

Fighting for Kurdistan?

Assessing the nature and functions of the Peshmerga in Iraq

CRU Report

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Abstract

The Peshmerga forces of Iraqi Kurdistan are a complex and multi-faceted security organisation, their loyalty divided between the Iraqi state, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), different political parties and powerful individuals. At different times – and sometimes simultaneously – they can be characterised as national, regional, party and personal forces. This report explores the dynamics and consequences of these various roles in the broader political context of the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad.

For relations within the KRG, as well as between the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) and Baghdad, to develop as constructively and as peacefully as possible, it is important that international partners currently supporting the Peshmerga and/or the Iraqi Security Forces take three recommendations to heart:

1. Develop an integrated security sector reform (SSR) strategy that considers support for the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Security Forces in relation to each other.
2. Ensure that such an integrated SSR strategy is embedded in a broader political strategy for re-including Iraq's Kurds in the Iraqi polity on favourable, inclusive and reconciliatory terms.
3. Consider the need for reform and reconciliation within the Kurdistan region to prevent further intra-Kurdish conflict.

Executive summary

The Peshmerga forces of Iraqi Kurdistan are a complex and multi-faceted security organisation, their loyalty divided between the Iraqi state, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), different political parties and powerful individuals. At different times – and sometimes simultaneously – they can be characterised as national, regional, party and personal forces. This report explores the dynamics and consequences of these various roles in the broader political context of the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad.

Kurdistan's political and military leadership is aware of the pitfalls of the divisions within the Peshmerga, and realises that integration and depoliticisation of these forces is vital to their ability to confront future (external) challenges. Nevertheless, while the KRG recently adopted a 35-point reform plan that seeks to unify and professionalise the Peshmerga, there are many obstacles to its implementation. Most crucially, it is questionable whether the region's most powerful parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – have the political will to relinquish authority over their armed forces, because these remain their key sources of power. The two parties harbour deep mistrust of one another, and have come to see their guns as a means of survival.

The political disunity in Kurdistan signals that there is an urgent need to face the shortcomings of its governance and authority structures. At present, the Peshmerga help to maintain – rather than overcome – Kurdish divisions and entrench KDP/ PUK control of the KRG. This has been further reinforced by the global coalition's unconditional support for the Peshmerga during the war against Islamic State. It has unintentionally strengthened the policies and attitudes of the KDP and PUK, enabling traditional Kurdish political elites to maintain power and suppress opposition groups.

The lack of a united political and military front and the mounting economic crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan offers an opportunity for Baghdad to reassert control. Prime Minister Al-Abadi's current strategy to bring the region's forces back into the Iraqi fold might succeed if he manages to pull the right strings – for example by insisting on direct payment of Peshmerga salaries on condition that the forces are downsized and brought under Baghdad's control – but only if financial incentives are combined with a more positive narrative of sociopolitical inclusion of Kurdish society in the Iraqi polity.

For relations within the KRG, as well as between the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) and Baghdad, to develop as constructively and as peacefully as possible, it is important that international partners currently supporting the Peshmerga and/or the Iraqi Security Forces take three recommendations to heart:

- 1. Develop an integrated security sector reform (SSR) strategy that considers support for the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Security Forces in relation to each other.** An integrated strategy should take account of the political consequences of strengthening the different forces and address the need for joint command structures and operational mechanisms.
- 2. Ensure that such an integrated SSR strategy is embedded in a broader political strategy for re-including Iraq's Kurds in the Iraqi polity on favourable, inclusive and reconciliatory terms.** This requires, above all, finding a satisfactory solution to the 'disputed areas' after the 2018 Iraqi elections.
- 3. Consider the need for reform and reconciliation within the Kurdistan region to prevent further intra-Kurdish conflict.** International actors should use their leverage over the KRG – the KDP and PUK in particular – to push for greater transparency, political neutrality and more democratic control over the Peshmerga forces, especially during the upcoming elections.

Acknowledgement

This short report is based on a review of existing literature, Kurdish and international news reports, and 25 extended interviews in Iraqi Kurdistan with key informants from government, Peshmerga, diplomatic, NGO and think tank backgrounds between 9 and 21 September 2017. The author thanks all interviewees for their frankness and helpful insights.

