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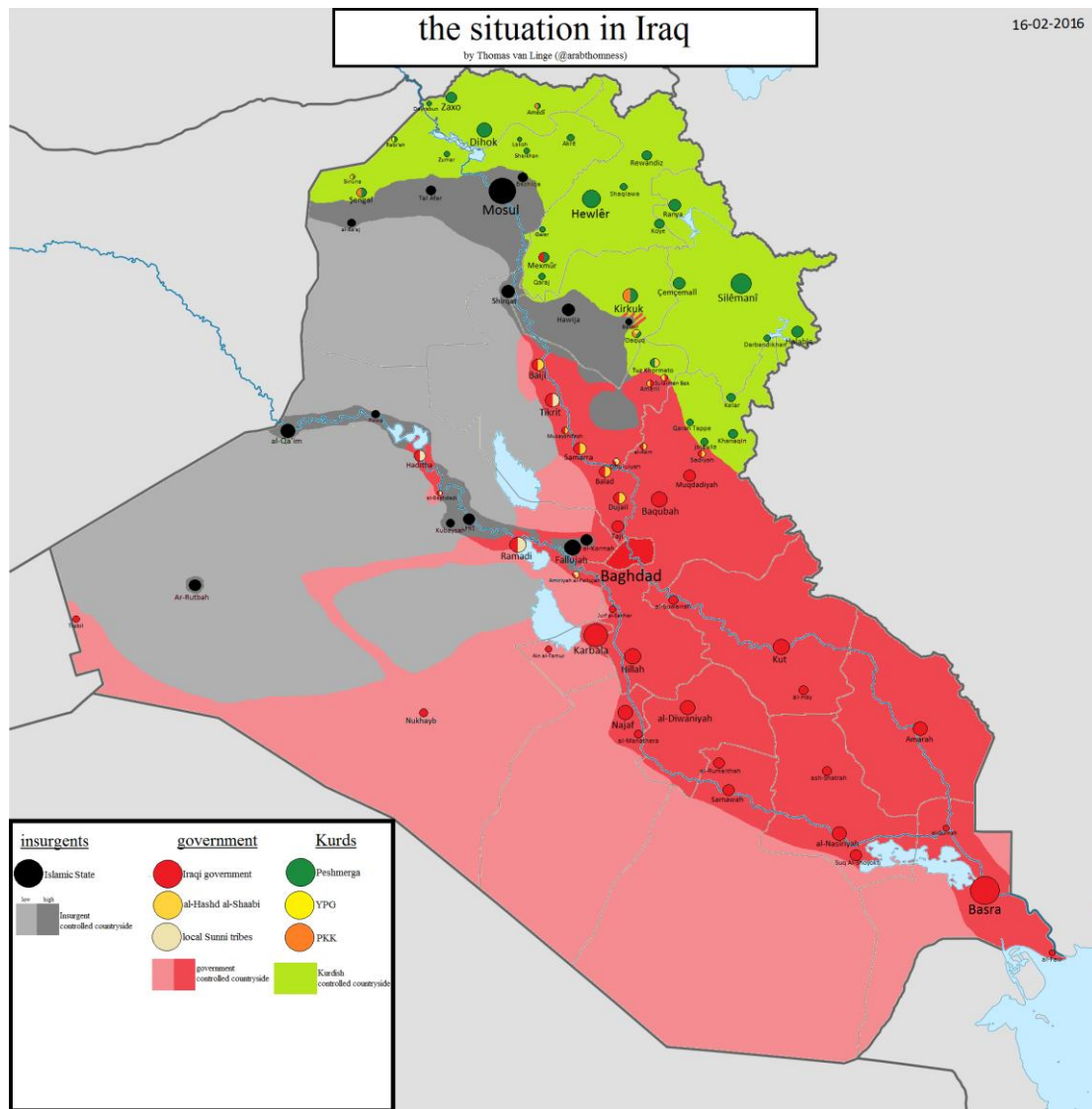
The Kurdistan Regional Government between the Islamic State and Shi'i Militias

Seth J. Frantzman

Since August 2014 the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been engaged in a protracted war with the Islamic State (IS), whose brutality has captured the world's attention. Iraqi Kurdistan has become one of the few relatively stable spots in the Middle East. However the long war that has unified its feuding factions has postponed other conflicts, namely with Iraq's central government in Baghdad over the KRG's demand for greater autonomy, the right to sell its oil, the Kurds' ultimate desire for independence, and how the KRG fits into the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This article is based on two trips to Kurdistan, in June and December of 2015, including multiple visits to the frontlines and interviews with high level officials and members of the peshmerga – the KRG's armed forces – as well as civilians.

