

# Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict

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## *Executive Summary*

Loosely organised in an ad hoc coalition, Western countries rushed military aid to Iraqi Kurds in the face of a lightning assault by the Islamic State (IS) in June 2014. They failed, however, to develop a strategy for dealing with the consequences of arming non-state actors in Iraq, a country whose unity they profess to support. Rather than forging a strong, unified military response to the IS threat, building up Kurdish forces accelerated the Kurdish polity's fragmentation, increased tensions between these forces and non-Kurds in disputed areas and strengthened Iraq's centrifugal forces. Delivered this way, military assistance risks prolonging the conflict with IS, worsening other longstanding, unresolved conflicts and creating new ones. A new approach is called for that revives and builds on past efforts to transform Kurdish forces into a professional institution.

Despite Western concerns, doing so is unlikely to enhance chances of Kurdish independence. Kurdish parties have become even more dependent, not less, on their alliances with Turkey and Iran since IS's arrival. Turkey, the country with the ability to give the Kurds the independent revenue stream from oil sales they would need to move effectively toward independence, has given no indication it is prepared to do so and every indication it wishes to preserve Iraq's unity. Western states' current practice of channelling weapons to the Kurds via Baghdad and encouraging the two sides to resolve their outstanding disputes over oil exports and revenues also will keep the Kurdish region inside Iraq. Indeed, the development of a professional Kurdish military force is a necessary condition for effective coordination with the Baghdad government in joint operations against IS and in preparing a post-IS political plan.

Coalition military aid is premised on a belief that giving weapons and training to Kurdish forces, known as peshmergas, will in itself improve their performance against IS, a notion Kurdish leaders were quick to propagate. But the evolving state of Iraqi Kurdish politics makes for a rather more ambiguous picture: the dominant, rival parties, the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), have been moving away from a strategic framework agreement that had stabilised their relationship after a period of conflict and allowed them to present a unified front to the central government as well as neighbouring Iran and Turkey. Moreover, their historic leaders, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, are on the political wane, triggering an intra-elite power struggle.

This is, therefore, a particularly fragile moment. Rather than shore up Kurdish unity and institutions, the latest iteration of the "war on terror" is igniting old and new internecine tensions and undermining whatever progress has been achieved in turning the peshmergas into a professional, apolitical military force responding to a single chain of command. In doing so, it is also paving the way for renewed foreign involvement in Kurdish affairs, notably by Iran. And it is encouraging Kurdish land grabs and a rush on resources in territories they claim as part of their autonomous region, further complicating their rapport with Sunni Arab neighbours and the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

On the face of it, after an initial delivery directly to the KDP in August 2014, Western military aid has been provided to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), with prior approval from Baghdad. In practice, however, weapon deliveries from a

variety of donors are unilateral, mostly uncoordinated and come without strings regarding their distribution and use on the front lines. As a result, they have disproportionately benefited the KDP, which is dominant in Erbil, the region's capital, and thus have pushed the PUK into greater reliance on Iranian military assistance and an alliance with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Kurdish rebel organisation in Turkey. In this context, the KDP and PUK, formal partners in a unity government, have shown little inclination to distribute roles or mount joint operations, preferring competition over coordination. As a result, Kurdish forces have been less effective in fighting IS than they could have been.

While coalition members have tied military assistance to acceptance of the central government's sovereign role in its distribution, they are jeopardising their stated interest in preserving Iraq's unity. Indeed, by upsetting the fragile equilibrium among Kurds, between Kurds and Sunni Arabs and between the Kurds and the governments in Baghdad, Tehran and Ankara, they risk weakening it; moreover, by empowering Kurdish party-based forces, they hasten the state's de-institutionalisation and invite external interference. Given how fragile and fragmented Iraq has become, one can only wonder how pouring more arms into it could have any chance of making it stronger.

Coalition members, working in coordination, need instead to persuade Kurdish parties to complete the reunification of their parallel military, security and intelligence agencies within a single, non-partisan structure by empowering the KDP-PUK joint brigades and the peshmergas' most professional elements; to cooperate with non-Kurdish actors in the disputed territories; and to develop a post-IS plan with the central government that cements security cooperation in these territories and moves forward the process of resolving their status through negotiation.

The KRG leadership is overdue in putting its own house in order. It may revel in momentary support for its fight against IS, but old problems will soon return, arguably posing a far more serious threat to the region's stability than IS by itself could ever represent.

## *Recommendations*

### **To the governments of the U.S. and other coalition members:**

1. Establish a coalition central command through which to channel military aid to Iraqi Kurds and charge it with:
  - a) coordinating weapons deliveries to, and training of, Kurdish peshmerga forces by coalition members;
  - b) ensuring that weapons are exclusively distributed to, and used by, KDP-PUK joint brigades;
  - c) engaging the peshmerga affairs minister and KDP-PUK joint-brigade commanders on military tactics and the use of coalition-supplied weapons; and
  - d) conditioning military support on coordination of anti-IS operations with non-Kurdish actors in the disputed territories and the Abadi government, and drafting with the Abadi government a post-IS plan that foresees the reinstatement of local institutions and security forces in these areas.

### **To the peshmerga affairs minister and the KDP and PUK leaderships:**

2. Establish a joint operations room bringing together the minister, KDP-PUK joint-brigade commanders and relevant security agencies to draft a Kurdish national security strategy that would ease delivery of coalition military aid.
3. Continue to integrate paramilitary forces into KDP-PUK joint brigades that respond to a single chain of command and refrain from deploying irregular forces against IS.
4. Improve coordination with the Abadi government and Iraqi army on the provision of weapons and training to the KRG.
5. Complete integration of the KDP and PUK military, security and intelligence services into the KRG.

### **To the Kurdistan region presidency:**

6. Encourage consolidation of KRG institutions in general and the peshmerga affairs ministry in particular and their emancipation from partisan control.
7. Engage the Abadi government on the future of the disputed territories and local institutions and refrain from calls for Kurdish independence.
8. Redouble efforts to coordinate KRG regional security operations with PKK and PKK-allied forces.

### **To the government of Iraq:**

9. Develop a joint security strategy with the KRG to counter IS, and work with the KRG to settle outstanding disputes over oil exports and budget allocations.

### **To the governments of Turkey and Iran:**

10. Support coalition efforts toward institutionalising peshmerga forces and reinforcing their cooperation with the central government.

**Baghdad/Erbil/Brussels, 12 May 2015**

# Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict

## I. Introduction

To counter the rise of the Islamic State (IS)<sup>1</sup> in northern Iraq, the country's foremost Kurdish political factions, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), mobilised military support from a 60-nation coalition formed to fight the jihadi threat. Its aid is being delivered as a stopgap, with no overarching strategy. The risk is that while it may help push IS back, it could also strengthen the Kurds' hold over hydrocarbon-rich disputed territories they have long claimed, inflaming a volatile local situation;<sup>2</sup> widen a marked intra-Kurdish rift that harms their fight against IS and invites regional interference; and exacerbate tensions between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad that could threaten the unity of state and country.<sup>3</sup>

IS first asserted itself in Iraq in early 2014, then expanded its territorial hold throughout predominantly Sunni Arab-populated areas. On 5 January, militants entered the city of Falluja in Anbar governorate.<sup>4</sup> Four months later, moving with lightning speed from across the Syrian border, the group captured Mosul, Tikrit and many of the surrounding areas, as Iraqi army units melted away.<sup>5</sup> By July, Iraq's map had become dramatically fragmented: the central government had lost control over much of the country, save the capital and the south; IS ruled Sunni Arab-populated areas in central and north-western Iraq; while the Kurdish regional guard force (peshmergas) capitalised on the army's disintegration to seize some of the disputed territories, including the city of Kirkuk.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> IS is also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, its acronym ISIL, its variant ISIS or its Arabic acronym Daesh. The latter is the acronym for Dawlat al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham. It is often referred to in the Arab world as Tanzeem al-Dawla ("the State Organisation", or, more freely, "the organisation known as the state"), to suggest it is a group, not a state.

<sup>2</sup> The Iraqi constitution defines the disputed territories indirectly by specifying the area of the KRG's jurisdiction. The interim constitution, the 2004 Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), recognised in Article 53(A) the KRG only in territories it administered until the 2003 U.S. invasion. The 2005 permanent constitution absorbed Article 53(A), so the KRG's formal jurisdiction remains as it was before the 2003 war, strictly within the Kurdistan region. Both TAL Article 58 and constitution Article 140 refer to "disputed territories" but do not define or name these, except Kirkuk. Based on Article 53(A), these territories lie outside the area controlled by the KRG before 19 March 2003, thus outside what is known as the Green Line. The latter, therefore, remains the region's de jure boundary until the disputed territories' legal status is changed. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°88, *Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble over the Trigger Line*, 8 July 2009, Chapter IV, Section A on the "disappearing" Green Line. See map in Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> On the progressive hollowing out of the Iraqi state, see also Crisis Group Statement, "Defeating the Iraqi State: One Victory at a Time", 26 March 2015.

<sup>4</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report, N°150, *Falluja's Faustian Bargain*, 28 April 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Briefing, N°38, *Iraq's Jihadi Jack-in-the-Box*, 20 June 2014. For a map of IS expansion across the Syria-Iraq border, see *The New York Times*, 3 July 2014.

<sup>6</sup> In the north, at least three major Iraqi army divisions deployed in the disputed territories (2nd and 3rd division in Ninewa, 4th division in Salaheddin and Kirkuk) disintegrated, in some cases

IS's dramatic military advances plunged Baghdad into political disarray. The ethnic and sectarian tensions that had catalysed IS's emergence deepened, with Shiite and Kurdish factions rallying supporters in the name of defending their own communities to confront the threat emanating from predominantly Sunni Arab areas. As militants threatened to march south, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the Shiite world's paramount leader, issued a call to arms resulting in the mobilisation of thousands of Shiite volunteers into self-defence militias, called "popular mobilisation" (*hashed al-shaabi*).<sup>7</sup> In Baghdad, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, victorious in the April 2014 parliamentary elections and poised to extend his tenure despite his poor and divisive governance record,<sup>8</sup> solicited support among Iraqi Shiites by openly supporting the popular mobilisation and declared a state of emergency. In the north, Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdish region, proclaimed himself commander in chief of the Kurdish armed forces and declared that independence was now the Kurds' goal.<sup>9</sup>

Sunni Arab politicians continued to elicit deep scepticism and distrust from their purported constituents, who appear paralysed by an unpalatable choice between two perceived evils – the radical IS versus the Shiite-Islamist government in Baghdad – leading some to reiterate the on-again, off-again demand for their own autonomous region.<sup>10</sup> Iran stepped up its presence in Iraq, with Revolutionary Guard Corps officers assuming command of military operations and propping up Shiite militias that quickly supplanted conventional Iraqi army units in reinforcing the capital's defences and deploying along the front lines against IS.

In August, a second IS military thrust, this time in territories directly adjacent to the Kurdish region, ended several weeks of standoff between jihadis and Kurdish fighters along an undefined line of more than 1,000km across northern Iraq from the Syrian to the Iranian border. On 3 August, IS stormed into Kurdish-controlled areas inhabited by the Yazidi minority in Sinjar governorate (whom Kurdish parties consider to be Kurds)<sup>11</sup> and the mixed Arab-Kurdish area around the town of Makhmour, overrunning Kurdish defences and coming within spitting distance of the Kurd-

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leaving behind weapons that IS or peshmerga forces retrieved. The latter took over army positions in Khanaqin and Qara Tapa (Diyala governorate); Tuz Khurmatu and Kifri (Salaheddin); areas east (Ninewa plain) and west of Mosul (Sinjar and Zummar, including its Ain-Zaleh oil field); and Kirkuk city, its (military) airport and the Kirkuk oil fields (Baba Dome, Avana Dome and Bai Hassan). The KRG began sending oil from the Kirkuk fields northward to Khurmala Dome and onward through the Kurdish region's strategic pipeline to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan in January 2015. Kirkuk oil used to flow westward to Bayji and from there through Iraq's strategic pipeline to Ceyhan, but this line was cut by IS's arrival. See Iraq Oil Report, 7 January 2015, and map in Appendix A below.

<sup>7</sup> BBC World, 13 June 2014. Sistani's call came as a *fatwa*, a binding religious edict. Though it addressed Iraqis generally, it had most impact among Shiites, deepening the sectarian divide.

<sup>8</sup> The April 2014 legislative elections gave Maliki's State of Law coalition the most seats (89 of 328). His reappointment as prime minister was delayed by disagreements among rival Shiite political forces, but in early June he remained the likely candidate.

<sup>9</sup> On 27 June, in a press conference with UK Foreign Secretary William Hague, Barzani declared that Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, which laid out a process of "normalisation", census and referendum to settle the disputed territories, "is implemented and finished, and we won't be talking about it [anymore]". Kurdistan Regional Presidency website ([www.presidency.krd](http://www.presidency.krd)), 28 June 2014. On 1 July, he proposed an independence referendum. BBC, 1 July 2014.

<sup>10</sup> See *Financial Times*, 4 July 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Yazidis are both a religious community and a national group of Kurdish and Arabic speakers whose syncretic belief is based on Zoroastrianism. Kurds generally consider the Yazidis to be Kurds, but many Yazidis reject this and claim they are a distinct minority group.

ish region's boundary and, reportedly, as close as 45km from its capital, Erbil.<sup>12</sup> While there is no evidence to suggest that Erbil and other parts of the Kurdish region were IS's target – its success has hinged on mobilising support in Sunni Arab areas based on deep-seated local grievances – its speed and proximity caused panic.<sup>13</sup>

The Kurdish leadership blamed its forces' stunning setback on poor equipment and launched an international appeal.<sup>14</sup> The immediacy of the response was startling in contrast to the inertia displayed during IS's build-up in previous months, including its spectacular drive through central Iraq in June. Within hours, Iran reportedly delivered military support.<sup>15</sup> In the night of 8 August, the U.S. mounted its first round of airstrikes, targeting IS positions near Makhmour, while sending military supplies to peshmerga forces.<sup>16</sup> France and the UK followed with airspace protection and military aid and training to the peshmergas.<sup>17</sup>

Western countries used the opportunity to promote an alternative to Maliki, who was forming a government in pursuit of a third term as prime minister. They succeeded, as Iran, whose interests converged, concurred in having another Shiite Islamist candidate replace him: Haider al-Abadi, likewise a member of the Islamic Daawa party but someone who, unlike Maliki, had spent most of his adult life in the West and was known to support a more inclusive approach to politics. The idea was that only a

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<sup>12</sup> During that week, IS overran peshmerga lines in three Ninewa towns (Bartella, Gweir and Makhmour) in a radius of about 67km north west, west and south west of Erbil. The Kurds also lost Sinjar, Zummar, Bashiqa, towns around the Mosul dam in Ninewa governorate, Jalawla in Diyala governorate and the dam (which they recaptured with U.S. military help ten days later).

