion – before increased contact between individuals from different ethnic groups leads to reduced prejudice

and xenophobia. Contact must be of such frequency, duration and closeness that it has the potential to lead to meaningful relationships between the individuals concerned, and that contacts be symmetrical such that interacting parties can be of approximately equal status in the encounter situation (see Allport, 1954; Forbes, 1997; and see Pettigrew, 1998, for additional conditions). We must therefore distinguish between casual contacts and true acquaintances (Forbes, 1997: 20). Casual contacts that cross ethnic boundaries are the kinds of contacts that cannot be avoided in ethnically heterogeneous areas, and that occur when people bump into each other over the course of everyday activity – as when people travel on the same bus or buy a pack of cigarettes in the local store. Such contacts will probably not provide relevant new information about ethnic outgroups; they do not promote increased interethnic familiarity and are unlikely to reduce prejudices and distrust. On the contrary, casual contacts are likely to increase stereotypes and prejudices by providing highly biased information about the outgroup (Rydgren, 2004; see also Forbes, 1997: 20).

To return to the terminology of network theory, we assume that ethnic heterogeneity (and thus proximity) increases the likelihood of ethnic conflict in localities in which ethnically based catnets are characterized by closure and are detached from one another. When two or more ethnic groups share space without sharing social networks, ethnic conflicts are more likely. On the other hand, we may assume that the likelihood of ethnic conflict will decrease and that tolerance will increase in situations in which ethnic catnets are firmly and relatively enduringly integrated. In other words, whereas ethnic heterogeneity in itself may heighten the risk of conflicts (Connor, 1972; Kaufman, 1996), ethnic integration, which in this article should be understood as the number of ethnically heterogeneous ties in a network (see Breiger, 1974: 184), is likely to lower intergroup hostility in heterogeneous settings.<sup>3</sup>

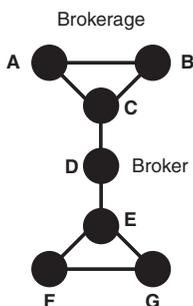
Of course, many true acquaintances originate from casual contacts, and without heterogeneity in interaction space no catnets will ever integrate. By interaction space we mean the substructures (e.g. family, workplace, neighbourhood, civil society organization) in which individuals are embedded. People spend most of their everyday lives within such substructures, and social encounters take place and relations are formed there. If there are few potential heterogeneous alters within such interaction spaces, the likelihood for encounters that cross group boundaries will be slight. The likelihood for casual contacts with outgroup members can be assumed to increase in proportion to the availability of potential heterogeneous alters, and some of these casual contacts may develop into close social relations when people are 'forced' into repeated interaction because of structural constraints in the interaction space. Hence, in

discussing heterogeneity, we must pay attention to the extent to which heterogeneity penetrates different substructures (see Blau, 1977, 1994). In localities in which heterogeneity does not penetrate substructures, interethnic contacts are unlikely to be anything but casual, whereas true acquaintance contacts are much more likely to develop in localities in which heterogeneity does penetrate substructures (Blau, 1977: 83–4; Merton, 1972: 22–5; see also Blau, 1994; Blau and Schwartz, 1984; Marsden, 1990). This implies that we cannot stop at a level that is too aggregated. We must know how much of a society's heterogeneity lies within substructures and how much lies between substructures.

Empirical research has shown that although true acquaintance contacts between ethnic groups are positively correlated with friendly interethnic attitudes, heterogeneity is positively correlated with interethnic hostility (see Forbes, 1997 for a review; for support for the contact hypothesis, see also references in Oliver and Wong, 2003: 569). Since these studies have not taken microstructures into account, we cannot know whether the effect of heterogeneity differs between localities in which ethnic catnets are integrated and localities in which they are not. However, Schwartz (1990) has shown that ethnic heterogeneity has stronger positive effects on interethnic friendship in situations in which heterogeneity penetrates deep into the substructures (in his study, into classrooms) than in situations in which it does not. This indicates that microstructures do matter.

### **Ethnic Brokerage**

The preceding discussion points to the importance of brokerage, that is, to the ways in which otherwise detached catnets are linked. The idea of brokerage is very simple, and is illustrated in Figure 1: ego D bridges the two cliques of egos A, B and C; and of egos E, F and G, respectively.



*Figure 1* Brokerage

Without the brokerage of ego D the network would disintegrate into two separate networks (see, for example, Burt, 1992, 2005).