More than 1,000 kilometers of frontline facing the IS runs from southwest of Kirkuk to the border of Syria west of Shingal (Sinjar mountain). The peshmerga have sustained approximately 1,500 killed in the war as of February 2016.¹ As the war approaches its second anniversary, the frontlines have become more stationary. Iraqi Kurdish forces took back the city of Shingal in November and also small areas around Kirkuk. But large areas of the frontline, from Makhmur to the north around Mosul, remained mostly static.

¹ Sardar Sattar, "[New figures show Peshmerga casualties](#)," *Bas News*, January 12, 2016.



Source: Thomas van Linge (@arabthomness)

What strikes anyone who visits these frontlines is that there seems little impetus to move forward. In conversations with commanders from Kirkuk to Shingal, it was clear this was a result of orders and pragmatic decision making at the highest levels. On the battlefield, there is close coordination with coalition aircraft and American special forces, and limited special forces raids by Kurds, usually targeting some objective such as freeing a kidnapped person,² or killing an IS member.

Kurdish forces on the frontlines employ mostly World War I style tactics. When a new line is carved out they use bulldozers to erect earthen trenches above the ground and fortify parapets with sandbags. Sleeping quarters will be established in the position and whatever heavier weapons available, usually a .50 DShK (a

² Adam Withnall, "[Swedish 16 year old rescued from ISIS](#)," *The Independent*, February 23, 2016; Fazel Hawramy, "[Kurdish fighters say US special forces have been fighting ISIS for months](#)," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2015.

Soviet-era, mounted heavy infantry machine gun), will be positioned at a strong point. Sometimes mortars will be placed behind the line. The KRG has no shortage of manpower, with some 200,000 fighters, but the peshmerga are often not being paid on time. Many speak of going months without payment due to an ongoing budget crisis in Erbil.³ The average salary of peshmerga fighters tends to be around 500,000 Iraqi dinars a month, about \$500.⁴

But the budget crisis alone doesn't explain the lack of initiative by frontline commanders. There is a classic misunderstanding about the KRG's goals in this war and the nature of this conflict. When the IS first arrived in force in Iraq in June of 2014, there was a debate among leaders of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) PUK, the two major political parties in Kurdistan. According to a leading PUK source, the PUK supported a forward policy against the IS. This claim may simply be an attempt to score political points after the fact.⁵ In general the PUK has been closer to the Iraqi central government; indeed, Jalal Talabani the leader of the PUK was also president of Iraq from 2005 to 2014. Instead of striking at the KRG, some Kurds told me in interviews that the hope was that the IS would ignore Kurdistan and move south towards Baghdad. With the chaos unleashed by then prime minister Nuri al-Maliki and the withdrawal and disintegration of the army from cities in northern Iraq in June, and abandonment of Mosul to the IS in June 2014, the KRG leadership was reticent to trust Baghdad.⁶ When Mosul fell to the IS some 200,000 refugees poured into Kurdistan, increasing a refugee flow that would drive more than one and a half million people into the KRG.⁷

The surprise IS offensive against Kurdish forces on August 3, 2014 has been described as a "deep wound in the Kurdish nation" by KRG Prime Minister

³ Tom Mackenzie, "[The Kurds trying to beat Islamic State have lots of other problems,](#)" *Bloomberg*, December 7, 2015.

⁴ Brenda Stoter, "[Kurdish fighters struggle to pay bills,](#)" *Al-Monitor*, August 24, 2015.