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This report is part of Clingendael's Levant research programme that focuses its analysis on hybrid security organisations in Syria and Iraq. A more extensive description of this research programme, as well as its outputs to date, is available at:

[Clingendael Levant Research Programme](#)

Introduction

During the past three years, Kurdish Peshmerga forces have played an essential role in the fight against Islamic State (IS) in Iraq. Seemingly forgotten by the international community until 2014, the Peshmerga ('those who face death') turned into heroic Kurdish fighters overnight by resisting the IS-terrorist onslaught with courage and determination, despite a lack of arms, training and equipment. Or so the story goes. But there is more to the Peshmerga than meets the eye. In fact, the period 2014–2017 offers a rich case study of the Peshmerga as multifaceted security phenomena, their impact on governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and Kurdish relations with the Iraqi state.¹

It is beyond dispute that the Peshmerga were pivotal in bringing about the ultimate defeat of IS and that they suffered heavy losses for the safety of the Kurdish region and the state of Iraq. In this sense, the Peshmerga discharged their national duty as constitutionally mandated security forces to protect Iraqi lives and property from death and destruction. However, in the process of doing so, the Peshmerga also took the opportunity to occupy a string of territories that have long been disputed between Erbil and Baghdad, which centre on the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. In a masterstroke, the Peshmerga enabled the creation of an independent Kurdistan region by almost doubling its territory and wealth.² Yet parts of the Peshmerga withdrew equally fast from these disputed territories in the face of the advancing Iraqi army and paramilitary forces after the controversial Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017. This painfully exposed the longstanding and continued lack of direct control by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) over the majority of Peshmerga forces. More precisely, it showed that the Peshmerga remain divided into three different branches. Two of these are not commanded by the KRG, but by the main Kurdish political parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).³ Peshmerga forces

1 The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is a federal region in north-eastern Iraq, consisting of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah governorates. The KRG also claims parts of adjacent governorates, including Kirkuk.

2 Less positively, it also prevented the KRG from developing a diversified economy, and fuelled rampant corruption. See: Banco 2017. 'The curse of oil in Iraqi Kurdistan.' PRI GlobalPost Investigations. <https://gpinvestigations.pri.org/the-curse-of-oil-in-iraqi-kurdistan-1c9a9a18efd1> (Accessed 5 November 2017).

3 The KDP was created by Mullah Mustafa Barzani in 1946. His son, Masoud Barzani, took over the leadership of the party after his father's death in 1979. He became the first President of Iraqi Kurdistan in 2005, and stayed in this position until 1 November 2017. The PUK was created by Jalal Talabani, a former leading member of the KDP, in 1975. He served as President of Iraq from 2005 to 2014, and passed away in October 2017.

affiliated with the latter were among the first to pull back from the disputed territories, underlining a longstanding cleavage within the Peshmerga.⁴

These events occurred against the backdrop of a triple crisis that simultaneously affected both Erbil and Baghdad, the political centres of the Kurdish community and the Iraqi polity respectively, namely: the illiberal turn of their 'democratic systems' between 2005 and 2014; the escalation and subsequent reduction of sectarian violence between 2004 and 2008; and the chronic political nepotism and largescale corruption since 2007/8.⁵ The current political situation in Iraq is further complicated by the post-Kurdish referendum crisis, as well as the continued existence of an array of emboldened security organisations that operate outside of the country's formal security institutions.⁶

This brief report discusses the different security functions of the Peshmerga and how these relate to the development of governance in the KRI on the one hand and political dynamics between the KRI and the Iraqi state on the other. What factors determine which security function dominates the Peshmerga at a particular point in time? And what effects have these had? Section 1 examines the 'Peshmerga security paradox' in the broader context of violence in crisis states. Section 2 analyses the evolution of the Peshmerga as a security organisation, paying particular attention to their fight against IS. Section 3 discusses the effects of how the Peshmerga have prioritised and discharged their different security functions on the development of the KRG and the Iraqi state. Finally, Section 4 offers three key recommendations on how external actors should consider supporting the Peshmerga in the near future in light of the available evidence.

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- 4 On the KDP and PUK see also: Alaaldin 2014. 'A dangerous Rivalry for the Kurds.' *The New York Times*, 16 December. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/opinion/a-dangerous-rivalry-for-the-kurds.html> (Accessed 26 June 2017); Hassan 2015. *Kurdistan's Politicised Society Confronts a Sultanistic System*. Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center. On divisions within the Peshmerga: Aziz 2017. *Reforming the civil-military relationship in Kurdistan*. Amman: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- 5 Hassan 2015. *op.cit.*; Van Veen, El Kamouni-Janssen and Grinstead 2017. *A house divided: Political relations and coalition-building between Iraq's Shi'a*, The Hague: Clingendael; Mansour 2017. *Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State*, London: Chatham House.
- 6 International Crisis Group 2017. *Post-ISIS Iraq: A Gathering Storm*, Brussels/Beirut: International Crisis Group; Van Veen 2017. *Iraq beyond Mosul: Avoiding the next conflict* (meeting summary), The Hague: Clingendael; Gaston and Derszi-Horvath 2017. *Iraq after ISIL: An Analysis of Local, Hybrid, and Sub-State Security Forces*, Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute. In the present report, security organisations are defined as actors that have the capacity to exert violence on a large scale against outsiders, and to control violence within their respective strongholds and/or constituencies. This definition adds a non-territorial dimension to account for transnational groups to the definition proposed in Boege, Brown, Clements and Nolan 2008. *On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of 'Fragility'*, Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management.