For several reasons, ethnic catnets must be linked by a relatively large number of brokers to be effective. Positive effects resulting from true acquaintance contacts with singular individuals are not automatically generalized, and do not necessarily lead to increased tolerance and trust towards the ethnic outgroup as a whole. When people have first-hand information of only a few outgroup members, these are easily seen as exceptions and not as representative of the outgroup as a whole. Research by social psychologists has shown that true acquaintance contacts with a large number of outgroup members are needed to break down stereotypes and reduce prejudice, distrust and interethnic hostility (see Brewer, 2003: 93; Hewstone et al., 2002; Weber and Crocker, 1983).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, singular brokers do not always create a stable and durable integration of two otherwise separated catnets. If the broker disappears, for whatever reason, the network is likely to disintegrate again (see Whyte, 1993: 95). In order to create stable and durable integration, a relatively large number of brokerage relations are needed – which lowers the risk of disintegration should one or a few of them disappear.

As a consequence, what we call organizational brokers – or organizational sites for brokerage – are very important because they coordinate a large number of individual broker relations. Organizations are ethnic brokers if by their membership activity they link members of otherwise separate ethnic catnets. Organizations thus provide important interaction space, in which relations may potentially form. Feld (1981, 1982; Feld and Grofman, 2009) calls such interaction space ‘foci of activity’. A focus is defined as ‘a social, psychological, legal, or physical entity around which joint activities are organized (e.g., workplaces, voluntary organizations, hangouts, families, etc.)’ (Feld, 1981: 1016). So conceived, foci are ‘social structures which systematically constrain choices to form and maintain relationships’ (Feld, 1982: 797), and from which it is usually difficult and/or costly to disassociate oneself. Very few relationships develop from single encounters, but need the recurring interactions provided by foci to take form (Feld, 1982: 797). The effects of foci on social relations vary according to the degree of structural constraints; the greater the constraints the greater the likelihood that two persons sharing the same focus will form a social relation. That means that for ‘foci where everyone is forced to interact much and often (e.g., families), all of the individuals associated with that focus will be tied to each other; but for foci that are less constraining on interaction (e.g., neighborhoods), only a slightly higher proportion of individuals will be tied than would be tied in the general population’ (Feld, 1981: 1019). There are thus good theoretical reasons to believe that organizations will provide more important interaction

space for ethnic brokerage than neighbourhoods – although neighbourhood segregation is also a potentially important factor. This claim is supported by Pickering's (2006: 87) study of interethnic contacts in Bosnia, where respondents reported more positive interethnic interactions at their workplaces than in their neighbourhoods.

Because membership in most organizations is less voluntary than in friendship networks (Ahrne, 1994), they have a greater potential for 'fostering contacts that cross the boundaries established by the routines of everyday life' (Gould, 1995: 22). Moreover, organizations typically last a relatively long time and structure people's activities recurrently, which increases the chance that casual contacts will develop into true acquaintance contacts – which is a precondition for the emergence of social capital.

In discussing organizational brokers, we should distinguish between three main types of organizations: family and kin, workplaces and schools, and voluntary organizations (including religious organizations) (see Ahrne, 1994). Earlier research has shown that family and kin are the most important organizational foci for creating interpersonal ties, and that schools, workplaces and voluntary organizations provide the great majority of ties that are not kin (McPherson et al., 2001: 431). However, there are good reasons to assume that families are more ethnically homogeneous than the two other kinds of organizations (e.g. Marsden, 1990: 401). When kin is the dominant organizational principle, the likelihood that ethnic catnets will be brokered, and thus integrated, is low. Kin are less likely organizational brokers between ethnic catnets than are schools/workplaces and voluntary organizations. In particular, ethnically heterogeneous workplaces, as Pickering (2006: 96) notes, 'may provide opportunities for repeated interethnic interaction among colleagues of equal status, allow for norms of professionalism, and enable people to form relations of varying intimacy with colleagues of another background . . . these characteristics, and much-needed salaries make the mixed workplace the most fertile environment for promoting interethnic cooperation'. Moreover, in comparing cities and towns with similar degrees of ethnic heterogeneity, Varshney's (2002) important study of Hindu–Muslim relations in India shows that ethnic conflict is considerably less common in localities in which civil society organizations and workplaces are heterogeneous than in localities in which they are not. These findings support our argument that organizational brokers are important for preventing ethnic conflict. However, it should be emphasized that the extent to which workplaces and other organizations are effective brokers depends on the extent to which ethnic heterogeneity penetrates the substructures of the organizations (e.g. ethnically heterogeneous workplaces will be less effective brokers if their units are segregated).<sup>5</sup>

