

coalitions are unable to send any weapons to the Peshmerga due to the central government's restrictions. To this day, only minor weapons support from the international coalition have been approved by Baghdad. Yet, the Peshmerga maintain their support for the Iraqi forces in the retaking of Mosul and they are cooperating in the defeat of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Without the support of Peshmerga, the Iraqi army would have not been able to liberate Mosul.

Peshmerga before the ISIS invasion of Mosul

The rise of ISIS in northern Iraq was inevitable; the way some Sunnis welcomed them was no surprise as they had been alienated by the power of the central government of Baghdad. Moreover, ISIS thrived during the civil war in Syria, the bitter Sunni-Shia conflict in Iraq, and the power vacuum in Iraq, particularly in the Sunni-Arab parts. ISIS constitutes an international threat, but it has benefited from a civil disorder in Iraq, not only to recruit fighters but also to gain ground amongst Arab Sunnis. Their existence in Iraq is a direct threat to the unity of the country. However, the unfortunate reality is that Iraq is divided along ethnic, religious and sectarian lines.

Following the ISIS invasion of Mosul,⁶ Iraq's second largest city with a population of over two million, along with other areas of the Nineveh province, the Tikkit and Dyala provinces and the later occupation of large parts of Sunni territories in northern Iraq, the country descended into complete chaos, apart from the Kurdish region in the north. The border between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the central government was cut-off apart from a few kilometers in the southern area. In a matter of days after the fall of Mosul, ISIS took control of a significant amount of Iraqi territory. On the August 3, 2014, ISIS proclaimed itself an Islamic Caliphate across a sizeable part of Sunni areas in Iraq and Syria with no regard to international borders. Over 3 million Iraqis were internally displaced from their homes with more than half of them coming to Kurdistan to seek protection.

On August 3, 2014, ISIS attacked Sinjar (110 kilometers from Mosul) without warning and quickly took over neighboring towns and villages. The attack on Sinjar, with an overwhelmingly Yezidi-Kurdish population, was a shift of policy by ISIS towards the Kurdistan region. With the attack

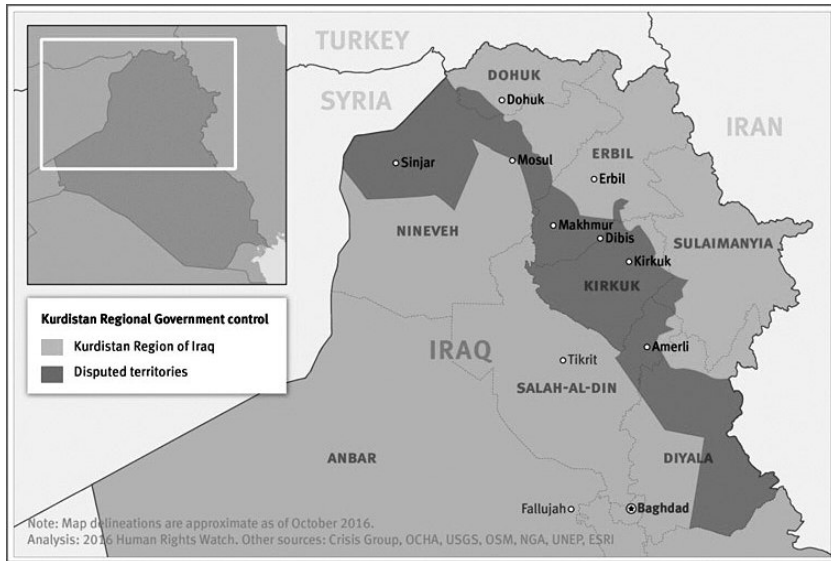
⁶ The invasion of these territories happened between June 4-10, 2014

on Nineveh, the international community suddenly woke up to the ISIS threat of global terrorism; prior to that attack, ISIS was not regarded as a “terror threat” but rather a participant in the internal sectarian strife between the Shia and Sunni. Their ability to bring about the repressive control of Mosul and surrounding areas, an important Iraqi territory and geopolitical location on the border between Iraq and Syria, was an example of ISIS’s social, economic, political and military prowess. They gained more credibility amongst their followers, both in the West and in the Middle East, when they easily defeated and humiliated the Iraqi army, seized sizeable amounts of cash from the banks in Mosul, took control over many oil fields and captured modern Russian and U.S. military equipment and weaponry which the four Iraqi army divisions and two federal police divisions had abandoned in their flight from their bases around Mosul. They gained the support of a large portion of the Sunni population of Nineveh. These people felt abandoned by the Iraqi army, who were majority Shia, with no allegiance or desire to fight for the Sunni inhabitants of Nineveh. And the Sunni who were in the Iraqi Army at time, rejected to fight against ISIS. As ISIS advanced and took over control of areas around Mosul, the Iraqi army abandoned their duties and left their territorial domain unguarded; Kurdish Peshmerga forces took control of a wide area of the “disputed territories”⁷ of northern Iraq, which had a Kurdish population but were under the control of the federal government of Iraq.