⁵ Lahur Talabani, nephew of the former President of Iraq, Kurdish intelligence official, and a PUK member, told interviewers in June of 2014 that there was a plot by the IS to take over northern Iraq, which was being ignored by Western intelligence agencies, lending some credence to the PUK claim that it was more concerned about the IS. See, for example: Simon Tomlinson, "[US secretary of state pledges intense, sustained and effective support for Iraq,](#)" *Daily Mail*, June 23, 2014; Talabani himself has been accused of misleading statements, see "[Kurdistan Regional Security Council responds,](#)" November 6, 2015.

⁶ Just days before the IS launched its attack on Sinjar, the Iraqi government was demanding that the Peshmerga "return weapons" the Iraqi army had abandoned when it withdrew from northern Iraq fleeing ISIS. See: "[President must demand peshmerga return weapons,](#)" *Middle East Monitor*, August 1, 2014.

⁷ The fall of the Mosul and the areas around it were estimated to have sent displaced approximately half a million people, many of them towards the KRG. Many Sunnis preferred the KRG to living under Shi'i rule in Baghdad. See: Martin Chulov, "[Iraq army capitulates to the IS militants in four northern cities,](#)" *The Guardian*, June 12, 2014.

Nechirvan Barzani.⁸ This led to a policy to retake those areas captured by the IS and then to expand into those areas that the KRG had disputed with Baghdad before 2014. Privately the peshmerga express no interest in continuing to push into areas dominated by Arab villages, and which are controlled by the IS. “Why should we die for Arabs,” is a common refrain. In addition, the Kurds are under extreme scrutiny by the international community, accused of “ethnic cleansing” of Arab villages in disputed areas they did capture.⁹ Kurdish leaders also don’t want to assume responsibility for more areas dominated by Arabs and threaten the demographic balance of the KRG, which already is hosting more than a million Arab refugees (the other refugees consist of 300,000 Yazidis and 100,000 or more Assyrian Christians, as well as Kurdish refugees).

The debate in the KRG hinges on making sure that when the long-delayed Iraqi government-led operation to recapture Mosul is launched that the Kurds are not presented with a scenario in which they are squeezed between Shi’i forces on two sides: with Iraq’s Iranian-backed Shi’i militias controlling Mosul on the KRG’s western flank and Iran’s forces on its eastern border. At the same time the KRG leadership doesn’t want Mosul to be a safe-haven for jihadists and extremists, as both Kirkuk and Mosul were before 2014. They want a buffer zone between the KRG and what some are calling “Sunnistan” and “Shiastan.”¹⁰ As long as this situation remains the same, the KRG’s frontline positions will remain static.

Concerns over Iranian power

At the same time that the KRG is fighting the IS, it increasingly has an eye on Iranian meddling in the region.¹¹ After fighting broke out in Tuz Khurmato in November¹² between Kurds and Shi’i Turkmen, there was commentary in the Kurdish media about the “menace of Shia militia.”¹³ Some wondered whether a “civil war” would break out. Images of Iraqi flags burning appeared on Kurdish social media and there was anger in Kurdish regions. The Kurdish political leaders such as Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani have long worried about

⁸ “Shingal deep wound in Kurdish nation,” *Rudaw*, August 8, 2015; See, also decision to investigate Peshmerga commanders for abandoning Shingal: [“Disciplinary action possible for some peshmerga officers,”](#) *Rudaw*, August 16, 2014.

⁹ [“Northern Iraq: Satellite images back up evidence of deliberate mass destruction in peshmerga dominated villages,”](#) *Amnesty International*, January 20, 2016.

¹⁰ The issue of supporting Sunni Arabs in Iraq by Kurdish politicians has come up several times in the last year, see for instance, [“Kurdish Deputy Prime Minister urges US to remain engaged in Iraq,”](#) *PBS*, December 10, 2014; and [“Iraq Kurd official urges regional role for Iraq Sunnis,”](#) *Al-Arabiya*, 10 December 2014.

¹¹ Seth J. Frantzman, [“Fighting ISIS with an eye on Iran,”](#) December 20, 2015.

¹² Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, [“Tensions between Kurds and Shiites could spark civil war,”](#) *NOW Media*, November 23, 2015.