## **Interaction Space and Interethnic Social Capital in Kirkuk**

As demonstrated in the preceding section, there are good theoretical reasons to focus on interethnic brokerage and social capital as a possible path to interethnic reconciliation. But is it a possible solution in the case of Kirkuk? At least some of the informants we interviewed believed it is. According to an Arab resident, 'the different ethnic groups in Kirkuk have a great deal in common – culturally, historically, and in terms of social relations. This has prevented outright civil war in the Kirkuk region.' In his view, deepened ethnic integration at the grassroots level may potentially counteract the aspiration to ethnic (power) dominance that he believes characterizes the political elite.

The fundamental question, of course, is to what extent we find ethnically heterogeneous interaction spaces with the potential for interethnic brokerage in Kirkuk. Before we move to the discussion of interaction spaces, however, let us first look at other factors influencing interethnic brokerage. Language and norms against interactions are arguably the most important factors here. All ethnic groups in Kirkuk have their own languages.<sup>6</sup> Before the 1970s, most groups could communicate in most other languages and language was not a barrier to interethnic integration. However, this situation changed during the course of the Arabization process, because Arab settlers could speak only Arabic. Since 2003, moreover, the situation has become even more complex as the new generation of returning Kurds can speak only Kurdish. Needless to say, such language barriers impede interethnic integration.

Community norms against interactions with outgroups clearly exist at the elite level. In Kirkuk, politics is highly ethnified. Cooperation with other groups is often met with suspicion. Group members who try to cross ethnic boundaries are often stigmatized as 'false' or as traitors. For example, as a Turkmen politician who was cooperating with a Kurd party in Kirkuk said in one of the interviews: ' "You are not Turkmens, you are the spies of Kurds", other Turkmens say to us.' Because of fear of stigmatization or ostracism, many people – in particular at an elite level – chose not to have too close contacts with ethnic outgroups. At the grassroots level, it may be more common to make distinctions between different subgroups. Kurds, for instance, sometimes claim that they distinguish between 'primordial Arabs' and Arab settlers. They claim that Arabs who resided in the region before the Arabization process and the Anfal campaign are seen as good people, whereas more recently arrived Arabs are seen as problematic alien elements – and interaction is permitted only with the former category. However, our interviews also show that not all

Arabs are in agreement with this description: according to one informant, the problem he sees with Kurds and the prospect of peaceful coexistence is that 'they [Kurds] treat all Arabs as if they belonged to the Baath regime'.

When turning to interaction spaces, we can start by declaring that Kirkuk is ethnically segregated. There are a few multiethnic areas in the inner city, but many areas in the outer city are monoethnic, and many others are strongly dominated by one or another of the groups. The northern parts of the city are Kurdish, whereas the southern parts consist of Arab settlements. Many of the Arab settlers of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s live there. The two groups try to avoid going into one another's parts of the city.

Largely because of residential segregation, many other kinds of interaction spaces, or foci of activity, are ethnically homogeneous in Kirkuk as well. The various ethnic groups tend to have their own schools, mosques, coffee houses, marketplaces and other institutions. This means that ethnic homogeneity, and not heterogeneity, tends to penetrate deeply into the substructures of the city, which is a major obstacle to interethnic brokerage and the creation of interethnic social capital.

When looking more specifically at voluntary organizations, however, the overall picture is slightly more optimistic – indeed more optimistic than what would be expected from Kirkuk's particular structuring of civil society. In Kirkuk, civil society is almost synonymous with party politics since most voluntary organizations are extensions of or at least affiliated with the political parties. Neutral organizations are few. Since party politics are highly ethnicised in Kirkuk, it would seem natural to assume that this situation would spill over into civil society, making integration through interethnic brokerage provided by voluntary organizations less likely.