<sup>13</sup> Recalling the panic, an Erbil resident said, "my family and I locked ourselves inside our home following the news showing IS militants a few km from the city. The police said we should stay calm, so we stayed inside". Crisis Group interview, September 2014. A Lebanese investor with a Kurdish region business reported that 70 per cent of his Bangladeshi employees fled Erbil, most forgetting their residency permits in haste. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, September 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Masrour Barzani, President Masoud Barzani's son and head of the KDP's intelligence apparatus, said about IS: "After taking all the weapons from the Syrian and the Iraqi army, they have become a much stronger organisation and now they are outgunning the peshmergas, and as a result of the fire power they have, they had an upper hand in some of the battlefields". BBC, 14 August 2014, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhpP4R7vEa4>.

<sup>15</sup> A senior Iranian official said his country had provided instant military assistance to Barzani, before the U.S. carried out its first airstrikes. Crisis Group interview, Tehran, December 2014.

<sup>16</sup> The U.S. launched four rounds of airstrikes, 8-14 August, sent direct military aid to the Kurds and, with the UK and France, made humanitarian air-drops in Sinjar. It also began to assemble a 60-state coalition to fight IS. Some gave only humanitarian help; others delivered weapons and offered training to the peshmergas. France and UK carried out airstrikes from September on, Australia from October and Canada from November. Among regional powers, Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE also participated; Turkey stayed out; Iran, despite its anti-IS agenda, was not invited. Others, such as the Netherlands and Belgium, gave air support.

<sup>17</sup> The U.S. and Germany have been the largest suppliers of weapons to Iraqi Kurds. Between August and February 2014, the U.S. declared having given more than \$3 million of equipment in 60 flights, including 15,000 hand grenades, 40 million rounds of light and heavy machine gun ammunition, 18,000 assault rifles and 45,000 mortar rounds. *Rudaw*, 2 February 2015. Germany pledged to supply weapons to equip 4,000 soldiers and delivered long-range MILAN anti-armour rocket launchers, anti-tank weapons, mine-resistant vehicles, assault rifles, heavy machine guns, heavy rocket launchers, hand grenades, pistols, helmets and body armour. The U.S., Germany, Britain, the Netherlands and Italy have trained peshmergas to use the MILAN launchers and heavy machine guns. *Die Welt*, 9 January 2015; and Michael Knight, "The Long Haul: Rebooting U.S. Security Cooperation in Iraq", January 2015, and "U.S. support to Peshmerga: Too Little, Too Late?", 29 March 2015, both Washington Institute on Near East Policy.



government capable of bringing Sunni Arabs into the country's politics and institutions could marginalise and defeat IS.

Regardless of any direct military support, what was striking was the rush in which aid was delivered, the lack of a concerted political strategy to coordinate it and the failure to monitor where it went or how it was used – a standard accountability practice in most donor-recipient relations based on legal requirements and subject to parliamentary review. Was there an implicit calculation that the benefit of fighting IS would outweigh any negative auxiliary effects from distributing arms to non-state actors in Iraq? Did anyone have a sense of what those effects might be? If so, discussion took place mainly outside the public domain.

On the face of it, the Kurds were the big winners, as the crisis precipitated a dramatic change in how they, and their role in the region, were perceived. Long viewed as a powerless, oppressed minority striving for a measure of autonomy against long odds, they came to be seen – a perception their political leaders have actively promoted<sup>18</sup> – as a trusted standard-bearer of secular Western values battling the obscurantist ideology and spectacular violence of an extreme form of Islamic fundamentalism. Nevertheless, there is reason to be concerned that Western aid to the Kurds, as well as Iranian support of Kurdish groups, is accelerating a fragmentation of Iraqi Kurdish politics that began well before IS arrived and is paving the way for new conflicts even as it fails to resolve current ones.

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<sup>18</sup> Falah Mustafa, the KRG foreign relations minister, said, “during my visit to Europe, I made clear in many interviews that we are secular and balanced. We don't impose the headscarf on women like in Iran, and we don't oblige them to take it off like in Turkey”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 4 November 2014.

## II. The Kurds' Fractious Politics

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### A. *Divided They Stand*

Since emerging from the shadow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 1991, the Kurdish region has been profoundly shaped by the rule of its two main political parties, the KDP and PUK, based on their decades-long struggle for national liberation.<sup>19</sup> Following the first parliamentary elections in May 1992, they set themselves the task of governing, while keeping real power in the parties, supported by their respective security forces. Based on historical, cultural and linguistic differences, the KDP extended its reach throughout Erbil and Dohuk governorates, while the PUK's stronghold was Suleimaniya, as well as, after the 2003 U.S. invasion, Kirkuk governorate, outside the Kurdish region in disputed territories.

Reflecting roughly the election results, the two agreed to split the fledgling government's ministries 50-50 and within each ministry give the minister a rival-party deputy. This soon proved unworkable; two years later fighting broke out over customs revenues. In 1996, the KDP, aided by the Iraqi army, evicted the PUK from Erbil, leaving it to set up a separate government in Suleimaniya. When the U.S. overthrew Saddam, this uneasy arrangement had become entrenched, though the parties had come to a U.S.-mediated accommodation. Even as they reestablished a joint Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil, they retained de facto parallel systems of governance, with their own military and security agencies, patterns of co-optation, rules of advancement and reporting lines for both civil servants and peshmerga fighters, imposing party loyalty throughout.

In 2007, the parties reached a "strategic agreement" – more a private understanding between the two leaders, Barzani and Jalal Talabani – that reaffirmed the 50-50 arrangement, in both governance and resource allocation, and promised to unify the administrations and military/security agencies incrementally under the KRG's roof.<sup>20</sup> Since then, they have cooperated in matters of mutual interest, such as containing challengers from outside the two parties, articulating a common posture on the disputed territories and coordinating a unified approach to relations with Baghdad, while keeping distinct policies for their respective areas. Moreover, each developed privileged political and economic ties with distinct regional partners – the KDP with Turkey, the PUK with Iran. All in all, and beyond their ideological differences (the KDP is a conservative, tribally based party, the more cosmopolitan PUK hews to a social-democratic line), separate social bases, domestic competition and divergent foreign policy outlooks, the two parties came to embody a Siamese-twin reality of Kurdish politics in Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The KDP was founded in 1946 by tribal leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani. In 1975, prominent member Jalal Talabani broke away in protest over the Barzani tribe's dominance, founding the PUK, a movement of socialist inspiration. Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> For the Kurdish parties' interrelationships, see the graph in Appendix B.

<sup>21</sup> An independent Kurdish political analyst said, "the KDP and PUK have more in common with each other than with any other political force in Kurdistan. They grew up together. They fought separately against the same enemy [Saddam Hussein's regime]. And their past is one of mutual competition. They developed similarly hierarchical structures and are driven by essentially the same claim to leadership in Kurdistan". Crisis Group interview, Aziz Barzani, Erbil, 5 November 2014. Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse, 2005).

For nearly a decade the KRG remained structured on this bipolar basis, and this kept both domestic and regional interests in equilibrium, ensuring stability. Over time, however, the arrangement proved unsustainable. The region thrived economically (based on a burgeoning oil economy and sharply rising foreign investment), but top-down-sanctioned corruption (especially in land), party-based cronyism and the leadership's failure to refresh its composition and reach out to new generations began to seep into the sinews of Kurdish society.

Cracks first appeared in the PUK, whose dissidents in 2009 founded Gorran ("movement for change"). Its popularity and electoral success as a political party that year rested on vocal and populist denunciations of the two parties' patronage-based politics and corruption; given its origins, it threatened PUK dominance in Suleimaniya in particular.<sup>22</sup> It received a shot in the arm during the 2011 Arab Spring, when Kurdish youths, taking a cue from Arab compatriots, went into Suleimaniya's streets and squares to denounce the KDP/PUK monopoly of politics and resource allocation.

The PUK bore the brunt of this challenge. It was already weakened by internal disputes, as its aging and ailing leader retired from active politics, and by having shed its original social-democratic credentials, as it assumed the trappings of its rival, the KDP: ruling-family nepotism and lack of internal democracy.<sup>23</sup> The September 2013 KRG parliamentary elections marked the lowest point in the PUK's history, with Gorran placing second, directly behind the KDP.<sup>24</sup> Its partial collapse deprived the KDP of its strategic partner, putting in jeopardy the continuity of the agreement that had ensured stability for a decade.

Having no military/security force of its own while the PUK, however diminished, still had its, Gorran was incapable of becoming the KDP's new strategic partner, even as it joined in forming a government in June 2014. While it took over key portfolios (notably finance and peshmerga affairs), it failed to impose operational control over institutions that were stacked with administrative and security personnel whose loyalties lay elsewhere, and in the process it damaged the anti-status-quo appeal it had enjoyed among its base.<sup>25</sup>

The PUK's weakness fed the KDP's longstanding aspiration to leadership of Kurdish politics both inside and outside Iraq. This translated into an overt attempt to bring Gorran under its wing, an escalation of tensions with Baghdad over oil policy and a

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<sup>22</sup> Gorran is an uneasy coalition of PUK dissidents, especially in its upper ranks, and Suleimaniya urban professionals who scorn rule by the peshmerga-based parties.

<sup>23</sup> A former PUK supporter sneeringly referred to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan as the "Patriotic Union of Companies". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, September 2014.

<sup>24</sup> In its first test, the 2009 Kurdish legislative elections, Gorran won 22 per cent of the vote, becoming the main force after the unified KDP-PUK list. Four years later, when the KDP and PUK ran separately, it placed second with nearly 24 per cent of the vote against the PUK's 17 per cent. The PUK was unable to benefit from its relative popularity in Kirkuk, which lies outside the Kurdish region, so did not vote in the elections.

<sup>25</sup> On 19 June 2014, Gorran decided for the first time to participate in government, receiving four ministries: finance, peshmerga affairs, trade and industry and religious affairs. An adviser to the parliament speaker blamed his party's failure to reform the finance ministry on Baghdad's decision to stop budget payments, and its failure to reform the peshmerga affairs ministry on the conflict with IS. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 29 January 2015. A PUK member said, "Gorran blurred its role as a radical opposition party because of its ambition to govern. It failed to replace the PUK as a counterweight to the KDP. Now as it enters the KDP's embrace, it risks growing weaker and weaker". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 4 November 2014. Kamal Chomani, "The Challenges Facing Gorran to Change", Kurdish Policy Foundation, 5 September 2014.

projection of force into Kurdish-populated areas in Syria.<sup>26</sup> Fearing to lose its political weight, the PUK sought to strengthen its alliance with Iran. This was a proven tactic of the Kurds, honed over decades as they sought to play one regional player against another and against their own domestic rivals to survive and thrive.<sup>27</sup> This time, however, it was also encouraged by Iran's growing weight in Iraq's domestic affairs, especially since the U.S. troop withdrawal in late 2011.

The KDP and PUK have blamed each other for jeopardising the strategic agreement. A former KDP lawmaker said:

There has been a radical change in Iraqi Kurdistan's balance of power, and this is threatening the region's stability. The PUK is the sick body of Kurdistan. Its turmoil and its relationship with Iran ... have plunged the KRG into a deep crisis. The PUK should act responsibly and refocus its policy on the Kurdish national cause rather than on the interests of some of its members.<sup>28</sup>

A PUK politburo member said:

The 50-50 strategic agreement is no more. When Gorran entered the scene, the PUK retreated from government. The KDP made things worse by striking deals with Gorran, calling for independence and conducting an independent oil policy, thereby creating tensions with Baghdad, Tehran and Ankara. The KDP needs to change its policy, which is directed toward seizing every opportunity to strengthen the party and only the party.<sup>29</sup>

IS's arrival did little to bring the parties back together, much less revive the strategic agreement or encourage them to build institutions independent of their party-affiliated organs. Kurdish politics became yet more partisan. The conflict exacerbated simmering competition between and within both parties' leaderships and tilted the internal balance toward the most security-minded politburo members, empowering them at the expense of those who traditionally had acted as a bridge between the rivals. President Barzani conducted his own policy, promoting himself as the leader of all Kurds, proposing to bring the Iraqi Kurdish peshmergas into a single command under his leadership and, more ambitiously, create a pan-Kurdish umbrella (including Syrian Kurdish peshmergas), and openly calling for independence, thus provoking criticism even within his own party. Inside the KDP, conflict with IS fanned the simmering competition among branches of the Barzani tribe, empowering security officials closest to the president who champion the leader-of-the-Kurds role and support the independence bid.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> On KDP political entanglement in Syria's Kurdish-populated areas see, Crisis Group Middle East Report, N°136, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle*, 22 January 2013, Section IV.

<sup>27</sup> The PUK and Iran were closely aligned during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, participating in coordinated military campaigns inside Iraq.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 28 January 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 23 January 2015.