1 The Peshmerga security paradox: soldiers, rebels and militiamen

Generally, situations of state fragility and conflict tend to go hand in hand with the presence of security organisations outside of the state's formal institutions.⁷ The absence of a monopoly on the use of force creates opportunities for alternative security organisations to exist and thrive in the same territory. While the dynamics in the development and nature of such organisations are explored elsewhere in greater detail, two insights about security organisations that exist outside of formal state institutions are particularly relevant for the discussion in this report.⁸

To start with, once security organisations exist that have a more ambiguous or adversarial relationship with the state and enjoy a measure of autonomy, mitigating the risk of conflict and progressing state development become more complex endeavours. This is due to the expanded range of political agendas and material interests that such security organisations manifest, as well as the attractiveness of maintaining a parallel coercive capacity as a hedge against political uncertainty, and as a vehicle for augmenting political and economic power.

In addition, it is inaccurate to treat all security organisations outside of formal state institutions as a single, broad category. Rather, a continuum of security organisations can be discerned that ranges from those that are close to the state to those with anti-state orientations. This continuum is depicted in the form of a rough typology in Table 1. Naturally, where security organisations fall along this continuum is not static and develops over time. For example, Hezbollah developed from an anti-regime security organisation during the Lebanese civil war into a hybrid security organisation with ambiguous relations with the Lebanese state that alternate between dominance (e.g. its occupation of West Beirut in 2008), competition (its efforts to subdue the militia of sheikh Al-Assir in Sidon in 2015) and cooperation (its joint offensive with the Lebanese army in Aarsal against Jabhat al-Nusra in 2016). All security organisations on

7 Iraq is no exception. What are today the Hashd al-Sha'abi and Peshmerga long existed next to the Iraqi Security Forces as manifestations of unresolved, political issues of ethno-sectarian marginalisation and repression.

8 Van Veen and Fliervoet 2018. *Hybrid security actors in the Levant: The politics and force of competition and cooperation*, The Hague: Clingendael (forthcoming).

this continuum are the armed manifestation of a political project of one sort or another, but obviously vary in the degree of legitimacy, strength or currency of their political undertaking. The nature of a security organisation's political project both shapes its relationship with the state and is shaped by its relations with local political actors or parties, regional actors and other non-state groups.⁹

What is interesting about the Peshmerga is that they simultaneously represent a number of the types listed in Table 1, with the prominence of primary, secondary and tertiary functions depending on time and circumstance. To begin with, the Peshmerga are a constitutionally mandated Iraqi security organisation, although they receive little financial or material support from the state. Moreover, the Peshmerga are also an anti-regime security organisation in relation to the Iraqi state because they are the armed manifestation of the Kurdish desire for greater independence from the government in Baghdad.¹⁰ Finally, the Peshmerga are a hybrid security organisation in relation to the KRG, since they work for and compete with it as armed wings of the political parties that run the KRG, the KDP and PUK. Put plainly, a sizeable portion of the Peshmerga is loyal to their party first, to influential politburo leaders of both parties second, and to the KRG third. This results in cooperation, competition, chaos and further fragmentation within both parties along the lines of personal loyalties to individual leaders.¹¹

9 Gaston, Derzsi-Horvath, van den Toorn and Mathieu-Comtois 2017. *Backgrounder: Literature Review of Local, Regional or Sub-State Defense Forces in Iraq*, Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute.

10 The fact that the Peshmerga are also an anti-regime security organisation helps explain why the Iraqi state is hesitant in providing them with financial or material support. This topic is further explored in Section 3.

11 In addition, influential members of each party control security forces of their own. See: Hama 2017. 'KRG Politicized Forces Pose Threat to Human Security.' <https://kurdishpolicy.org/2017/01/16/krp-politicized-forces-pose-threat-to-human-security/>. (Accessed 22 January 2018); Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton 2015. *Kurdistan's Political Armies: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces*. Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center.