Table 1 lists the ethnic composition of 16 organizations affiliated with one of the two large Kurdish parties, the PUK. The data were provided by PUK's Bureau of Democracy in Kirkuk, in 2006. The reason for choosing organizations affiliated with PUK rather than other parties' organizations is principally data availability. However, we see no reason to believe that organizations affiliated with the other large Kurdish party, the KDP, would differ in any fundamental way in terms of ethnic composition. Table 1 shows that Kurds constitute a large majority (85 percent) of the members of these organizations. However, contrary to expectations – expectations based on the strong ethnic basis of party politics in Kirkuk – many organizations exhibit a certain degree of ethnic heterogeneity. In eight of the 16 organizations, at least 90 percent of the members are Kurds. Yet, in seven other organizations, including large organizations for teachers, students and workers, Kurds make up only between 45 and 75 percent

of the membership. That means that several of these organizations – comprising more than 15,000 members – constitute interaction spaces where interethnic brokerage has a real potential to evolve and eventually develop into interethnic social capital.

Turning to workplaces, data limitations only permit us to look at public workplaces in any detail; that is, the state and city administrations and state-owned companies. However, the private sector is still weakly developed in Kirkuk, consisting mostly of small family-based enterprises. For that reason we may assume that our analyses capture the important dimensions of ethnic composition in Kirkuk’s labour market.

During the past decades, different ethnic groups have explicitly tried to colonize state institutions and state-owned companies in Kirkuk in order to create power bases. By general understanding in the city, the law court

*Table 1 PUK’s Organizations and Associations in Kirkuk—Separated by Ethnicity*

Organization or association	No. of members	Kurds	Arabs	Turkmens	Christians
Teachers	1555	695 (45%)	350 (23%)	425 (27%)	85 (5%)
Students (high school)	12,800	8033 (63%)	3420 (27%)	754 (6%)	593 (5%)
Rural engineers	433	272 (63%)	81 (19%)	74 (17%)	6 (1%)
Health (employed)	1493	1013 (68%)	243 (16%)	212 (14%)	25 (2%)
Photographers	523	373 (71%)	40 (8%)	100 (19%)	10 (2%)
Ferh Centre	233	168 (72%)	49 (21%)	12 (5%)	4 (2%)
Workers	4177	3120 (75%)	596 (14%)	430 (10%)	31 (1%)
Geologists	147	125 (85%)	5 (3%)	14 (10%)	3 (2%)
Students (college and university)	6998	6412 (92%)	386 (5%)	143 (2%)	57 (1%)
Artists	171	157 (92%)	3 (2%)	6 (3%)	5 (3%)
Roj Handicap Centre	1150	1086 (94%)	34 (3%)	26 (2%)	4 (–)
Technicians	908	857 (94%)	23 (3%)	23 (3%)	5 (1%)
Chemists and physicists	150	143 (95%)	2 (1%)	4 (3%)	1 (1%)
Young people (Azadi Lawan)	9872	9472 (96%)	200 (2%)	150 (2%)	50 (0.5%)
63+ (retired persons)	2000	1950 (97%)	20 (1%)	30 (2%)	–
Farmers	16,596	16,507 (99%)	81 (0.5%)	8 (–)	–
Total	59,206	50,383 (85%)	5533 (9%)	2411 (4%)	879 (1.5%)

Source: PUK’s Bureau of Democracy, Kirkuk, 2006.

is dominated by Arabs, the police force is dominated by Kurds and the educational system by Turkmen. Taking this practice into account, we would expect public workplaces in Kirkuk to be ethnically rather homogeneous. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, however, this is not actually the case.

Table 2 lists public workplaces with more than 200 employees and Table 3 public workplaces with fewer than 200 employees.<sup>7</sup> All together, the tables list 60 workplaces. Although the composition of the workplaces is not representative of the population of Kirkuk – Arabs are generally over-represented (approximately 55 percent of employees), and Kurds are rather strongly underrepresented (11 percent of employees) – most public workplaces are ethnically heterogeneous. Notable exceptions are the huge Nord Oil Company, in which only 45 of 10,415 employees are Kurds (Arabs make up the large majority, with 8740 employees). Even more generally, the Kurds are a rather minor presence in oil-related workplaces. Yet, despite clear signs of an ethnically segmented labour market, many public workplaces are ethnically heterogeneous, and thus constitute potential interaction space for ethnic brokerage – and hence for the creation of interethnic social capital. It should also be emphasized that small workplaces are more ethnically heterogeneous than large ones. This is of importance because small workplaces constitute more structurally constrained interaction spaces, making it more likely that shared foci of activity will lead to social interaction. For the larger workplaces, we would need data on the ethnic composition of subunits in order to draw clear conclusions about the likelihood of interethnic brokerage. Such data are lacking. Nonetheless, we may safely conclude that a substantial proportion of public workplaces constitute heterogeneous interaction spaces with a substantial potential to create interethnic brokerage and interethnic social capital.