<sup>30</sup> The main struggle within the KDP has been between Masrour Barzani, Masoud's son and head of its intelligence apparatus, and Nechirvan Barzani, son of his late older brother and KRG prime minister. While the latter has had no direct role in fighting IS, the former became commander in chief of security operations and assumed, next to his father, primary decision-making powers and ability to shape KRG domestic and regional politics. A pro-Masrour KDP member skewering Nechirvan's lack of a security affairs role, called him a "*mikhwari mall*" ("commander of the frontline of his own house"). Crisis Group interview. Dohuk, 26 January 2015. An analyst with strong ties to the KDP

The conflict lifted flagging PUK confidence,<sup>31</sup> while sharpening internal divisions in favour of security figures relying on Iran's support over leaders who have cultivated more diverse and balanced international ties.<sup>32</sup> With Iranian guidance, the PUK paved the way for the involvement of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) in Iraqi Kurdish affairs and deployed its own peshmergas in Syrian Kurdistan to back the PKK's Syrian affiliates, the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Democratic Union Party) and its military branch, the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, People's Defence Corps) in Kobani. This strengthened Iran's hand there and further divided the KDP and PUK, given their pursuit of projects influenced by different regional partners. While the KDP aims to curb and counterbalance the PKK/PYD/YPG presence in its neighbourhood and in this is strongly supported by Turkey, the PUK presence in Syria is to insure PYD/YPG strategic dependence on Iran.<sup>33</sup>

The KRG's hybrid political system is premised on the understanding that each party is virtually autonomous within the areas of its core support, thus limiting competition, violence and foreign interference. Today, however, both parties' leaderships have fractured. Competing factions hew to different visions of their party's and region's future; seek to position themselves in difficult succession struggles; and maintain divergent regional connections, while facing decreasing legitimacy in society. Decision-making about the IS threat has become as much a partisan as military matter, subject to factions' complex domestic and regional agendas. This puts the Kurdish region's stability at risk. As a PUK leader put it:

The strategic agreement has ended. We have entered a new phase. Now we need to find a new formula, a new way to stabilise the relationship between the two parties. Unity is the strongest weapon in the defence of any nation.<sup>34</sup>

## B. *Disparate Chains of Command*

Peshmerga political affiliations run deep. The KDP and PUK established units as their armed branches for resistance to the central government, fighting an extended insurgency in the 1980s and joining a popular uprising in 1991. After the unilateral withdrawal of Iraqi forces from most Kurdish areas and the KRG's establishment in

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said of its internal struggle: "Nechirvan has woven relationships with Iran, Turkey, the PUK and even the PKK. For him, Kurdish independence is not the priority. But Masoud wants to deliver a state before he dies and has designated Masrour as his natural successor to continue on this path". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 30 January 2015.

<sup>31</sup> "If the PUK were to run in elections today, it would win". Crisis Group interview, Saadi Pire, PUK politburo member, Erbil, 5 November 2014. Mulla Bakhtiar, also a PUK politburo member, stated: "After the April 2014 [Iraqi parliament elections] the PUK became the first political party in the Kurdistan region". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 28 January 2015.

<sup>32</sup> The PUK's internal struggle has been between security figures in the politburo who led resistance to Saddam and enjoyed Iranian backing and more technocratic members. Its outcome was apparent with selection of a PUK candidate for Iraq's presidency in August 2014. Security figures such as Mulla Bakhtiar and Hero Talabani (the ex-president's wife) marginalised Barham Salih, a pro-Western figure who has good relations with the KDP, thus neutralising his candidacy. An analyst with strong PUK ties said, "Iran wished to save the PUK at any cost and to do so it bet on its most 'trusted horses' in the politburo, people who have had a relationship with Tehran for a long time. Why should they trust others who have close relations with the West?" Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 28 January 2015.

<sup>33</sup> See graph in Appendix B.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hakem Qader, politburo member, Suleimaniya, 26 January 2015.

1992, these fighters evolved from guerrillas into more regular forces. Both parties set up military academies, through which they provided training, organised conventional military units and graduated their first “peshmerga military officers”. After Saddam was toppled, the peshmergas were further professionalised by U.S. aid and the experience of fighting beside U.S. troops.<sup>35</sup>

The parties’ shortcomings in building non-partisan government institutions are most manifest in the security sector. While acquiring the trappings of a military institution, the peshmergas have stopped short of becoming a proper Kurdish army, which would have entailed merging both parties’ fighters and officers into a single force under non-partisan, professional command. However, party structures continue to hold key decision-making powers over recruitment, appointments, promotions and deployments of their peshmerga affiliates.<sup>36</sup>

Realising the cost of division in the face of a resurgent Iraqi central government after 2008, the parties tried gradually to merge their parallel structures, but their security and intelligence services have been the most difficult to free from the partisan grip. This culminated, in 2009, in creation of a joint peshmerga affairs ministry, establishment of mixed units and an intelligence department (*hawalgry*) with both KDP and PUK officers. The ministry has administrative (*kargerrî*) and operations (*harakat*) departments, both with teams attached to peshmerga units on the battlefield. A ministry spokesman proudly explained:

We have been working since 2009 to create a 150,000-strong force of twelve brigades, combining KDP and PUK officers. If you were to look at them, you would have difficulty distinguishing who is KPD and who is PUK. Only Brigades 70 and 80 remain under ... KDP and PUK control.<sup>37</sup>

The initiatives proved only a half-success. The forces were merged administratively, allowing the ministry to do a much-needed upgrade, and the joint brigades included academy graduates with a professional military education who, despite having joined the peshmergas through party connections, were not necessarily party members. But the parties’ intelligence agencies (the KDP’s *parastin*, the PUK’s *zanyari*) remained separate, as did the most sensitive recruitment and appointments issues. Whether in the ministry or party security structures, officers continue to report to and take orders from party leaders, to whom they owe their careers.

The minister, who since 2014 is from a party with no military force, is a representative and spokesman of sorts, devoid of decision power over nominally joint units. The two parties redistributed joint-division commands and heads of brigades on the 50-

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<sup>35</sup> On Kurdish forces, see Crisis Group Middle East Report, N°103, *Iraq and the Kurds: Confronting Withdrawal Fears*, 28 March 2011, Section IV. On the eve of the 1991 uprising, the PUK set up the Kurdish region’s first military academy, near Suleimaniya; two years later, the KDP established the second, in Zakho (Dohuk governorate). Kurdish officers deserting from the Iraqi army helped in organising both sets of peshmergas into structured military forces, folding the infantry into regiments and introducing a peshmerga officer corps on the basis of the Iraqi army template. See Maria Fantappie, “Armée irakienne: histoire d’un tour de passe-passe entre Bagdad et le Kurdistan”, *Mémoire de l’Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris*, 25 June 2009.

<sup>36</sup> A visit to Suleimaniya and Zakho military academies before and after creation of the peshmerga affairs ministry showed that PUK officers were always trained in Suleimaniya, KDP officers in Zakho. Crisis Group analyst observations in previous capacity, March 2009, May 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, Helgard Hikmet, peshmerga affairs ministry spokesman, Erbil, 28 September 2014.

50 principle, assigning a PUK deputy to brigades led by a KDP commander and vice-versa, but apportioned ground operations command according to the traditional zones of influence. Existence of a mixed brigade does not necessarily correspond to operational joint decision-making or full intelligence cooperation. To the contrary, KDP and PUK officers of the same brigade monitor and report on each other's activities.<sup>38</sup>

The return to battle in June 2014 revealed these dynamics more to the outside world. It catapulted older officers and younger party figures to command positions on the front lines, marginalising the academy graduates. Now the chain of command flows from senior KDP or PUK politburo security figures down to middle- and lower-ranking officers from their own party. Front-line commanders tend to belong to the party politburo and typically flaunt credentials from the resistance to Saddam.<sup>39</sup>

Cooperation between parties depends solely on agendas.<sup>40</sup> Early on, as the Iraqi army withdrew from Mosul, Kirkuk and elsewhere, they agreed on deploying across disputed territories, dividing terrain geographically. While the PUK led in disputed areas of Diyala, Salaheddin and Kirkuk governorates (from the Iranian border toward the centre-north), the KDP took charge across the Ninewa plain west to the Syrian border.<sup>41</sup> Coordination ends when interests diverge, as in Kirkuk, where both want to preserve and expand footholds, or where regional agendas strongly differ; thus, the KDP, which historically has had less influence in Kirkuk, insisted on a neutral command structure in the area and deployed its forces at oil fields north west of the city.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Reflecting on the parties' local control and mutual mistrust, a PUK member said, "it was the PUK's right to not allow the KDP to intervene, in order to protect its voters"; he had heard that in Makhmour (Ninewa governorate), where joint brigades are deployed, "KDP members gave orders to arrest PUK officers for security reasons". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 25 January 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Mahmoud Sengawi, a PUK politburo member and former peshmerga commander, leads on the front line in the Germian area, south east of Suleimaniya governorate, with the help of Abdul Abor, a younger PUK military commander in charge of the Tuz Khurmatu front line. Sheikh Serwan Barzani, a KDP politburo member, heads units on the Gweir front outside Makhmour, aided by Qader Qader, a KDP central command member. Crisis Group observations, November 2014. Mahmoud Sengawi, recounting his career and recent appointment as Germian front commander, said, "I became involved in politics as a KDP member in 1964. Since 1975 [PUK founding], I have been a member of Komala [Marxist-Leninist faction] and in 1977 I became [Jalal] Talabani's peshmerga affairs deputy. I am a PUK politburo member. As the conflict with Daesh began, it was natural for me to be put at command of the front line. I have fought since 2000 against Ansar al-Islam [Kurdish extremist group] and al-Qaeda in Germian .... I entered politics through the military door". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, January 2015.

<sup>40</sup> As an analyst with close ties to the peshmergas put it, "despite formal unification, a KDP division commander cannot force a PUK officer to do anything without the PUK politburo's approval and vice-versa". Crisis Group phone conversation, 12 December 2014.

<sup>41</sup> The front extends 1,050km along the KRG's southern boundary and can be divided into four areas, with the KDP and PUK each controlling two. The PUK has the front from the Iranian border to an area north west of Kirkuk city, comprising the Germian front (Khanaqin, Saadiya, Jalawla, Qara Tapa, Kifri, Suleiman Beg and Tuz Khurmatu), and the Kirkuk front (Daqouq, Kirkuk, Dibis and Tel Ward). The KDP directs the area from there west to the Syrian border: the Gweir front (Makhmour, Gweir and Mosul Dam) and Sinjar. See map, Appendix A.

<sup>42</sup> Though PUK forces dominate in Kirkuk, the KDP and PUK agreed to appoint Mohammed Haji Mahmoud, a Suleimaniya-based figure critical of both as military commander there. Moreover, while PUK forces are firmly in control of areas to the east and south east of the city, KDP forces have been trying to assert themselves in the north west, especially around Dibis and Tel Ward districts. Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, November 2014.

These partisan rifts have sparked dissatisfaction among the peshmerga rank and file. An officer complained about party control over military matters, stressing the need to overhaul civil-military relations:

We need a law regulating recruitment on the basis of geographical distribution and population density rather than political affiliation. We also need a law defining relations between civilian leaders and military officers, specifying appointments criteria. And we need a joint system of intelligence collection.<sup>43</sup>

Peshmerga forces are as internally fragmented as the leadership of the parties that direct them. Key figures from both parties run paramilitary forces alongside regular ones, using the former to supplement the latter in times of need, but also to protect their leaders' personal interests and counterbalance units under command of a rival, even from the same party, in the same battlespace.<sup>44</sup>

A result of peshmerga politicisation is that fighting IS is not always informed primarily by military necessity. Deployment of peshmerga forces, their offensives and retreats are most often a function of what intelligence was available to the party in charge or what political calculation it made vis-à-vis its rival. Extending party influence over the disputed territories is an integral part of the latter. In August 2014, for instance, the KDP politburo negotiated with a Sunni Arab tribal leader KDP involvement in the "liberation" of areas around Rabiya in Ninewa governorate – over which the party has long claimed Kurdish control – in order to secure an alliance that would give it future influence over this strategic area on the border between Iraq's and Syria's Kurd-populated areas.<sup>45</sup>

Competition between and within the parties strongly affects professionalism and performance, undermining the Kurdish region's security. Party intelligence services enjoy separate sources of information, have developed privileged ties to different regional partners and share information selectively. Some view this as a primary factor behind the defeat in Sinjar in August, which resulted from inability or unwillingness to share evidence indicating that IS was about to attack.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 6 November 2014. Mid- and low-ranking peshmergas tend to be more critical of the leadership's grip, seeing this as one of the most important factors affecting battle effectiveness. A 29-year old peshmerga fighting in Jalawla said, "the problem is not with the peshmergas but the parties. The brigade commander is from the KDP, his deputy from the PUK. Once we are in a fight, we're all brothers, but when we are on deployment, problems, competition and conspiracies pop up". Crisis Group interview, Kalar, 23 January 2015.

<sup>44</sup> For instance, Kosrat Rasoul, a top PUK leader, has transformed his protection unit to a brigade of 2,000-3,000 men. The PUK's Bavel Talabani, Jalal Talabani's eldest son, commands a well-equipped counter-terrorism force (Dizha Tiror), mostly operating in key disputed territories such as Kirkuk and Khanaqin. In July 2014, Nechirvan Barzani, KRG prime minister and KDP member, sent his personal security force to seize the Bai Hassan and Avana Dome oil fields in Kirkuk. That month, his rival, Masrour Barzani, led an operation to seize Ain-Zaleh oil field in Zummar. Operational coordination can be difficult even within the same party. A low-ranking PUK member commented: "There is not a single office or strategy within the politburo. Each member has his own interests to protect and confronts situations accordingly. The problem is they mix their political interests with peshmerga ones". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 25 January 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, December 2014. For more, see Section IV. C below.

<sup>46</sup> A PUK-affiliated peshmerga officer claimed: "The KDP and the PUK do not necessarily share information. This state of affairs creates gaps – deliberately or not – in the security system along the front line, and this could at least partially explain what happened in Sinjar [in August 2014]. The PUK security people realised what was about to happen but never passed on this information". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 8 November 2014.



### C. *Iran's and Turkey's Playground*

The geography of Iraqi Kurdistan invites de facto separation into adjacent Turkish and Iranian spheres of influence, offering both neighbours ability to pursue their agendas, while keeping the Kurds divided in pursuit of their statehood aspirations. At the same time, Kurds have become adroit at manipulating these powers, marshalling support in furtherance of their own interests, balancing them against each other and trying to limit their influence in Kurdish affairs.

In the wake of the U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq and the unrelated but simultaneous outbreak of the Syria crisis, Iran's influence in Iraq has grown steadily. Tehran discreetly but thoroughly embedded itself in Shiite politics, in particular by nurturing deep and distinct relationships with Maliki's entourage and various Shiite groups opposing him.<sup>47</sup> Its infiltration of security institutions (national security and interior ministries and army command) led to their progressive erosion and empowerment of Shiite militias beside the regular forces.<sup>48</sup> By 2013, as the Syrian crisis became a full civil war, Tehran's objective in Iraq no longer was only to exert political control over the government, but also to use its foothold there to protect the Assad regime and maintain access to Hizbollah in Lebanon.

When IS burst onto the scene in 2014, Iran ramped up its involvement dramatically and made it overt. Its organising, strengthening and empowering of Shiite militias, first noticeable in 2013, became explicit and more ambitious as army and police units dissolved, their more capable remnants folding into "popular mobilisation" militias managed by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commanders.<sup>49</sup> Apart from the serious threat IS posed to Iran's dominance in Iraq and its access to Syria and Lebanon, the group's presence also allowed Tehran to solidify control over Iraq's security and intelligence agencies, as well as what remained of the army, and take charge of ground operations against IS.