Throughout the Fight Against ISIS

ISIS advanced throughout northern Iraq, all the way to just a few kilometers from Baghdad, and only the Kurdish Peshmerga were able to fight them, despite their inferior arms compared to the Iraqi army; the Iraqi army was in disarray and demoralized. If the Peshmerga had not taken action, ISIS would have taken even larger areas of Iraq. The Peshmerga prevented ISIS from advancing to countries around Kurdistan and Iraq. The Peshmerga were protecting Kurdistan and fighting ISIS on behalf of the entire civilized world.

⁷ Disputed territories are articulated by Iraqi Constitution as Arabized areas under Saddam Husain’s regime whose population have been dispersed throughout Iraq. The right of a referendum for the original population and residences of disputed territories whether they want to be under the control of Kurdistan Regional Government or the Iraqi Government was defined by Article 140 in Iraqi Constitution but was never stipulated.

Figure 1. Map of Iraq: Kurdistan Regional Government Control⁸

When ISIS overtook Sinjar, it was attacking Kurdistan; under the guidance of the Ministry of Peshmerga (MoP), the Peshmerga formed units to protect around 1,050 kilometers of border from Sinjar (between the Iraq-Syria border) down to the Diyala Province and all the way to the Iranian border around Khanaqeen in the western part of northern Iraq. There are four main units of Peshmerga under the umbrella of the MoP: twelve brigades of Peshmerga forces, Unit 70, Unit 80, and the special forces of *Zeravane*. The Peshmerga forces of “*Yekey 70*” (unit 70) and “*Yekey 80*” (unit 80), and the military forces of the two main political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), were distributed and organized across eight border sectors.⁹ When ISIS was nearing to the center of Erbil by only 25 kilometers, on August 6, 2014, I was appointed the Commander-in-Chief of Peshmerga in Sector 6 (Gwer and Makhmur), protecting the border of Erbil, the capital city of Kurdistan, which saw some of the bloodiest battles

⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/11/13/marked-x/iraqi-kurdish-forces-destruction-villages-homes-conflict-isis>.

⁹ The process of unifying all the Peshmerga forces began in 2013 but has been delayed because of the fight against ISIS, with the process still ongoing. There is a special committee that has been formed to reform the units of Peshmerga with the help of western coalitions.

with ISIS. My sector was the first to stop the ISIS offensives against Kurdistan and also the first to create a counter offensive against ISIS. As the Commander-in-Chief of all the Peshmerga forces, the President of Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani, had a base in Sector 8 (Sinjar). He bravely led Peshmerga against ISIS in many battles. He also masterminded the liberation of the town in late 2015 and again in 2017 when other areas around Sinjar were liberated from ISIS control.

Since taking up the fight against ISIS, the Peshmerga fought them in many areas in northern Iraq, and along the 1,050 kilometer-border with the ISIS controlled areas, the Peshmerga never lost a fight. The objectives for the Peshmerga was to prevent ISIS from advancing into Kurdish territory, to break up and disrupt their subversive strategies, to wear out their ability to carry out large scale military actions, and to slowly diminish and eradicate their power. It was never the intention of the Peshmerga to entangle themselves in a fight outside of Kurdish territory as this could bring about a backlash ramification and sensitivity from the Iraqi Arabs. With that in mind, the Kurdish leadership supported coalition forces and allied militias as well as the Iraqi Army, should they strike ISIS in their enclaves. The Peshmerga also helped Sunni tribes liberate their lands from ISIS. Therefore, when the operation of liberating Mosul started in 2016, the Peshmerga was a vital partner for the Iraqi army. The Peshmerga, in just a few days, retook several areas from ISIS and destroyed their power in the Mosul front lines from the east Tigris, and cleared the path for the Iraqi troops to advance into Mosul.