## **Conclusion**

Since the collapse of the Baath regime in 2003, ethnic relations in Kirkuk have been uncooperative and violent, a fact that not only causes human suffering but also obstructs democratization processes in the region. At the surface level, it is difficult to imagine interethnic reconciliation. The main conflict in the city, between Kurds and (settled) Arabs goes back several decades, and many people share memories of recent outrages committed by – or associated with – ethnic outgroups. However, in this article we argue that the situation is not necessarily that hopeless. Although ethnic groups in Kirkuk are largely separated by mutual distrust, they do not constitute entirely decoupled catnets. Despite residential segregation, there exists considerable room for social meetings across

**Table 2** Ethnic Composition of State Institutions and State-Owned Companies, with More than 200 Employees, Kirkuk (2006)

Public employer	No. of employees	Kurds	Arabs	Turkmen	Christians	Employer
Oil Nord Company	10,415	45 (0.5%)	7840 (75%)	2200 (21%)	330 (3%)	A
Gasol Nord Company	1618	119 (7%)	670 (41%)	759 (47%)	70 (4%)	K
Administration of well drilling	1373	25 (2%)	1,017 (74%)	292 (21%)	39 (3%)	T
Administration of electricity	885	55 (6%)	470 (53%)	350 (40%)	10 (1%)	T
Oil products	801	128 (16%)	521 (65%)	126 (16%)	26 (3%)	A
Kirkuk Hospital	761	290 (38%)	210 (28%)	238 (31%)	23 (3%)	T
Azadi Hospital	624	294 (47%)	186 (30%)	122 (20%)	22 (4%)	K
Cement company	591	218 (37%)	170 (29%)	189 (32%)	14 (2%)	K
City administration	519	122 (24%)	276 (53%)	113 (22%)	8 (2%)	K
Administration of communication	503	35 (7%)	310 (62%)	150 (30%)	8 (2%)	T
Kirkuk water	452	59 (13%)	212 (47%)	176 (39%)	5 (1%)	K
Administration of health	428	104 (24%)	114 (27%)	196 (46%)	14 (3%)	A
Administration of agriculture	355	104 (29%)	102 (28%)	140 (39%)	9 (3%)	K
Dubz electricity production	320	54 (17%)	207 (65%)	45 (14%)	14 (4%)	K
Water supply	307	137 (45%)	67 (22%)	83 (27%)	20 (7%)	K
Civil defence	276	20 (7%)	193 (70%)	62 (22%)	1 (-)	K
Institute of Technology	273	64 (23%)	44 (16%)	156 (57%)	9 (3%)	K
Hamurabi Entrepreneurs	268	170 (63%)	46 (17%)	50 (19%)	2 (1%)	K
Children's Hospital	263	111 (42%)	54 (21%)	93 (35%)	5 (2%)	A
Administration of provisions	248	49 (20%)	108 (44%)	80 (32%)	11 (4%)	K
Power station	228	30 (13%)	98 (43%)	100 (44%)	-	T
Taze Northwest Nights	222	12 (5%)	53 (24%)	150 (68%)	7 (3%)	T
Administration of education	213	18 (8%)	54 (25%)	137 (64%)	4 (2%)	T
Total	21,943	2263 (10%)	13,022 (59%)	6007 (27%)	651 (3%)	

**Table 3** Ethnic Composition in State Institutions and State-Owned Companies, with Fewer than 200 Employees, Kirkuk (2006)