As Iran has become more deeply enmeshed in the Iraqi body politic and begun to transform it, it has used its relationships with Kurdish actors as leverage in its dealings with Baghdad and to gain advantage in the broader regional contest. Just as its partnership with the PKK in Turkey gives it leverage against Ankara, so it uses ties to the PKK's affiliate in Syria, the PYD, and its YPG forces and to the PUK in Iraq to tilt

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<sup>47</sup> Iraq's alignment with Iran became more apparent during 2013. Maliki's government actively cooperated in dispatching Shiite fighters across the borders into Syria to fight beside the Syrian regime, while stepping up repressive actions in Sunni Arab areas. See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°143, *Syria's Metastasising Conflict*, 27 June 2013, pp. 11-12; and N°144, *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State*, 14 August 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Shiite militias' presence in and control over the army and police was visible before June 2014. In May, a Baghdad resident observed: "At the moment those who can easily circulate are members of Asaeb Ahl al-Haq [League of the Righteous, a splinter group of Sadrism origins]. They use special badges issued by the prime minister's office and cars with tinted windows to pass easily through security checkpoints". Crisis Group phone interview, Baghdad, May 2014. In June, a Baghdad staff member of a humanitarian organisation reported coordinating security operations with Asaeb Ahl al-Haq, not the army. Crisis Group phone interview, Baghdad, June 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Shiite "popular mobilisation" includes inter alia: the Badr Corps, a military formation created during the Iran-Iraq war; Serayat al-Salam (Peace Brigade), including followers of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr; and Asaeb Ahl al-Haq; as well as Serayat al-Khorasan, Liwa al-Aqida, Liwa al-Imam Abbas, Liwa al-Imam Hussein and Liwa al-Imam Ali, each inspired by a Shiite religious school. Amnesty International, "Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq", October 2014.

the local and regional balance.<sup>50</sup> Iranian support gave the PYD/YPG the sense it could implement its ambition to establish a Kurdish region in Syria and the PUK a new lease on life after its leadership and identity crises.

In Iraq, the PUK's declining fortunes paved the way for Tehran to promote figures in the leadership sympathetic to its interests and to progressively integrate the party, with which it has a long relationship, into the mosaic of pro-Iranian forces. Iran's political backing in part explains the PUK's unexpectedly good showing in the April 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections.<sup>51</sup> PUK officials see this support as a necessity to secure their personal and partisan interests, more than as a matter of ideological affinity or support for Tehran's political strategy in the region. Some, however, have started to question the wisdom of confining the party to an unbalanced partnership with Tehran that nominally revives its political fortunes but in effect reduces its power.<sup>52</sup>

By increasing the PUK's role in Baghdad, Tehran strengthened the party's ability to compete with the KDP, boosted Kurdish presence in Iraq's central government and undercut Barzani's drive for Kurdish independence. The gap between the parties widened further as the PUK deepened ties to the PKK and its PYD/YPG affiliate, boosting this counterforce to KDP influence in Kurdish areas in both Iraq and Syria.<sup>53</sup>

These dynamics were further exacerbated by the struggle against IS. Iran jumped to the Kurds' rescue when they faced the IS threat in the disputed territories in August 2014, providing the PUK with intelligence and weapons as the peshmergas took up positions in Kirkuk, Diyala and Salaheddin governorates, just as it had been supplying Shiite militias further south.<sup>54</sup> In PUK strongholds, Iranian military advisers have tried

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<sup>50</sup> Iran has traditionally capitalised on Turkey's Kurdish issue and conflict with the PKK to apply pressure on Ankara and hindered their peace talks by supporting PKK radicals led by Jamil Beik to the detriment of a more negotiations-prone current led by Murat Karayilan. In Syria, Iran's support of the PYD enabled it to push back against local opposition to the regime in Kurdish areas. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 151, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, 8 May 2014, Section IV.

<sup>51</sup> The PUK won 21 seats, coming second behind the KDP by four seats and nine ahead of Gorran. Seven months earlier, in the KRG parliamentary elections, the party was in free fall.

<sup>52</sup> Hakem Qader, a PUK politburo member, commented: "There is a geopolitical reality that cannot be changed. Iran has a long border with us, and this means shared security interests and also trade. The PUK's relationship with Iran runs deep. During the Anfal campaign [the old regime's 1988 counter-insurgency campaigns against the Kurds], Iran opened its borders and helped us escape. The issue is not whether to keep our relationship with Iran; it's how to have a balanced relationship". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 26 January 2015. Another PUK member, recording a major shift in PUK regional ties, said, "when Talabani was still active in politics, besides keeping a special partnership with Iran, he also cultivated a good relationship with Turkey. Today this heritage is lost. We need to think of another way to balance the relationship with Tehran". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 25 January 2015.

<sup>53</sup> While a senior PUK official explained the PUK's partnership with PKK-affiliated parties as "natural" and based on control over neighbouring geographic areas as well as "ideological affinities" (Crisis Group interview, Mullah Bakhtiar, Suleimaniya, 28 January 2015), a senior KDP official's version differed: "The PUK and PKK are together only because Iran brings them together. The PKK constitutes a greater threat to the PUK than to the KDP, considering its ability to mobilise people in PUK-dominated areas". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, January 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Despite the PUK peshmergas' uneasy relationship with Shiite militias, they have deployed side by side, especially in areas with a mixed population of Kurds and Shiite Turkmen. On the Germian front, PUK peshmergas have deployed beside the Badr Corps militia in Tuz Khurmatu, Qara Tapa, Saadiya and Jalawla, as well as in south-east Kirkuk. The peshmergas and Serayat al-Salam have deployed side by side around Shiite shrines in Kirkuk and Daqouq. In Jalawla, Daqouq and Sinjar,

to organise their diverse military proxies under a unified command, with PUK peshmergas, Shiite militias and PKK and YPG fighters all benefitting from Revolutionary Guard intelligence, assistance and equipment.<sup>55</sup> In October, Revolutionary Guard Commander Qasem Soleimani posed openly alongside peshmerga fighters on the Kirkuk front line.

As Iran threw its weight behind the PUK and the PKK, the KDP became somewhat isolated, so was compelled to pursue closer ties with Iran to compensate for over-reliance on Turkey, which unlike Iran did not rush to the aid of its Kurdish partner in August. IS attacks on Sinjar and Makhmour left Barzani no choice but to request Iranian military help, which arrived promptly.

Since the Syrian conflict began, Turkey's policy has gone in the opposite direction of Iran's. Under prime minister, now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's stewardship, it progressively distanced itself from Baghdad while strengthening political and economic ties with the Kurds, even explicitly backing Barzani's quest to unseat Maliki. It strove to turn KDP friends into a vehicle to promote its policies in Kurdistan and the broader region, seeing them as a powerful counterweight to the PKK, whose PYD affiliate was using the vacuum created by the regime's departure from Syria's Kurdish areas to impose its control.<sup>56</sup>

The war with IS thus strained the KDP's relationship with Ankara. It empowered the party's security-minded factions, with which Turkey's ties were less strong, at the expense of those it had long cultivated as economic and political partners.<sup>57</sup> And in a moment of need, the KDP found Turkey mostly unresponsive to requests for immediate help. Instead, Ankara denounced KDP cooperation with PKK and YPG fighters against IS. Barzani's calls for independence in July 2014 exacerbated the distrust.<sup>58</sup> A Turkish official asserted:

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PUK peshmergas have cooperated with PKK/YPG forces. Crisis Group observations, Germian and Kirkuk front lines, December 2014. See map in Appendix A.

<sup>55</sup> PUK peshmergas and Shiite militias share military facilities along the front line. A Serayat al-Khorasan member who took part in the Jalawla fighting in November 2014 said, "Iranian military support is for all Iraqi forces, including peshmergas, and this is crucial for the fight against Daesh. Iran helps both technically and logistically. There were Iranian technical teams to train our forces on some advanced weapons, and Iranian artillery units joined in the fighting. We have three joint operations rooms comprising Kurdish and Shiite commanders in the Kurdish region [Suleimaniya], Diyala and Baghdad". Crisis Group interview, Jalawla, 8 December 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Masoud Barzani's November 2013 visit to Turkey's Kurd-populated Diyarbakir helped the Erdoğan government project a pro-peace image on the Kurdish issue to rally support for his party among Kurds and undercut PKK support. *Today's Zaman*, 21 November 2013. On the situation in northern Syria, see also, Crisis Group Report, *Flight of Icarus?*, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> An independent Turkish political analyst commented on Ankara's strategy to control the KDP: "Turkey's style is different from Iran's. Iranians bet a little on each horse and pick one at their convenience. Turkey bet on one horse only, and that was Nechirvan. They thought that he would be the guy, and through him they could control the KDP. But Nechirvan is losing by the day and cannot even control his own government. Masrour is the guy, and Turkey could never control him". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 28 January 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Kurdish official, Suleimaniya, March 2015. Beside distrust of the KDP, Ankara appears to take a relaxed approach to IS and Iran's growing influence in Kurdish affairs, seeing these as helping contain Barzani's independence aspirations and protecting Iraq's unity. A Turkish political analyst said, "in Sinjar, Turkish soldiers could have intervened. But you can also let the results of IS's strategy work for your own interests. Turkey thinks Iran's political influence is effective in pressuring the KDP and preventing Kurdistan's independence". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 3 November 2014. An Ankara-based economist added: "Turkey saw an interest in

Barzani faces a serious dilemma: he needs our support, but he won't get it if he continues to cooperate with the PKK [PYD/YPG]. When Barzani talks about Kurdish independence, we are not scared. We know this is not going to happen. Recently KDP officials voiced strong criticism of Turkey, but eventually our common [economic] interests will prove overwhelming. If they go ahead with independence, and Turkey responds, we are pretty sure that the West is not going to intervene to save the Kurds.<sup>59</sup>

This may reflect overconfidence.<sup>60</sup> Events in Sinjar and IS's advance on KDP strongholds in the disputed territories in August tested Turkish-Kurdish relations. In Kurdish eyes, Ankara did not pass.<sup>61</sup> By contrast, Iran won, leaving the KDP with no option other than to pursue more balanced alliances with Tehran as well as Ankara, in addition to Washington.<sup>62</sup> This, too, came at a cost. An Iranian diplomat indirectly denounced Barzani's independence call, warning: "Barzani should end his ambition for independence. There is a legitimate government in Baghdad. The Kurds should try to benefit from their presence in Baghdad or they will lose what they have."<sup>63</sup>

In the larger geopolitical game in the region, Turkey suffered a series of setbacks with the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere and Iran's growing influence in Iraq. The return to Iraq of the U.S. and other Western countries should be seen in this context.

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having Tehran keep Baghdad stable. When you have Baghdad intact and stable, it is easier to gain influence in Erbil". Crisis Group interview, Ankara 10 November 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, September 2014.

<sup>60</sup> An Iraqi Kurdish analyst with close ties to the KDP said that, during summer 2014, several KDP officials uncovered Turkish intelligence efforts to monitor their telephones. Crisis Group could not corroborate this, but it suggests growing distrust and deteriorating relations. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 4 November 2014.

<sup>61</sup> A senior PUK official said, "Turkey is a good friend once food is served, but don't expect it to bring any. Davutoğlu may be a good architect, but the Iranians are proving themselves to be the only capable civil engineers, actually working on the ground. Turkey is highly unpopular in Kurdistan. They may have succeeded in investing in Kurdistan, but they failed to win the Kurds' trust". Crisis Group interview, Saadi Pire, PUK politburo member, Erbil, 5 November 2014.

<sup>62</sup> KDP officials strongly criticised Turkey's laissez-faire attitude during the Sinjar events and hinted at a shift. Fuad Hussein, chief of staff to President Barzani, said in an interview, "Turkey consistently reiterated that if the security of the Kurdistan Region was threatened, they would intervene. Well, our security was under threat, but we did not receive any support". *Rudaw*, 16 September 2014. Barzani thanked Iran for its support in a letter to President Hassan Rouhani. *KurdPress*, 11 August 2014. Immediately after the Sinjar events, he visited the camp for Kurdish refugees from Turkey in Makhmour (known in Turkey as a PKK camp, housing the families of PKK fighters) as a sign of independence from Turkey and an implicit threat that the KDP might begin cooperating with PKK and YPG fighters against IS. *KurdPress*, 14 August 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 28 January 2014. A former KDP lawmaker commented on the KDP's dilemma vis-à-vis Iran: "Iran sees Masoud Barzani and aspirations to Kurdish independence as a big threat to the Islamic Republic. They are waiting to find a breach within the KDP to attack it. Iran only benefited from Daesh. Before Daesh's takeover of Mosul Iran was already powerful in Baghdad, but afterward they were able to extend their influence. Daesh's attack on KDP areas came as big shock and forced the party to rethink its position vis-à-vis both Iran and the independence issue". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 30 January 2015.

### III. The West Returns: Intervention by Proxy

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As attention focused on the conflicts in Syria and elsewhere in the region, Iraq slipped mostly off the West's radar. The U.S. in particular after its troop withdrawal adopted a low profile in pursuit of modest objectives: nominal Iraqi stability through minimal engagement. The Obama administration chose to ignore not only the many shortcomings of its predecessor's attempt at rebuilding the Iraqi state, but also the increasingly obvious trends that threatened to undermine it: Maliki's growing authoritarian bent, based on a mixture of patronage and repression; Iran's expanding role in politics in response to the Syria crisis, including an increasing footprint in the government and security apparatus; the pronounced Shia'isation of state institutions that deepened Sunni distrust of whatever political process remained; and ever more repressive and violent security operations in predominantly Sunni Arab areas. The result was rejuvenation of the indigenous insurgency, including its jihadi components in the form of groups associated with what was still known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

During the first half of 2014, ISIS's rise sparked only moderate interest, even in Iraq; its role in Anbar was seen as auxiliary to that of local insurgents empowered by chronic protests against the government's military-style repression. This began to change when ISIS fighters raced across the border from Syria in June 2014, taking control of most Sunni Arab areas and declaring the Islamic State. It accelerated in August, when IS made a sudden thrust toward the Kurdish capital, Erbil, and attacked the Yazidi minority in Sinjar.