Challenges

The start of the fight against ISIS was a huge challenge for the KRG. The Peshmerga forces felt inferior to their technological and military strength, and initially, ISIS was indeed superior. In addition, the KRG felt isolated in the fight against the ISIS as their allies were few and far between, as President Barzani explained in an interview with Patrick Goodenough on CNS News.¹⁰ The result of a bitter relationship between the central government and the KRG was that the Peshmerga had no money for salaries, trainings, or heavy weaponry to fight ISIS. The KRG was also suffering from a lack of internal and external funding following a drop in oil prices and a lack of their fair share in revenues from the Iraq Govern-

¹⁰ Goodenough, Patrick (2014): "Kurdish Government, 'Alone' in Fight Against ISIS Appeals for Airstrikes and Urgent Aid."

ment. Even before the ISIS offensives, the KRG's revenue shares and salaries were cut off completely by the central government. Moreover, around two million refugees and IDPs from both the ISIS and the Syrian conflict were a heavy burden on the KRG.

Most of the younger and newer Peshmerga did not have sufficient training prior to the fighting, and many young civilians volunteered to defend Kurdistan. Initially, there was neither enough time nor personnel for adequate training, as ISIS had moved with no warning and immense speed. ISIS was also spreading fear through social media, with grave impact on the civilian population. However, the Peshmerga knew the lands very well because of their previous fights in the mountains of Kurdistan; their method of fighting had been used for nearly two centuries of guerrilla warfare in these areas. However, many of the battles against ISIS took place in the low borderlands and flat areas which required a different type of fighting, to which the Peshmerga had to adapt quickly. The most immediate task was to bring experienced Peshmerga and organize them into defensive units to protect the borders; this later proved to be the most vital factor in the removal of the ISIS. The expansion of the Peshmerga in such haste was very problematic, and posed a real danger to the collapse of the troop structure.¹¹

International aid to the Peshmerga was extremely limited due to restrictions imposed by Baghdad on the KRG. Thus, no armaments or ammunitions were issued to the Peshmerga without the approval of the central Iraqi government in Baghdad. This was a response to the KRG exporting its own oil and was a punishment rather than a legal restriction. However, the coalition liaised with the Peshmerga forces who were able to draw down air support and this was critical assistance to the Peshmerga to weaken ISIS and halt their military advance.

Once the borders were protected by the Peshmerga, the next task was to make the civilian population safe. The KRG security forces managed to completely destroy ISIS compounds and to decipher their communication systems. Even though at times ISIS came very close to cities, in particular Erbil and Kirkuk, Kurdistan was the safest region in Iraq.

Moreover, one of the major challenges that the Peshmerga faced were the land mines and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) which ISIS used by placing hidden booby traps on the roadways, abandoned houses and in

¹¹ Peshmerga forces often went without salaries for several consecutive months.

buildings and farm lands.¹² There was not enough experience in recognizing these and there was a significant loss of life as the Peshmerga retook ISIS-held territory. Not only were these bombs difficult to recognize, but the Peshmerga had no bomb disposal equipment or expertise to defuse them. Many men were killed due to inexperience and a lack of knowledge.

Aftermath

In the areas of Sinjar that ISIS had captured,¹³ they had completely destroyed the villages, towns and cities, rendering them completely uninhabitable. The population was either massacred or, in the case of women and girls, deported to ISIS strongholds in Iraq and Syria where they suffered unimaginable torture, sexual slavery, and violence. No survivors were left among the ruins. The Yezidis that were able to flee before the ISIS onslaught managed to take refuge in the mountains, but many died from starvation and lack of water. ISIS considered the Yezidi-Kurds as devil-worshippers and infidels. Around 40,000 people fled to mount Sinjar; 5,000 men faced death,¹⁴ and approximately 7,000 women were captured alive. More than 3,000 women managed to escape ISIS imprisonment, the majority of which were ransomed out of bondage.¹⁵

In the fight against the ISIS *jihadis*, the Peshmerga suffered enormous losses with over 1,700 dead and around 10,000 wounded: suffering horrific injuries including loss of limbs, brain injuries and sight. The bravery of the Peshmerga in this fight should be recognized and remembered as the most efficient military campaign in modern Kurdish and Iraqi history. We owe a lot to their bravery and loyalty of Kurdistan and its civilization.

In addition to the loss of lives, ISIS had completely destroyed buildings, mosques, churches, infrastructure and historical religious sites; they aimed to obliterate any signs of life that contradicted their own twisted vision of Islam. The consequences for the KRG and Iraqi government is an almost impossible task of rebuilding the buildings and infrastructure, but also the social society and national security.

¹² The Pesh and Jamers have been denied de-mining tools for remote control bombs.