Public employer	No. of employees	Kurds	Arabs	Turkmen	Christians	Employer
Court	186	51 (27%)	44 (24%)	86 (46%)	5 (3%)	A
Grain warehouse	183	5 (3%)	134 (73%)	40 (22%)	4 (2%)	K
Country district administration	149	22 (15%)	70 (47%)	51 (34%)	6 (4%)	A
Central business	116	19 (16%)	57 (49%)	34 (29%)	6 (5%)	K
Veterinary hospital	100	17 (17%)	33 (33%)	44 (44%)	6 (6%)	T
Institute of Teaching	99	17 (17%)	28 (28%)	42 (42%)	12 (12%)	K
Kirkuk drainage	93	25 (27%)	48 (52%)	18 (19%)	2 (2%)	K
Central Taamim market	82	26 (32%)	27 (33%)	21 (26%)	8 (10%)	K
Institute of Pedagogy	79	6 (8%)	55 (70%)	18 (23%)	-	K
University Board	78	26 (33%)	35 (45%)	17 (22%)	-	T
Building materials company	75	11 (15%)	49 (65%)	13 (17%)	2 (3%)	K
Occupational therapy	71	17 (24%)	14 (20%)	37 (52%)	3 (4%)	A
Social insurance	69	13 (19%)	16 (23%)	37 (54%)	3 (4%)	K
Roads and bridges	66	32 (48%)	5 (8%)	24 (36%)	5 (8%)	K
City registration	64	7 (11%)	43 (67%)	14 (22%)	-	A
Grain company	62	6 (10%)	30 (48%)	25 (40%)	1 (2%)	K
North customs control	60	3 (5%)	2 (3%)	53 (88%)	2 (3%)	T
City Board of Health and Welfare	60	16 (27%)	15 (25%)	26 (43%)	3 (5%)	A
School inspection	58	2 (3%)	44 (76%)	11 (19%)	1 (2%)	A
Local tax office (district 1)	55	7 (13%)	24 (44%)	18 (33%)	6 (11%)	A
Municipal services	52	11 (21%)	15 (29%)	26 (50%)	-	K
Carpet factory	52	19 (37%)	4 (8%)	27 (52%)	2 (4%)	A
Local tax office (district 2)	41	3 (7%)	23 (56%)	14 (34%)	1 (2%)	A
Assessment authority	37	11 (30%)	8 (22%)	14 (38%)	4 (11%)	A
Law Institute (employed)	35	10 (29%)	10 (29%)	15 (43%)	-	T
Trade and finance monitoring	30	16 (53%)	5 (17%)	9 (30%)	-	K
Institute of Nursing	30	5 (17%)	11 (37%)	14 (47%)	-	K
Special inspection	29	3 (10%)	16 (55%)	9 (31%)	1 (3%)	T

Table 3 (Continued)

Public employer	No. of employees	Kurds	Arabs	Turkmen	Christians	Employer
Administration of religious buildings	23	5 (22%)	6 (26%)	12 (52%)	-	K
Institute of Administration	22	11 (50%)	3 (14%)	7 (32%)	1 (5%)	T
Law Institute (teachers)	22	1 (5%)	17 (77%)	4 (18%)	-	T
Community planning	20	2 (10%)	4 (20%)	13 (65%)	1 (5%)	A
Institute of Science (employed)	18	2 (11%)	7 (39%)	9 (50%)	-	T
Vocational training	15	5 (33%)	3 (20%)	6 (40%)	1 (7%)	K
Cigarette warehouse	15	12 (80%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	A
City library	12	4 (33%)	5 (42%)	1 (8%)	2 (17%)	T
Institute of Science (teachers)	3	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	-	T
Total	2261	449 (20%)	912 (40%)	811 (36%)	89 (4%)	
Total: small + large	24,204	2,712 (11%)	13,934 (58%)	6818 (28%)	740 (3%)	

ethnic boundaries. Workplaces and, to some extent, voluntary organizations provide ethnically heterogeneous interaction spaces, or foci of activity, where interethnic brokerage may evolve. Many of these organizations are structurally constrained, making it likely that people will establish contacts with others sharing the same interaction space. Since they meet the same people on a regular basis in those foci, casual contacts have a potential to develop into true acquaintance contacts and, thus, into interethnic social capital.

As in all studies, the analysis in this article is constrained by the available data. We rely on qualitative interview data and ecological data on ethnic composition in civil society organizations and workplaces. These kinds of data take us a long way, by providing important insights into the interaction spaces in which social encounters take place. To expose the hypotheses formulated in this article for a rigorous test in future research, however, we would need to collect ego-network data, that is, individual-level data on the composition of people's social contacts. This is a highly time consuming endeavour, which given the scarce resources at our disposal was impossible for us to do in this particular study. Yet, we hope that this article has demonstrated the usefulness of a social network perspective to ethnic conflict and conflict resolution, and that it will inspire future research to continue along these lines.