Various factors drove Western military intervention. Washington said protection of its Erbil consulate was a compelling factor, but Western investments in the Kurdish region, much more significant than those in other parts of Iraq, were no doubt part of the calculation.<sup>64</sup> In some quarters, the KRG was considered a more reliable partner than Baghdad and worthy of support.<sup>65</sup> The U.S. likely estimated that its passive posture until that moment was no longer sustainable and that the potential threat IS posed to Western interests necessitated military intervention. The protection of minorities theme resonated strongly with Western governments. It certainly was a trigger for the U.S., which after years of muddled responses to the complex challenges of escalating violence in the region could frame confronting IS and saving the Yazidis

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<sup>64</sup> The U.S. formally announced it would intervene to protect U.S. citizens in Erbil. "Statement by the President", The White House, 7 August 2014. An Erbil-based European investor said, "in those 48 hours we felt the threat approaching. And this time it was not a matter of a small village or distant city like Mosul. What was at stake in Erbil was much bigger". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 19 September 2014. Some commentators saw oil-related interests as the driving force behind the intervention. See Steve Coll, "Oil and Erbil", *The New Yorker*, 10 August 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Expectations vis-à-vis Iraqi politicians in general were low. President Obama said, "we cannot do for them what they are not willing to do by themselves". *The New York Times*, 8 August 2014. A former European diplomat echoed this: "We are not going to be the ones who keep Iraq together. Better to provide military protection to a rich and stable region in the north than have the entire country dissolve into chaos. Moreover, Total [France's largest oil company] has made no gains in Baghdad with Maliki in power, and Sinjar has offered a good opportunity to introduce a change". Crisis Group phone interview, September 2014. An Iraqi diplomat commented: "The U.S. is tired of investing politically in Iraq. They see Shiites as duplicitous, talking to the U.S. while cooperating with Iran, and they have no trust in the Sunnis. The Kurds look the more trustworthy". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, 8 March 2015.

from slaughter as a clear moral imperative. A European diplomat in Erbil acknowledged a similar motivation:

People are being displaced and killed. Women are being raped. Foreign fighters from our countries are fighting alongside ISIS. Humanitarian help is not enough. In such a situation, doing nothing would make us guilty.<sup>66</sup>

IS's decapitation of U.S. and British hostages in August and September created an emotional and psychological climate favourable to military retaliation. Together with the spectacular deterioration of the situation in Iraq, this helped create a local, regional and wider international diplomatic consensus. Neither the Iraqi government, nor the KRG, Iran, Turkey, Jordan, the Gulf states, Russia, China or any other powers voiced reservations over the prospect of intervention. This instant mobilisation also flowed from the Kurdish presidency's energetic role in shaping Western perceptions of the IS danger and lobbying for military assistance. Kurdish leaders put out a clear message: IS posed a threat not just to the Kurds, but also to Western civilization; standing up to it was everyone's responsibility; Kurdish forces were the West's best-placed ally in the fight; and time was of the essence to stop an unfolding humanitarian catastrophe.<sup>67</sup> Masoud Barzani said as much in *The Washington Post*:

There can be no overstating how perilous the situation is. The terrorist blitzkrieg of the Islamic State has swept from Syria into Iraq, with its goal of conquering and controlling a large swath of the world .... We are the United States' staunch allies in the region, and we have the only force in the area with the means and will to protect thousands of lives from the horrors that these terrorists bring. But we cannot do it alone.<sup>68</sup>

This message found a large audience with governments and public. Decision-makers sought to relax rules and speed up procedures for delivering weapons, bypassing domestic legislation or casting out established policy in the process.<sup>69</sup> More than a foreign policy issue, intervention came to be seen, or at least was portrayed, as an indispen-

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<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 28 September 2014. A European diplomat explicitly contrasted the Iraq situation to Syria's: "Now the priority is to stop this killing machine. Sinjar is special because minorities are specifically targeted, and it is our duty to intervene and protect them. In Syria, massacres have certainly happened, but minorities were not directly targeted". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 22 September 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Iraq's Kurdish leadership mobilised sympathisers in Washington, especially in Congress. Falah Mustafa Bakir, the KRG foreign minister, and Fuad Hussein, chief of staff to the Kurdish president, made several trips to seek military support. Falah Mustafa, <https://twitter.com/falahmustafa>, and *The Washington Post*, 10 October 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Masoud Barzani, "Kurds Need More Help to Defeat the Islamic State", 10 August 2014. Hemin Hawrami, the KDP foreign relations spokesperson, argued: "Daesh is not only a terrorist organisation. It's a group with the military capacity of a state. It represents a threat common to us and to the West, and can only be defeated through our peshmergas on the ground". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 22 September 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Sending weapons to the KRG broke Germany's taboo of not sending armaments to conflict zones. On 1 September 2014, the Bundestag approved the first shipment, a decision a German diplomat described as "historic". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 27 January 2015. *Die Welt*, 2 September 2014. For that first shipment, Germany did not ask Baghdad for permission, but it coordinated subsequent shipments to the Kurds with the central government. Crisis Group interview, German foreign ministry official, March 2015.

sable tool in an existential struggle in the defence of Western security and values.<sup>70</sup> Ordinary citizens broadly approved, in contrast with reactions to other recent military ventures – not least because of the moral abhorrence and outrage caused by the videotaped beheadings that had gone viral. Reporting on the itineraries of European volunteers joining IS strengthened perceptions that this enemy was threatening Western interests and people everywhere, nesting in and operating from the very midst of Western societies.

Over time, with growing deployment and mounting casualties, the Kurds asked for more and heavier weapons.<sup>71</sup> Such requests matched the Western preference for minimal direct engagement, except from the air – the opposite of earlier state-building enterprises in Iraq and Afghanistan that had gone sour. The Kurds looked reasonably well-organised, militarily proficient and trustworthy, if in need of equipment and training, unlike Sunni Arab proxies – tribes – that if armed might shift loyalties and throw in with IS.<sup>72</sup> Subcontracting the struggle to Kurdish forces, while providing air support, intelligence, technical expertise and political backing, had the allure of a low-cost, low-risk option far preferable to a more ambitious operation that would require boots on the ground and risk mission-creep as defeat of IS proved elusive. A British diplomat summed up the new, humbled outlook: “We have entered a post-Sykes-Picot era in which you cannot impose solutions by force. Our foreign policy principles are clear, and the limits of our prosperity and stability are just as clear. We act accordingly”.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> A European diplomat said, “for our prime minister, the question is above all domestic security. Daesh has street appeal back home. Many of its fighters are European nationals, and our citizens are among its victims”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 22 September 2014. Western officials often stress the moral dimension of intervention against IS. At the UN Security Council, UK Prime Minister David Cameron described IS as “cruel” and “medieval”, and its militants as “psychopathic, murderous, brutal people”. *Daily Telegraph*, 25 September 2014. A European diplomat highlighted its impact on Western domestic politics: “ISIS can hit Europe anytime, and we should therefore help support the fight against it. We should be careful, however. ISIS’s presence is transforming our democratic political system; growing security measures are eroding our citizens’ daily freedoms. We are caught in a dilemma: more security means less freedom; more freedom means more risks. But if we give up on our freedom, ... ISIS will truly win”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil 27 January 2015. On IS’s effect on public opinion, see Peter Harling and Sarah Birke, “The Islamic State through the Looking Glass”, *The Arabist*, 3 March 2015.

<sup>71</sup> In a February 2015 interview, Masoud Barzani claimed Kurds had a combined force of 70,000 along the front line, facing 50,000 IS fighters in Syria and Iraq (ie, not all directly confronting the Kurds in Iraq). He also claimed the peshmergas had lost 800 men, 300 of them officers, including a dozen generals. In response to whether he thought the Kurdish region in August 2014 faced “an existential threat”, he said, “certainly. It was a very serious threat”. If the Kurds were to receive heavy weapons, he added, “we would resolve the battle militarily very quickly”. *Al-Monitor* (translated from *Al-Hayat*), 15 February 2015.

<sup>72</sup> A European diplomat explained: “A significant reason for arming the Kurds is that we have a well-organised counterpart, the peshmerga affairs ministry”. Crisis Group phone interview, 22 November 2014. Another European diplomat said, “we trust the Kurds to use these weapons for the right purpose. Kurds have been victims themselves; they have been refugees. They are the best placed to protect minorities”. Crisis Group phone interview, Erbil, 23 September 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, 5 November 2014. The Sykes-Picot agreement was a World War I (1916) secret accord between the UK and France that divided the Middle East into their respective spheres of influence and laid the basis for the emergence of the present states and their boundaries.

#### IV. Aid's Unintended Consequences

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While coalition members stress their aim is to defeat or contain IS, the almost inevitable result of providing military aid is that they get embroiled in Iraqi and Kurdish affairs, with unanticipated consequences. Shaping the Iraqi and Kurdish responses to IS will be a necessary, if probably insufficient, condition for military success, but it will also pave the way for new conflicts.<sup>74</sup> How to maximise the effectiveness of weapons supplied to the KRG, if these end up with disparate party militias that, while perhaps unified in their aim of fighting IS, otherwise have divergent, even adversarial agendas? Or if these weapons are used to put force behind Kurdish claims in disputed territories with Sunni Arab populations, who then turn to IS for protection from such encroachment?

The immediate goal of the U.S. and its Western allies in Iraq is to fight IS, but their strategic goal remains to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, which they see threatened above all by the Kurds' well-known aspiration for statehood. To calibrate intervention in pursuit of these two objectives is the main political challenge the coalition faces. The net effect of coalition support has been to empower the KDP through weapons and political legitimisation (potentially altering the Kurds' relationship with Baghdad); to remain silent on provocative Kurdish land grabs in disputed territories (destabilising these areas, undermining Kurds' relations with Baghdad and increasing local Sunni Arab resentment on which IS feeds); and to entrench intra-Kurdish rivalries (providing space for Iranian influence to grow); while allowing IS to endure in a still permissive environment.

##### A. *Strategy in Flux as Weapons Flow*

The coalition's mix of motives in providing military support to the Kurds prompted a rushed, not well-considered response militating against coordination between members united only on the need to fight terrorism. Since day one, the extent and modalities of this support derived from each state's domestic considerations, and each delivered aid via its own direct link to the KRG. A European diplomat stressed:

The coalition has a common military goal: the defeat of IS. But political goals shift all the time. Each coalition member has a different reason for participating. It depends on where they place their bet. The first intervention in Sinjar was not a pre-planned operation. We are not yet able to work as a coalition; each member tends to deal bilaterally with the Kurds.<sup>75</sup>

Competing political objectives have prevented a common strategy. While some members have tried to coordinate, others have acted autonomously, triggering distrust among members as well as between the coalition and Kurdish officials.<sup>76</sup> This has

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<sup>74</sup> A European diplomat said: "We are concentrating on the fight against IS, not on what the KDP and PUK are doing. We don't have any intention to go deep into domestic politics. Our overarching principles are clear: we support the unity of the Iraqi state, focus on the fight against IS and support the Kurds to that end". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 27 January 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 27 January 2015.

<sup>76</sup> In January 2015, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden reportedly began joint training of peshmergas under rotating command. Those trying to coordinate military aid to the Kurds have been frustrated, especially with the U.S., which has pursued its own policy. A European diplomat said, "The coalition is like a mythical beast composed of different animals. We have com-



given rise in some quarters to calls to restructure military intervention and aid. A donor country diplomat lamented: "Our first reaction came during an emergency. We needed a quick solution to an unfolding disaster. Now we must plan ahead to boost cooperation between coalition members. But ... we are always running two weeks behind events".<sup>77</sup>

Coalition members see arming the Kurds as a quick security fix, divorced from broader political considerations. They have approached it as a technical question, with their defence ministries and military attachés taking the lead in what appears a mere logistical task. Arms have been delivered with no particular strings attached: neither end-use conditions nor follow-up. For example, the coalition has been hands-off on the peshmerga chain of command and strategy – who reports to whom, who gives orders and to what end; and who receives the weapons, to whom they are given and against whom and how they are used.<sup>78</sup>

The one thing coalition partners agree on is to preserve Iraq's unity, a principle often reiterated.<sup>79</sup> Barzani's independence call, even if not shared by all Kurds (at least not as an immediate matter),<sup>80</sup> helped consolidate the notion that a Kurdish state was the strategic priority of all factions, which led to reconsideration of how aid should be channelled. Donors began to insist on transfers being contingent on Baghdad's approval, especially after Maliki was shunted aside; this reinforced that Western military aid was premised on Kurds remaining in Iraq, which required participation in the central government.<sup>81</sup> Most importantly, Western states remain sceptical about

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mon principles, but mostly operate without real coordination. Today the U.S. focusses on Sinjar; tomorrow they forget about Sinjar and turn to, for instance, Anbar". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 5 November 2014. Lack of coordination is also felt among peshmerga commanders: one complained: "Clearly the coalition does not have a strategy. I wonder whether they are serious [about] defeating Daesh. The coalition is like twelve people who have to decide where to go to dinner, but each has different tastes. We often receive weapon systems difficult to combine on the battlefield". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 4 November 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 17 September 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Some coalition members argue they cannot infringe KRG sovereignty, others that the peshmerga affairs ministry, headed by a Gorran figure, is apolitical, with real decision-making power over front line forces. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Erbil, September 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Despite coalition rejection of Kurdish independence, senior Western officials started visiting Erbil after the IS crisis began for the first time in the Kurds' history, often before visiting Baghdad and thus elevating Masoud Barzani's status. The KRG played up the visits as de facto recognition of independence. Kurdistan presidency website, [www.krp.org/English/default.aspx](http://www.krp.org/English/default.aspx).

<sup>80</sup> Several Kurdish politicians see independence as not realistic for the foreseeable future. A senior PUK figure said, "Kurdish independence is a nice vision, but not a purely Kurdish decision. We cannot change geography: we have a 400-km border with Iran, and Turkey is ready to deploy tanks in Kurdistan at a moment's notice. [KDP and PUK] need to keep our neighbours in balance. The coalition may be here today but will be gone again tomorrow". Crisis Group interview, Saadi Pire, Erbil, 20 September 2014. Qubad Talabani added: "The West doesn't support Kurdish independence. What has changed is that before they would give us a flat 'no'; now we get a 'not yet' .... We are not ready .... We must first reform our entire system of governance. We lack a clear national security policy, an immigration policy or a central bank. We remain somewhere between a province and state". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 24 September 2014.