¹³ Paul Iddon, [“The menace of Shia militia to Kurds and Iraq itself,”](#) *Rudaw*, November 30, 2015.

unregulated Shi'i militias.¹⁴ The general feeling is that Kurdish-Shi'i clashes will only get worse.¹⁵

High level KDP officials have been intimating to the media in recent months that they are fearful of the power of these Shi'i militias, which are also known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) (*Hashd al-Sh'abi*). The area where these Shi'i forces and Kurdish forces are positioned next to each other is south of Kirkuk.¹⁶ However as the war against the IS progresses, there are disputes about which areas the Shi'i militias and Iraqi Security Forces will operate in, and how close they will be allowed to get to the heartland of the KRG's territory.

The major issue at present is which forces will take part in the liberation of Mosul.¹⁷ This operation has been planned since early 2015, but it has taken a back seat to Iraq's re-conquest of the Sunni triangle north of Baghdad and Ramadi. The KRG has allowed a small Turkish training base for Sunni Arab militias in Bashiqa-Zilikan, near Dohuk. When this training became public knowledge, the Iraqi central government sought to have the Turks removed. This exposed tensions between Turkey and Baghdad over Ankara's support for the KRG and its training of a Sunni Arab militia called *Hashd al-Watani* run by the pre-IS governor of Mosul, Atheel al-Nujaifi. Sunni Arabs in Mosul do not want Shi'i militias involved in an operation to re-take the city, according to Turkish media.¹⁸

The contretemps over Mosul are part of broader sense in the KRG that Iran is infiltrating Iraq, and that the rising power of Iran in the wake of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal may have adverse effects for the KRG. In general, the ruling KDP party feels that Iran has influence over its rival parties, including the PUK and *Gorran* ("Change"). The KDP also believes that Iran, through its support for Bashar al-Asad and coordination with Russia in Syria, has influence over the Kurdish groups (the YPG and PKK) fighting in Syria and Turkey, respectively. Iran for its part is concerned that Iranian Kurdish armed groups, such as Hussein Yazdanpanah's Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK), are fighting alongside the peshmerga in Iraq, and that KDP-I, an Iranian branch of the KDP, operates in the KRG's territory.

¹⁴ Amberin Zaman, "[PM Barzani: Kurdish militias should be regulated](#)," *Al-Monitor*, March 24, 2015.

¹⁵ Martin Chulov, "[Kurds and Shia face off over Kirkuk in vacuum left by Iraqi army](#)," *The Guardian*, January 22, 2016.

¹⁶ Seth J. Frantzman, "Fighting ISIS with an eye on Iran," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 20, 2015.

¹⁷ Seth J. Frantzman, "[The dangerous limits of Iraq's anti-ISIS campaign](#)," *The National Interest*, February 3, 2016.

¹⁸ Ali Jawwad and Ali Shikho, "Iraqi Sunnis reject Shia role in planned Mosul offensive," *AA Media*, February 21, 2016.

The feeling is that when the war with the IS is over, there may be trouble with Iran and its backing of the Baghdad government and Shi'i militias. For that reason, the KRG wants to be careful with how Mosul is liberated from the IS, in order to ensure that there will be a Sunni Arab counterweight to Iran. Kurds are almost all Sunni, a fact that should not be forgotten. Some Kurds believe a close alliance with Turkey and Saudi Arabia is necessary to secure the KRG's independence and balance Iranian power and influence.¹⁹ Recent high level visits by KRG officials to Turkey and Saudi Arabia underscore this point.²⁰ The KRG, which previously was seen as a threat to Arab hegemony, and often derided as a "new Israel" or "dagger pointed at the Arab world," is now winning friends among Sunni Arabs, including the Gulf States that recently reduced visa restrictions on travelers from Iraqi Kurdistan (but not the rest of Iraq). These Sunni Gulf States, fighting a war in Yemen and angry with Hizballah's power in Lebanon, see Iraq and Syria as lost to Iranian influence. In the eyes of the Gulf States, the KRG presents a Sunni shield against the Iranian regime. How exactly the Kurdish leadership will navigate the broader rivalry between Iran and the Sunni States of the region, remains to be seen.

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¹⁹ Seth J. Frantzman, "[2016: The year Kurdistan finally breaks with Iraq?](#)," *The National Interest*, February 26, 2016.

²⁰ "[Kurdistan welcomes Saudi envoy](#)," *Rudaw*, February 28, 2016.