In addition, in future research we need to more systematically compare the results from this study with relevant comparative cases, both within Iraq and cross-nationally. It should be emphasized, however, that data on the ethnic composition of civil society organizations and workplaces are not always readily available. In Erbil, for instance, we were not able to obtain such information because ethnic membership was not registered – with the motivation that 'we are all Erbilians'. This example suggests a potential methodological problem: if data on the ethnic composition of organizations are available primarily in setting where ethnic relations are problematic, unbiased comparisons may be difficult to arrive at in future research.

Finally, in focusing on interethnic social capital and brokerage we have in this article largely bracketed other factors of potential importance for interethnic conflict. This was a necessary choice given the limited space permitted by the journal for this article. Stepping outside the theoretical framework of this article, however, we can easily identify factors working against reconciliation. For one thing, local elites, neighbouring countries, as well as diaspora groups, have vested interests in fomenting ethnic mobilization in the area in order to secure control over scarce resources. Future research would need to take these and similar factors into account, and demonstrate empirically to what extent – and in which situations and

social settings – interethnic social capital is strong enough to counterbalance conflict-creating factors.

## Notes

1. The second author was born in northern Iraq (from which he emigrated at the age of 25), which was a prerequisite to the empirical part of this study. Without a deep knowledge of the community, and without the required language skills, it would not have been possible.
2. If we look at Iraq as a whole, Arabs are the dominant group, with about 75 percent of the population (55–60 percent Shia and 15–20 percent Sunni). Kurds make up about 19–23 percent of the population, whereas the share of Turkmens is 2–3 percent and Christians 1–2 percent (for assessments, see Statistics Iraq, census 1947, 1957, 1965, 1970, 1977, 1987; see also Goran, 2002; JHIC, 2004; McDowall, 1997: 380; Marr, 2004: 16–17; Middle East Watch, 1993; Minahan, 2002; Talib, 2005).
3. The reason for this assumption is that such network ties reduce the information asymmetry between ingroup and outgroup, which undermines the power of stereotypes and prejudice and increases bilateral trust (see Hechter et al., 1982: 424). This is because trust is based on predictions about the future based on a person's actions in the past. Since knowledge about individuals' past behaviour is structured by a person's network – that is, one knows more about people one interacts with or who interact with people one knows – and as ego-networks tend towards ethnic homophily, most people have greater knowledge about co-ethnics than about individuals belonging to other ethnic groups. Intragroup trust thus tends to be more common than intergroup trust. If all you know about the person facing you is that he or she belongs to an ethnic outgroup, you are unable to predict his or her future from past behaviour. Instead, stereotypes are likely to become mobilized as proxies (see Fearon and Laitin, 1996: 719).
4. Indeed, situations in which there are only a few true interpersonal acquaintance contacts that cross ethnic group boundaries may even increase interethnic hostility at a group level, even as the persons involved become more tolerant. This is in particular likely to happen in areas in which ethnic catnets have been effectively detached earlier, where we might find a risk of reaction and radicalization among those believing in the virtue of not interacting with the outgroup. Persons embedded in ethnic catnets that are characterized by strong closure can also be expected to react more strongly against defection from consensus beliefs and practices, and against deviant behaviour that threatens the unity of the ingroup (see Forbes, 1997: 167).
5. Ethnically heterogeneous organizations are also important because they may provide alternative social identities and loyalties and channel alternative collective interests. People belonging to different ethnic groups may thus share interests or social identities as, for example, automobile workers, classmates, or football players, which are likely to reduce the material and symbolic reasons

to get involved in interethnic conflicts. On the other hand, we may assume that ethnic conflicts will be more common in localities where ethnic group boundaries overlap with organizational belonging and social categorization, in particular when ethnic categorization overlaps with economic and social stratification (see Horowitz, 1985). In such situations, several identities and interests combine, and non-ethnic conflicts may take on ethnic forms.

6. In addition to language, clothes and skin colour are among the most visible signs of differences between ethnic groups. There are no significant differences in skin colour between Kurds and Arabs. All groups have traditional folk costumes, but most people usually wear non-ethnic cloths. Yet, traditional clothing is more common in Kirkuk than in other cities in northern Iraq (e.g. Erbil), especially among Arab settlers.
7. It should be noted that the police force is excluded from the tables.

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