<sup>81</sup> In August 2014, Kurdish forces received Western military help directly. Thus, on 5 August, the U.S. CIA bypassed federal government regulations that require end-user certificates. After the first deliveries, however, coalition members started transferring weapons to the Kurds only after obtaining Baghdad's approval. See Michael Knight, "The Long Haul", *op. cit.* Baghdad's approval has been a mere formality. A European diplomat said, "we want military assistance to be in line with Iraqi sovereignty. Our policy ... is saving Iraq's territorial integrity. Each plane transporting weapons to the

restructuring the peshmergas into a professional, non-partisan force, which they see as tantamount to supporting independence. Echoing the fears, a coalition diplomat said, “we would like the Kurds to coordinate, but ... don’t want them to be too ‘united’ either”.<sup>82</sup> A colleague said, “once IS is defeated, we don’t want an independent Kurdistan to pop out. Today they [peshmergas] are fighting IS. Tomorrow, will they be fighting the army?”<sup>83</sup>

But how to ensure success against IS if the peshmergas fight under disparate chains of command and intelligence-gathering systems? Weapons and training do not automatically improve their performance against IS, at least not as long as they are organised on the basis of partisan loyalty, as this negatively affects activities from recruitment to training, battle readiness, logistics and supply lines.<sup>84</sup>

Fears of Kurdish independence caught the coalition in a contradictory policy of giving military aid without boosting intra-Kurdish coordination. The former in the absence of the latter may set back Kurdish hopes for independence, but it also reduces military efficiency in the fight against IS and widens intra-Kurdish divisions and thus encourages regional interference by Turkey and Iran.

#### **B. Feeding Kurdish Partisanship**

Without follow-up, arms feed the parties’ diverse paramilitary forces’ hunger for more supplies without forcing them to regulate distribution, account for use or shape a common anti-IS strategy. A peshmerga commander critical of this said:

Daesh [IS] cannot be defeated this way. On the battlefield, one unit gets support from Iran, the other from the U.S. or Turkey. Sometime I wish Daesh had entered the Kurdish region itself, so that we Kurds could have united. Having jihadis on our borders just keeps us divided.<sup>85</sup>

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Kurds needs prior approval from Baghdad. For us, this is a red line. The Kurds know they should not do anything that could challenge the country’s integrity if they don’t want to jeopardise their own interests”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 22 September 2014. Another European diplomat said, “this is also a message meant to reassure Baghdad, where there are many suspicions about this operation”. Crisis Group phone interview, November 2014. A U.S. official echoed this. Crisis Group interview, 28 January 2014. A European diplomat critical of this approach said, “the coalition is building its policy on fake assumptions: the existence of Iraq’s formal unity, the existence of an Iraqi army and the peshmerga affairs ministry having real power. None of this is true, and a policy based on these assumptions has little hope of succeeding”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 27 January 2015.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 26 January 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview, January 2015.

<sup>84</sup> A coalition member-state military attaché mentioned one of the challenges in improving peshmerga effectiveness against IS: “Whenever we ask how many peshmergas there are, we receive different numbers. Sometime ammunition is wasted or fails to reach the front lines. The peshmergas should tell us what they want to achieve, and we will provide them with the appropriate weapons. What often happens instead is that Kurdish officials come with requests that do not really match front line needs. They ask for training on high-tech weapons when they still have to learn basic fighting skills and how to stay at the front. If you ask for complex weapons, you need more time to be trained ..., and maintenance is going to be difficult. They don’t understand that a highly complex weapon system rarely has a better kill rate than a simple AK47”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 27 January 2015. The greatest challenge in improving peshmergas’ performance rests in improving their ability to stay at the front and organise efficiently when confronted with an emergency.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 28 January 2015.

The KDP has been the primary beneficiary of Western military aid.<sup>86</sup> Arms are routinely delivered to Erbil airport, giving the KDP, which controls the facility, the edge over the Gorran-administered ministry in deciding allocation. Likewise, facilities where Kurdish forces receive Western training are in Banislawa, near Erbil, giving the KDP easier access than the PUK. Most importantly, coalition airstrikes have targeted IS positions nearly exclusively in KDP-controlled parts of the disputed territories. The KDP has ingested Western military help and integrated the accompanying symbolic and material influence into its own exercise of power. Previously almost exclusively reliant on close partnership with Turkey, it has begun to build a diverse network of external relations, establishing itself as the West's privileged interlocutor in Kurdistan, while also reaching out to Iran.<sup>87</sup>

The KDP's relationship with the coalition has pushed the PUK further into the Iranian camp. This has not been cost-free for the PUK. On fronts where its forces have been deployed, Shiite militias have at times dictated terms to Kurdish commanders, imposing restrictions on deployments or claiming the victory in joint operations, as in Jalawla in December.<sup>88</sup> While the PUK might succeed in pushing IS out of the

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<sup>86</sup> Between August 2014-April 2015, coalition members reportedly launched more than 1,700 airstrikes in Iraq. Those targeting areas bordering the Kurdish region have concentrated on KDP-controlled areas, particularly near the Mosul Dam, Sinjar and Makhmour, as well as Kirkuk, where both PUK and KDP are present. They have not used airpower in areas exclusively controlled by the PUK and Shiite militias. The only exceptions have been Amerli, where the U.S. launched airstrikes in coordination with Turkmen Shiite militias retaking the town on 31 August 2014, and Tikrit, where the U.S. supported Shiite militias with airstrikes on 26 March 2015. For graphic portrayal of coalition airstrikes, see "Battle for Iraq and Syria", BBC Middle East, 14 April 2015. Some explain this de facto division of labour as a result of a tacit U.S.-Iranian understanding. A PUK official said, "during the attacks in southern Kirkuk [governorate] in mid-March [2015], U.S. airstrikes targeted areas where peshmergas [both KDP and PUK] are deployed, while stopping in areas around Bashir [a Shiite Turkoman town] where only Shiite militias are present". Crisis Group interview, Khaled Shwani, political advisor to the Iraqi president, Baghdad, 15 March 2015. A coalition member diplomat explained: "We are aware of the divisions among the Kurdish parties. But we hope that the weapons they receive will be used for the right purpose, according to our expectations. When IS's pressure decreases, military aid will drop accordingly. Some coalition members have a common interest with Iran that having Shiite militias fighting IS in those areas might be an acceptable temporary solution". Crisis group interview, Erbil, 23 September 2014.

<sup>87</sup> See graph in Appendix B. The KDP foreign relations chief explained: "We have good relations with all sides. We shape our foreign relations based on common interests, values and threats. With the West and Iran we have three of these. With Turkey we certainly have common interests but not necessarily common values or common threats, considering its position vis-à-vis Daesh" – a reference to rumours about alleged Turkish links to IS. Crisis Group interview, Hemin Hawrami, Erbil, 22 September 2014. A political analyst with close ties to the KDP said: "Now that we reoriented our relationships we need to pay attention to keeping them diverse and avoid becoming Iran's lackey like the PUK has done". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 3 November 2014. KDP officials have increased their lobbying efforts in the West, in the U.S. Congress in particular, to persuade Western countries to accept end-user certificates from the KRG for military aid (especially heavy weapons), bypassing Baghdad as well as the PUK. See *Washington Examiner*, 25 March 2015, and *Al-Monitor*, 24 March 2015.

<sup>88</sup> The PUK peshmergas and Shiite militias have an uneasy relationship. Though they deployed side by side outside Saadiya in Diyala governorate in November 2014, the Badr Corps prevented them from entering the town. In December, the PUK and Badr Corps made conflicting claims on the capture of nearby Jalawla, with the former accusing the latter of looting. A PUK fighter at Jalawla described the tensions: "We [peshmergas] liberated Jalawla, and it wasn't until three days later that Badr entered the town and proceeded to loot people's homes. We don't trust them. They are similar to Daesh but with a Hussein flag" – a reference to Hussein ibn Ali ibn Abi Taleb, Shiism's third

disputed territories, it can do so only by increasing its dependence on Iran, sharing power with Iran-supported Shiite militias and accepting a military partnership with the PKK/YPG.<sup>89</sup>

Uncoordinated, unbalanced, unconditional and unmonitored military aid for the Kurds and their internal divisions may indirectly allay coalition concerns that the beneficiaries are using this support to lay building blocks for statehood. But it also risks encouraging the rise of an array of paramilitary forces, each responding to a different party leader, thus reducing effectiveness against IS and threatening the unity of the Iraqi state in a different way.

### C. *An Intensifying Struggle over the Disputed Territories*

Since the coalition has so far resisted arming locals in IS-controlled areas for fear of their joining the enemy, its military aid has tipped the precarious Arab-Kurdish balance in the disputed territories in the latter's favour. In the absence of any attempt to promote local cooperation, this in turn may strengthen IS as the only player on the ground perceived as capable of pushing back against Kurdish land grabs. The Kurds' and Shiite militias' military gains against IS enable them to promote their own preferred personalities in administration and security in governorates with Sunni Arab populations (Ninewa, Salaheddin, Diyala, Kirkuk), further polarising an already volatile situation and loosening ties with Baghdad.<sup>90</sup>

Indeed, since IS's arrival, the Kurds have made unprecedented strides beyond their region's formal boundary, the Green Line.<sup>91</sup> The dispute between the KRG and the capital over these territories has lasted a decade, their forces arrayed along a virtual "trigger line" that bisects the territories. During 2013, the conflict between Sunni Arabs and the Shiite-led central government allowed the Kurds to push back against the army, whose June 2014 collapse in the north left Kurdish forces with exclusive control over most mixed-population areas outside the Green Line. Kirkuk city and its surrounding area were the most important of these strategically, due to Kirkuk oil field and several others (notably Bai Hassan), whose installations KDP-affiliated forces promptly seized.

Some Sunni Arab districts in the disputed territories became battlefields and were depopulated; others that fell to IS have been denied state services and targeted by airstrikes, displacing more civilians, so changing area demographics.<sup>92</sup> The cities of

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Imam whose killing by other descendants of the Prophet Muhammad solidified the Sunni-Shiite schism in Islam. Crisis Group interview, Kalar, 28 January 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Signs are becoming manifest, with pro-PUK media publishing pictures of a PUK counter-terrorism unit shaking hands with YPG fighters in Kirkuk and training YPG forces in Syria.

<sup>90</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Defeating the Iraqi State*, op. cit.

<sup>91</sup> On the Kurds' June 2014 advances beyond the Green Line (including capture of oil fields), see the Introduction. They lost some of these territories to IS in August. They have retaken most, except the Christian- and Yazidi-populated towns of Sinjar, Bashiqa and Bartella, as well as villages north east, north and north west of Mosul. See map in Appendix A.

<sup>92</sup> Since June 2014, three basic scenarios have been on display, depending on the area's tribal, ethnic and sectarian fabric. Suleiman Beg, a predominantly Sunni Arab town in Salaheddin governorate, fell to IS in June 2014, then became a battlefield between peshmergas/Shiite militias and IS, displacing its population. Nearby Tuz Khurmatu, with a Kurds-Shiite Turkmen-Sunni Arabs mix, saw extensive looting of a Sunni Arab neighbourhood on the outskirts, pushing residents toward the centre where they came under Kurdish-Shiite control. In Jalawla (Diyala governorate), with deep Arab-Kurdish tensions, the Sunni Arab Qarawee tribe stood firm and eventually did a

Erbil and Suleimaniya now host many prominent Sunni Arabs, including Ninewa Governor Atheel al-Nujayfi, and leaders of minority groups, all left with few options other than to fall back to the Kurdish region. This has further increased Kurdish sway over Sunni Arab affairs in the disputed territories and adjacent areas.<sup>93</sup>

The KDP and PUK follow similar, though uncoordinated, strategies to further dominance in their areas of influence: the KDP in the Ninewa plain and points of access to neighbouring Kurdish-populated areas of Syria, the PUK in Kirkuk and Diyala governorates. Along the front line within the PUK's zone, Shiite militias often have thwarted Kurdish ambitions, sidelining local Sunni Arab leaders by recruiting Sunni forces under Shiite militia leadership in preparation of these areas' recapture from IS.<sup>94</sup> Seeking compromise with the Kurds or, at times, with Shiite armed factions remains the best bet for local leaders who want to recruit, train, arm and organise fighters against IS, but any such arrangement has a price.<sup>95</sup>

Kurdish forces make sure to "liberate" Sunni Arab-populated areas only after striking deals with local leaders that solidify their control by imposing their own leadership and making the local figures dependent on them for the protection and services essential for return of the displaced.<sup>96</sup> A Ninewa tribal leader at the KDP-controlled front highlighted the dilemma in the disputed territories:

We [Sunni Arab tribes] need serious partners to acquire the resources we need to liberate our land. Today there is no central state to engage with, and Sunni leaders in Baghdad have become irrelevant. The only option we have is to talk to the Kurds. But we cannot sell out to the Kurds either. Who is going to guarantee me they are not going to impose themselves and oppress my people? We know what the Kurds want: they want our land. We have started discussing issues related to the local budget, services and agriculture. The problem now is how to convince our [Sunni] people that this is the only way forward.<sup>97</sup>

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deal with IS, until IS retreated in November. Crisis Group observations, November 2014. Another source of Arab grievance in the disputed territories is that in areas under Kurdish control, Arab residents have not been allowed to return even after Kurds were granted freedom of movement once the KDP deemed the area safe. "Iraq: Iraqi Kurdistan: Arabs Displaced, Cordoned Off, Detained", Human Rights Watch, 26 February 2015.

<sup>93</sup> Many Sunni Arab tribal leaders, governors and provincial council members from Ninewa, Salaheddin and Diyala have moved to Erbil. The KRG has issued residence permits and housing to some of the most prominent. Crisis Group observations, September-December 2014.

<sup>94</sup> Suleiman Beg's mayor, Taleb Mohammed, told how after failing to negotiate its liberation from IS with the PUK, he had to deal with Badr Corps chief Hadi al-Ameri, agreeing to recruit Sunni forces under his command. Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 28 January 2015.

<sup>95</sup> The KDP offered Ninewa's governor, Atheel al-Nujayfi, to train and equip a Mosul police force of 12,000 in Dohuk governorate (Kurdish region) to prepare for retaking the city. It also made peshmerga guards available in Al-Qosh, where the governorate moved its administration following IS's takeover. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 27 September 2014.