¹³ Which was majority-inhabited by Yezidi-Kurds, a non-Muslims Kurdish minority whose religion dates back to time immemorial.

¹⁴ Bradford, Alexandra: *Escape From ISIS: Freedom and Justice for Yazidi Women and Girls*.

¹⁵ Engel, Richard: *Inside the Secret Rescue of Yazidi Sex Slaves From ISIS Captors*.

Opportunities

The fight against the ISIS was difficult and posed many problems for the KRG. However, the experience of the war also provided some opportunities for the Kurds, and the Peshmerga were a vital tool to gain world recognition and support for the reputation of Kurdistan. The Kurdish Peshmerga began to be recognized as the most reliable, fearless, and effective ground forces; their reputation grew as they began to defeat ISIS. The Peshmerga shed light on the situation of Kurds in Iraq, they brought attention to the region by gaining the admiration of many in the west. The Peshmerga showed the world the bravery of the Kurds, and the world recognized how the culture and mentality of the Kurds differs from others in the region. This situation is an opportunity for the Kurds to leave their mark and influence future political decisions affecting Iraq and the wider Middle East once peace is established.

One of the major developments arising from the fight against ISIS by the Peshmerga was the loyalty to Kurdistan and protecting their lands denied to them by successive Iraqi regimes. A type of Kurdish unity was created, encompassing the armies of other Kurdish regions adjoining the Iraqi/Kurdistan border. This is particularly true when the Peshmerga crossed national borders, by invitation and negotiation, to fight against ISIS in Kurdish towns and areas in Syria (Rojava). The most defining example of this cooperation was the brutal fight for the town of Kobane in northern Syria along the border with Turkey, which was besieged by ISIS and in danger of falling into their hands.¹⁶ Peshmerga forces crossed from Turkey into Syria where they helped in the long battle for the liberation of Kobane and the surrounding areas. This unique cooperation is groundbreaking and shows possibilities for further cooperation between Kurdish military units, and opens the way for further political collaboration.

The reputation of the Peshmerga has always been positive, and there has always been a great pride amongst the population for their freedom fighters who fought a vicious guerrilla war against the oppressive regime of Iraq, especially against the Ba'ath regime of Saddam Hussein.¹⁷ However, after the heroic fight against ISIS, this pride has become an unshakable

¹⁶ The PYD forces had retrieved back from nearly three hundred villages to Kobane, which fell into the hands of ISIS.

¹⁷ Between 1980–91, the Ba'ath regime killed around 200,000 people through chemical weapons and genocidal campaigns, with the majority being civilians. Around 4,500 out of 5,000 villages in Iraqi Kurdistan were completely destroyed.

confidence and has engendered a loyalty and unity from, not just the Kurds, but from the ethnic minorities who also claim the Kurdistan region as their traditional homeland. Previously not actively recruited into the ranks of the Peshmerga, the Peshmerga now consist of a diverse and representative cohort, combining Christians, Yezidi-Kurds, Turkmen, Shebeks and others to defend their traditional homelands and in many cases seek revenge for atrocities committed against them.¹⁸

A major factor that contributed to the successes of the Peshmerga forces was the ability of the commanders on the ground to liaise with each other, despite owing allegiance to different political parties in Kurdistan. There is a real feeling amongst Peshmerga forces, including senior officers, that they could effectively combine the forces into a national force which would effectively become the army of Kurdistan, protecting the institutions and population from outside threats.

Another vital advantage that turned the tide in favor of the Peshmerga and the KRG was the airstrike support they received from their Western allies. Without this air support, the outcome for the Kurdistan Region would have undoubtedly been very different.¹⁹

Conclusion

The Peshmerga established itself as a leading military force, which overcame the disadvantages of being ill-equipped with outdated weapons and no support from the Iraqi government. By doing so, it won the hearts and minds of its Western allies and put itself into a strong position to form a united military force to protect Kurdistan. The bravery of the forces with heroic individual actions have emphasized the strength of allegiance to the “homeland” and the commitment of the Peshmerga to defend Kurdistan and its people. Despite the tragic loss of life, the destruction and horror inflicted by the brutal ISIS fighters, Kurdistan may receive international recognition given the Peshmerga’s contributions to the now inevitable defeat of ISIS in Iraq.

¹⁸ Today, about 90 percent of the Iraqi minorities live in Kurdistan, as it is the safest place in Iraq.

¹⁹ The cooperation has been near-perfect with no civilian casualties. The air strikes were the first in support of the Kurds, as they have always have been the victims of air bombings.