<sup>96</sup> Taleb Mohammed, Suleiman Beg's mayor, explained: "The city council building has been destroyed; the city does not have electricity; there is no water, no hospitals. I can work to reestablish basic services, but I can do nothing without a force to secure the town first". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 28 January 2015.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 18 September 2014. Sunni Arab leaders in the disputed territories contend Baghdad, by excluding them from managing security, has left them no choice but to turn to the Kurds. A Ninewa leader explained: "In 2003 I took part in the transition and put my trust in the central government. Today we are in another phase: Sunni Arabs have no say in the capital, where

Such guarantees are elusive. Any Kurdish- (or Shiite-) led campaign against IS provides them further sway over local institutions. And just as Sunni exclusion from the Baghdad government created fertile ground for IS's control and recruitment in the areas it conquered, Kurdish hegemony in Sunni Arab-populated parts of the disputed territories bodes ill for the area's future stability.<sup>98</sup>

#### D. *The Unresolved Conflict between Baghdad and Erbil*

Pressing the Kurds to participate in the central government has done little to improve the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad, which has long been bedevilled by land, natural resources and revenue issues. International military support complicates this further by giving the Kurds not only greater military capability, but also diplomatic cover.

Tensions between Erbil and Baghdad became particularly acute during the last years of Maliki's rule. He pushed aggressively against Kurdish territorial claims and unilateral deals with foreign oil companies. Iraq's president, Jalal Talabani, a savvy Kurdish politician who had helped mediate and buffer the Kurds' relationship with the central government, faded into the background after a December 2012 stroke, leaving Masoud Barzani to confront Baghdad directly. For several years, Barzani and Maliki sparred over their differences in a way that may have boosted their popularity among their constituencies but also further inflamed Kurdish-Arab tensions, especially on the ground in places such as Kirkuk.

In February 2014, Baghdad began to withhold the annual budget allocation to the KRG (17 per cent of the state budget) in retaliation for its decision to export oil from fields in the Kurdish region directly through its new pipeline to Turkey without seeking Baghdad's approval. The KRG, facing an acute budget crisis, had to stop paying civil servants, and popular resentment of Baghdad peaked. After IS seized Mosul, thousands of displaced Arabs sought refuge in Kurdistan, causing petrol shortages and further stimulating anti-Arab sentiment.<sup>99</sup> There was a widespread belief among Kurds that they were paying the price for the financial, security and humanitarian crises caused by Maliki's disastrous governance.<sup>100</sup>

When Maliki was pushed aside, the Kurds breathed a sigh of relief. Pressed by Western nations supplying them military aid, they agreed reluctantly to reach out to Baghdad and join the Abadi government, with which they were able to quickly reach an initial compromise over oil. This modest step was the result of a tacit U.S.-Iranian

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Kurds and Shiites control the security file. My priority today is to protect my land; Baghdad cannot help me in this". Crisis Group phone interview, Erbil, 21 September 2014.

<sup>98</sup> Atheel al-Nujayfi, Ninewa's governor, blamed the Kurds: "The peshmergas should be fighting Daesh and not Sunni Arabs. Daesh feeds on the Arab-Kurdish struggle. It wants people to believe it is protecting Arabs from the Kurds, and somehow it succeeds". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 27 September 2014. Another Sunni Arab leader held the governor responsible: "I am not surprised people in Ninewa support Daesh. For four years the Nujayfi family and others voiced opposition to the Kurds. People believed them, but now they see them sitting in Erbil, while Daesh is reclaiming Arab land from the Kurds". Crisis Group phone interview, August 2014.

<sup>99</sup> Many Kurds see the fleeing Sunni Arabs as a threat, much as IS. Reflecting a wider sentiment, an Erbil taxi driver who had moderate views on Sunni Arabs until then, told Crisis Group in September: "We allowed them to enter Kurdistan, we gave them work, but as Daesh came closer to Erbil we couldn't trust them anymore. It is not possible to live with these people".

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group observations, Iraqi Kurdistan, June-September 2014.

understanding about the need to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity; it did not reflect progress toward a genuine settlement of old disputes.<sup>101</sup>

Scepticism about the agreement was mutual. A PUK politburo member qualified it as a "temporary deal", while the "will, intent and goals of both the KRG and Baghdad remain fundamentally at odds".<sup>102</sup> At a March conference in Suleimaniya, the Iraqi oil minister and Kurdish natural resources minister publicly traded non-implementation charges.<sup>103</sup> Another dispute concerned the Kurds' request to share weapons the central government received to fight IS.<sup>104</sup> The prospect of negotiating federal oil and revenue-sharing laws is as distant as ever.<sup>105</sup>

The Baghdad-KRG gap arguably is deepening, with IS holding the knife separating them. Security cooperation is either non-existent or a factional alignment of PUK peshmergas and Shiite militias sponsored by Iran. IS has prompted Baghdad and the Kurdish parties to stock up on weapons and mobilise external allies instead of working more closely together with a sense of solidarity or at least common interest informed by shared threat. Iraq, in sum, is being flooded with weapons despite a political compact too weak to allow these to be used for defending and strengthening the country as a whole.

#### E. *A Vanishing Frontier with Syria*

The blurring of borders due to IS military successes is entwining the once separate Kurdish struggles in Syria and Iraq, paving the way for Iraqi Kurdish parties to gain greater sway in Syrian affairs. The PYD/YPG military advantage on the ground since 2011 spurred Iraq's Kurdish factions, particularly the KDP (encouraged by Turkey), to project political influence into Syria by hosting Syrian Kurdish party representatives in Erbil, and to recruit and train an alternative Syrian peshmerga force, while pressing for an agreement that would place YPG forces under overall KDP command. Nevertheless, the YPG has kept almost exclusive control over Syria's Kurdish areas,

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<sup>101</sup> The U.S. and Iran have long had a tacit understanding of the need to preserve Iraq's unity; this now translates into Iranian support for proxies, bringing together under its umbrella Shiite factions, PUK, and PKK and its Syrian affiliates, and offering Sunni Arabs only a token role. The U.S. has done little to counter this. An Iranian diplomat said, "we support a united Iraq. Iran wants to help Haider al-Abadi overcome [his] challenges. It is fully in our interests to have a peaceful neighbourhood. We want a stable Iraq, and a stable central government in Baghdad. This shouldn't be a problem if Kurds and Sunni tribes cooperate with Shiite factions in Baghdad". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 28 September 2014. A U.S. official said similarly, "we support a 'one-Iraq' policy", acknowledging that this "is a common interest between the U.S. and Iran. Both are part of the fight against IS". Crisis Group interview, 28 January 2015.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 27 January 2015.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group observation, Suleimaniya, 11 March 2015. Respect for the deal is fragile. A Gorran member, adviser to the Kurdish parliament speaker, characterised it as "a good-will gesture ... hardly implementable from the start ... reached as the result of a push from Iran and the U.S. But we are not so unrealistic to believe you can resolve everything by sending one person to Baghdad with his bodyguards .... As long as the central government is not paying public sector salaries, it cannot claim sovereignty over Kurdistan region". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 29 January 2015.

<sup>104</sup> Masoud Barzani, in calling for support with tanks, helicopters and armoured personnel carriers, insisted: "We must get our share. If Iraq receives 300 tanks, we must take our share of them". *Al-Monitor* (translated from *Al-Hayat*), 15 February 2015.

<sup>105</sup> The KRG and the central government have yet to agree on an overarching set of federal laws regulating crucial issues such as control over oil fields, management of oil production and exports and revenue sharing. See *Iraq Oil Report*, 3 December 2014.

preventing KDP-supported peshmergas from crossing into Syria and taking the lead, at times successfully, in repelling IS.<sup>106</sup>

IS's September offensive in Kobani, a predominantly Kurdish town on the Syrian-Turkish border and part of the PYD-run administration in northern Syria, attracted global attention. The PYD sought coalition support for the YPG military, to push back IS but also to gain international recognition for its "self-democratic administration", inspired by PKK leader Abdallah Öcalan.<sup>107</sup> Unlike in Sinjar, calls to support the YPG in Kobani presented regional and wider international actors with a dilemma. Turkey was torn between need to uphold its partnership with the anti-IS coalition and hostility toward the PKK. How could it fight the former without aiding the latter? The U.S.-led coalition hesitated to support the YPG directly, in part due to the group's continued reliance on Syrian-regime-controlled institutions, but mostly for fear that such support would anger Turkey.

The solution found was for the U.S. to support the YPG indirectly through the Iraqi Kurds, partners to both Washington and Ankara. The YPG transmitted intelligence for U.S. targeting through KDP security officials and received weapons through Turkey via KDP and PUK forces deployed beside the YPG. In the "Dohuk agreement", KDP, PUK and PYD committed to shared governance in Syria.<sup>108</sup> The combined Kurdish effort, supported by coalition airstrikes, broke both the military and political impasse over Kobani and served virtually all interests: it gave Ankara the best among bad choices, relieving it of the need to decide whether to support PKK-affiliated Kurds;<sup>109</sup> provided a way for Turkey's friends to pursue their policy without alienating their ally;<sup>110</sup> and satisfied Iran's interest to see PUK fighters injected into the Syrian battlefield, inducing YPG-PUK cooperation.<sup>111</sup> The YPG received the requested military aid, boosting YPG/PYD hopes of future recognition; Iraqi Kurdish parties acquired a direct foothold in Syria; and Barzani enhanced his image as the Kurds' paramount leader.

The one thing it did not do was markedly improve intra-Kurdish strategic cooperation against IS or otherwise. The Dohuk agreement has yet to strengthen military cooperation between the main Kurdish forces or integrate Syrian Kurdish groups in-

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<sup>106</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Reports, *Syria's Kurds: a Struggle within a Struggle*, and *The Flight of Icarus: PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, both op. cit.

<sup>107</sup> The PYD saw the Kobani fight as a chance to gain the West's favour and attract international recognition for its "self-administration" project in what it calls "Rojava" (Western Kurdistan) in northern Syria. For background, see *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> On 22 October 2014, the KDP and PUK gathered Syrian Kurdish allies and the PYD in Dohuk to refresh a 2012 unimplemented agreement on administrative and military cooperation in Syria, done in Erbil, and pave the way for the Iraqi Kurdish parties' military intervention in Syria's Kurdish areas. A day before, the KRG parliament approved peshmerga deployment in Kobani. Eight days later, some 150 Iraqi peshmergas reportedly crossed into Syrian Kurdish territory through Turkey and proceeded to Kobani. *Rudaw*, 22 October 2014.

<sup>109</sup> Ankara reportedly went along under U.S. pressure. Columnist Cengiz Çandar described the government's dilemma of accepting peshmerga passage through its territory: "The pressure on Turkey was so strong that the government could do little but accept the compromise. The argument was, if the required backup forces must be Kurds, let them be Kurds, but at least let them be the kinds of Kurds we are friends with". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 26 October 2015.

<sup>110</sup> The move freed the U.S. and others from having to formerly shift their stance vis-à-vis the PKK. Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Ankara, 8 November 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Both PYD and PUK officials suggested that Iran assented to the Iraqi Kurds' deployment in Kobani because they included PUK fighters. Crisis Group interviews, November 2014.



to the PYD-run administration of Syrian Kurdistan.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, the PYD/YPG made little real progress toward international recognition and direct military aid.<sup>113</sup> Instead, the group has been yoked into an arrangement with the KDP so as to benefit from U.S. airstrikes and with the PUK in order to receive weapons from Iran.<sup>114</sup> However, the KDP and PUK are likely to do more to undermine than advance the PYD's attempt to impose its own form of self-government in northern Syria, its "Rojava" (Western Kurdistan) self-administration project.<sup>115</sup>

Since their Kobani victory, the KDP, PUK and PYD/YPG have spread their rivalry across Iraq and Syria. Sinjar town, which had earlier seen global mobilisation in support of the Yazidi minority, became its new locus. In January, the KDP focussed operations on Sinjar in order to cut IS's Syria-Mosul supply line and create a channel to Syrian Kurds in the Jazeera region and so counterbalance the PYD in Syria. The YPG responded by stepping up involvement in Iraq, calling for a self-administered canton in Sinjar (based on PKK political ideology) and organising Yazidis in the "Sinjar Protection Force" (Quwa Himayat Shingal), thwarting the KDP from retaking the town.<sup>116</sup>

The PUK supported YPG moves in Sinjar, reflecting Iran's desire to subordinate the YPG/PYD to its pro-regime, anti-Turkey Syria agenda via alliance with the PUK.<sup>117</sup> Barzani's efforts to bring all Kurdish peshmergas (including the YPG) under his command have achieved little.<sup>118</sup> He failed to bring in PUK and PKK hard liners (internally

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<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group observations, November-March 2015.

<sup>113</sup> In the Kobani aftermath, a PYD official declared buoyantly: "Before Kobani, Barzani and his allies claimed they provided the way for us to Europe and the U.S. Now that we are part of the anti-Daesh coalition, they cannot say this any longer. Kobani has been a success for us. We have received international recognition for our struggle; now it's in Barzani's interest to join us, because while we succeeded in Kobani, he failed in Sinjar". Crisis Group interview, Aldar Khalil, Erbil, 2 November 2014. A KDP official in charge of the Syria file gave his party's contrary view: "The coalition deals solely with [Iraqi] Kurds and does not have any link with the PYD. During the Kobani crisis, the PYD had no choice but to accept our help". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 28 October 2014. Western diplomats met with PYD leaders without formally recognising the group. After the U.S. began giving indirect military support to the YPG, a U.S. spokesperson said, "the PYD is a different group than the PKK legally, under U.S. law". Daily State Department press briefing, 20 October 2014. In February, French President François Hollande received a PYD official in Paris, while EU diplomats met with PYD leader Salih Muslim. No one has taken steps to directly support the PYD, however, much less recognise its local government. In March 2015, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office declared that "it will be very difficult to provide any support to the PYD while they maintain links to the Assad regime and refuse to cooperate fully with the moderate Syrian opposition. We are also concerned that the PYD maintains some links with the PKK". *Rudaw*, 23 March 2015.

<sup>114</sup> Following IS offensives in areas north east and east of Hasakeh (Tell Tamr, Tell Hamees and Tell Brak) in northern Syria in February-March 2015, the YPG requested further U.S. strikes and weapons, both of which were supplied through coordination with the Iraqi Kurdish parties.

<sup>115</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Reports, *Syria's Kurds: a Struggle within a Struggle*, and *The Flight of Icarus: PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, both op. cit.

<sup>116</sup> In August 2014, YPG deployed in Sinjar to open a corridor between Iraq and Syria that helped local Yazidis flee IS after the KDP peshmergas' retreat. In January 2015, when the KDP proclaimed Sinjar's liberation, the YPG supported Yazidi groups that declared Sinjar a "self-administered canton", thus preventing the KDP from taking over. *Al-Monitor*, 3 February 2015.

<sup>117</sup> A Syrian Kurdish party leader commenting on the PUK's increased role in supporting the YPG against IS in Syria said, "with Iraqi peshmergas entering Syria, we risk finding ourselves under the dual rule of the PUK-PKK and the Syrian regime". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 6 November 2014.

<sup>118</sup> The Kurdish parliament's deputy speaker, a KDP figure close to Barzani, claimed the president had been making continuous efforts at rapprochement with the PKK's mainstream branch led by

the most powerful), who saw his efforts as part of an old ambition to impose his family's and party's leadership.

Instead, the fight against IS in Syria and Iraq allowed the KDP and PUK to insert their forces into Syrian Kurdistan and increased the presence of PKK-affiliated fighters in Iraq. It thus helped exacerbate intra-Kurdish competition in both countries, because while the coalition and Iran have been fighting a common enemy in both theatres, they favour different Kurdish partners. How this will play out as the fight extends to Mosul and elsewhere should be a concern.

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Murat Karayilan and moderates in the PUK. Crisis Group interview, Jaffar Ibrahim Eminki, Erbil, 26 January 2015. A senior PUK official stated he had no confidence in such attempts: "Barzani wishes to register his name in history. But if he wants to achieve results, he needs to detach himself from his party. He cannot be the leader of all Kurds and at the same time head of the KDP". Crisis Group interview, Khaled Shwani, Baghdad, 15 March 2015.

## V. Conclusion: Toward a New Approach

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IS's arrival on the Iraqi scene caught the Kurds unprepared, as Kurdish politics was transitioning from the KDP-PUK strategic agreement to a situation in which both parties' leaderships and security forces were consumed by an internal power struggle that encouraged regional involvement. The coalition's rushed, uncoordinated, unbalanced military assistance accelerated this trend. Peshmerga forces are progressively morphing into an assemblage of paramilitary groupings, each responding to a different party leader – the opposite of a professional security organisation. Injecting large quantities of weapons into such an environment risks feeding rivalries without improving performance against IS.

Western countries have overly focussed on the risk of an independent Kurdistan, neglecting how their support is altering the already fragile equilibrium between the Kurds and their Kurdish and non-Kurdish environments and could equally compromise Iraq's unity. IS's defeat will depend on strong intra-Kurdish cooperation, with Kurdish parties continuing efforts to transform the peshmergas into a professional military institution and balancing their common interests vis-à-vis Iran and Turkey, as the KDP-PUK strategic agreement used to do, and on security cooperation with the Abadi government so as to reduce tensions in the disputed territories. These are preconditions for the coalition's twin aims of defeating IS, while preserving the unity of both the Iraqi state and country.

The coalition thus needs to change its approach radically. First, it must use military aid to the Kurds to build upon some of the KRG's earlier achievements in transforming KDP and PUK forces into a single, professional military institution under civilian control, rather than undermine them with weapons that further divide the parties and their leaders. A single command chain is indispensable if the coalition is to maximise returns on its support by improving military effectiveness, curbing regional interference and refocussing each faction's objectives on the fight against IS instead of inter- and intra-party competition or resource and land grabs in the disputed territories. As an initial step, members should coordinate military aid through a shared coalition command that would negotiate delivery exclusively with the KRG's peshmerga affairs ministry and stipulate and ensure that weapons and training will be provided only to KDP-PUK joint brigades. This would be a powerful incentive for the parties to integrate their forces.

Secondly, the coalition should use aid to improve Baghdad-Erbil military cooperation. This requires conditioning support on the Kurds' organising anti-IS operations in coordination with Baghdad rather than with Shiite militias and working with both the government and non-Kurds in the disputed territories on a post-IS plan allowing reinstatement of local institutions and security forces.

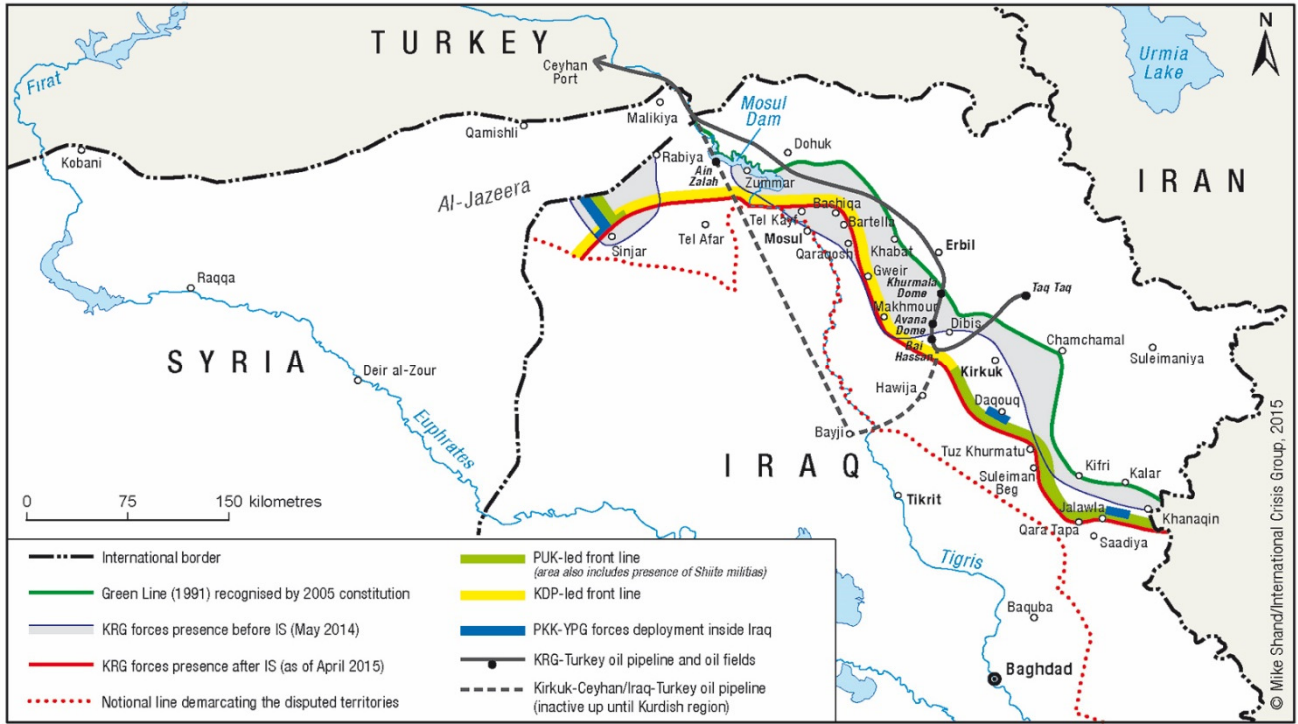
The Kurds have an overriding interest in putting their house in order. If they are to gain maximum benefit from the momentum of international support to fight IS that has increased their leverage against neighbours, they cannot continue to countenance fractured governance and security institutions. The KRG's most important security threat is its lack of a professional peshmerga force able to protect the region from aggression. If peshmerga forces remain partisan and fragmented, decision-making hubs will multiply, creating gaps in intelligence and opportunities for external interference and security breaches. Institutional reform must focus on restoring KDP-PUK strategic coordination. This could lead to normalisation of the parties' relationship with the PKK/PYD. Despite their differences in ideology and regional alliances,

the KDP, PUK and PKK/PYD need each other to prevent states in the region from dominating and manipulating them.

Kurdish cooperation with Sunni Arabs in the disputed territories is also overdue. The latter's alienation has empowered IS; continued Kurdish dominance there imposed by the force of arms can only rebound against the Kurds' own security, as it would further mobilise Sunni Arab support for IS or other insurgent activity. Moreover, Kurds' coordination with government forces, rather than Shi'ite militias, in anti-IS operations would help long-term stability for the four governorates surrounding the Kurdish region. That region's security depends more than ever on preserving and cooperating with a functioning Iraqi state.

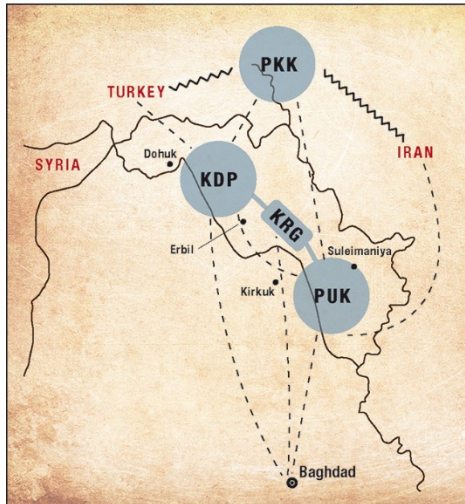
**Baghdad/Erbil/Brussels, 12 May 2015**

**Appendix A: Map of Kurdish Military Deployments in Northern Iraq**

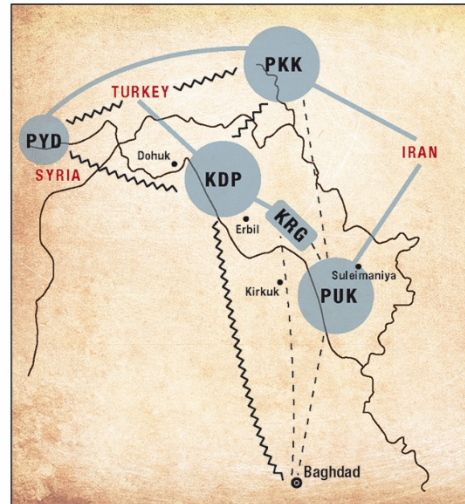


Appendix B: Diagram of Intra-Kurdish Relationships in Northern Iraq

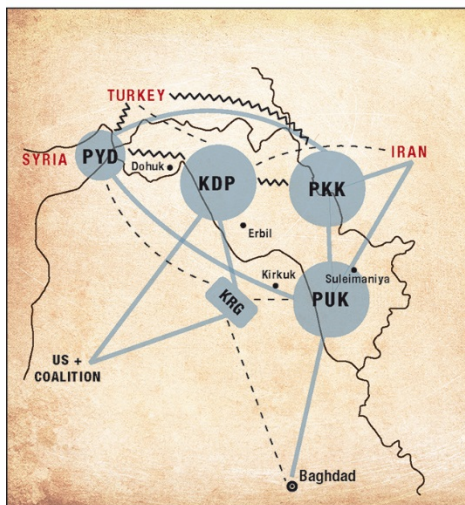
1. Strategic Agreement phase (2007-2013)



2. Kurdish political scene before IS (May 2014)



3. Kurdish political scene after IS (2015)



## Appendix C: Glossary of Terms

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IS	Islamic State, also known as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In Arabic it is known as Daesh, for Daw-lat al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham.
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrata Kurdistan): founded in 1946, one of the main Kurdish parties in Iraq, headed by Masoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdish region since 2005.
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Hikûmetî Herêmi Kurdistan): the official governing body of the predominantly Kurdish region of northern Iraq.
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party): Kurdish party in Turkey founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan. It started an armed insurgency there in 1984 and currently maintains around 3,500-5,000 insurgents based in the Qandil mountain range of northern Iraq, as well as in Turkey.
PUK	Yeketî Niştîmanî Kurdistan (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan): founded in 1975, one of the main Kurdish parties in Iraq, headed by Jalal Talabani, president of Iraq in 2005-2014.
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party): the Syrian Kurdish affiliate of the PKK, founded in 2003.
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Defence Corps): the PYD's armed wing in Syria, established in 2012 and deriving from the PKK. It is the dominant armed Kurdish force in Syria.

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## Appendix D: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 125 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown, and Dean of Paris School of International Affairs (Sciences Po), Ghassan Salamé.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, assumed his role on 1 September 2014. Mr Guéhenno served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000-2008, and in 2012, as Deputy Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on Syria. He left his post as Deputy Joint Special Envoy to chair the commission that prepared the white paper on French defence and national security in 2013.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices or representation in 26 locations: Baghdad/Suleimaniya, Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Bishkek, Bogotá, Cairo, Dakar, Dubai, Gaza City, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Kabul, London, Mexico City, Moscow, Nairobi, New York, Seoul, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis and Washington DC. Crisis Group currently covers some 70 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan Strait, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in Europe, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, North Caucasus, Serbia and Turkey; in the Middle East and North Africa, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Western Sahara and Yemen; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela.

This year Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument for Stability, Finnish Foreign Ministry, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Irish Aid, Italian Foreign Ministry, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, United Kingdom Department for International Development, U.S. Agency for International Development.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Adessium Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Koerber Foundation, Oak Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Open Society Initiative for West Africa, Ploughshares Fund, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Tinker Foundation.

**May 2015**



## Appendix E: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2012

### Israel/Palestine

*Back to Basics: Israel's Arab Minority and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Middle East Report N°119, 14 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*The Emperor Has No Clothes: Palestinians and the End of the Peace Process*, Middle East Report N°122, 7 May 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas & the Arab Uprisings*, Middle East Report N°129, 14 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Israel and Hamas: Fire and Ceasefire in a New Middle East*, Middle East Report N°133, 22 November 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Extreme Makeover? (I): Israel's Politics of Land and Faith in East Jerusalem*, Middle East Report N°134, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Extreme Makeover? (II): The Withering of Arab Jerusalem*, Middle East Report N°135, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Buying Time? Money, Guns and Politics in the West Bank*, Middle East Report N°142, 29 May 2013 (also available in Arabic).

*Leap of Faith: Israel's National Religious and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Middle East Report N°147, 21 November 2013 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*The Next Round in Gaza*, Middle East Report N°149, 25 March 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Gaza and Israel: New Obstacles, New Solutions*, Middle East Briefing N°39, 14 July 2014.

*Bringing Back the Palestinian Refugee Question*, Middle East Report N°156, 9 October 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Toward a Lasting Ceasefire in Gaza*, Middle East Briefing N°42, 23 October 2014 (also available in Arabic).

### Egypt/Syria/Lebanon

*Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle Over Nahr al-Bared*, Middle East Report N°117, 1 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria*, Middle East Briefing N°32, 5 March 2012 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

*Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, Middle East Briefing N°33, 10 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Lost in Transition: The World According to Egypt's SCAF*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°121, 24 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria's Mutating Conflict*, Middle East Report N°128, 1 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, Middle East Report N°131, 12 October 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian conflict*, Middle East Report N°132, 22 November 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, Middle East Report N°136, 22 January 2013 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

*Too Close For Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon*, Middle East Report N°141, 13 May 2013 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, Middle East Report N°143, 27 June 2013 (also available in Arabic).

*Marching in Circles: Egypt's Dangerous Second Transition*, Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°35, 7 August 2013 (also available in Arabic).

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