Table 1 A short typology of different security organisations in fragile states

Type of security organisation	Examples	Nature	Purpose
1. Formal state security organisations	Organisations that are nationally and internationally recognised as official state security forces (<i>Syrian Arab Army, Iraqi Security Forces</i>)	Part of the state's coercive apparatus	Publicly execute and enforce state authority under direct command and control
2. Informal state security organisations	Paramilitaries, state-sponsored militias and regime-linked armed groups (<i>Shabiba (Syria), Basij militia (Iran)</i>)	Extension of the state's coercive apparatus	Support formal state security organisations and/or advance state interests with plausible deniability under indirect command and control
3. Hybrid security organisations	Popular militias and armed wings of political parties (<i>Hashd al-Sha'abi (Iraq), Hezbollah (Lebanon)</i>)	Both autonomous of, and linked with, the state and its (in)formal security forces	Cooperate and/or compete with the state depending on overlap of interests between these organisations, their broader political platforms (if any) and the state
4. Anti-regime security organisations	Rebel groups and freedom fighters (<i>PKK (Turkey), Brigades of the Martyrs Al-Nasser Mohiuddin (ASMLA, Iran)</i>)	Armed actors operating in opposition to the regime, but recognising the state (in full or part)	Overthrow of the regime and/or establishment of their own autonomous territory
5. Anti-state security organisations	More extremist groups that do not recognise the state as an entity (<i>Islamic State, Al Qaeda</i>)	Transnational groups with an ideology that transcends state boundaries	Dissolve one or several states to replace them with a more universal project and ideological identity
Definition of security organisations: <i>Actors with the capacity to exert violence on a large scale against outsiders, and to control violence within their respective strongholds or constituencies.</i> ¹⁰			

Source: Van Veen and Fliervoet 2018. *Hybrid security actors in the Levant: The politics and force of competition and cooperation*, The Hague: Clingendael (forthcoming).

12 Slightly adapted by the author from: Boege, Brown, Clements and Nolan 2008. *Op. cit.* p. 9. All security organisations share four characteristics: (i) they are willing and capable to use violence for pursuing their objectives; (ii) they are able to control a particular territory and/or constituency; (iii) they possess a certain degree of autonomy with regard to politics, military operations, resources and infrastructure; and (iv) they are shaped through an organisational relationship or structure that exists over a specific period of time. See Schneckener 2009. *Spoilers or Governance Actors? Engaging Armed Non-State Groups in Areas of Limited Statehood*. SFB-Governance Working Paper Series, No. 21. Berlin: DFG Research Center (SFB) 700.

Box 1 below illustrates these ‘three types of the Peshmerga’ through the use of micro-case descriptions at different points in time within a single year. It hints at the many pull-and-push factors that influence which type of organisation prevails and when. To make sense of the Peshmerga in relation to both the KRG and the Iraqi state, these factors need to be inventoried and analysed in the context of decades of Kurdish sociopolitical life in Iraq.

Box 1 The Peshmerga as different types of security organisation

Monday 17 October 2016: The Peshmerga as a formal state security organisation

After months of preparation, the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces launch a joint offensive to liberate the city of Mosul from IS. The operation marks a historic development in Iraqi military relations. While formally part of the same security structure, the Peshmerga and the Iraqi armed forces have never before coordinated their actions, or fought a common enemy. It is also the first time since the KRI came under the exclusive control of the Peshmerga in 1992 that Iraqi federal forces are allowed to enter its territory. Both Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and President of the Kurdistan Region Masoud Barzani hail the unique alliance between their armed forces and stress the significance of their rapprochement.

Monday 25 September 2017: The Peshmerga as an anti-regime security organisation

The Kurdistan Regional Government organises a highly controversial referendum on independence that puts its already troubled relations with the Iraqi government on edge. The Kurdish leadership had expected the vote to force Baghdad to the negotiating table, to settle both the region’s legal status and its contested boundaries. Instead, Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Abadi uses the Kurds’ defiance as a pretext to redraw those boundaries himself.

Monday 16 October 2017: The Peshmerga as a hybrid security organisation

In the autumn of 2017, the Iraqi government launches a largescale military offensive against Peshmerga-occupied ‘disputed areas’, including the oil-rich governorate of Kirkuk – changing its view on the Peshmerga from valued allies to enemies. The Peshmerga gained control of large parts of these areas in June 2014 when they were abandoned by the Iraqi army fleeing IS. This expanded the territory of the KRI by as much as 40 per cent. Now, with IS defeated, the Iraqi

government seeks to push the Peshmerga out again. The Iraqi army succeeds in doing so in a matter of days and many inside Kurdistan blame this on factional political divisions within the Peshmerga. It is useful to note that the Peshmerga forces are divided between – but also within – the KDP and PUK. For example, Kosrat Rasul (deputy-leader of the PUK) strongly criticised his own party amid allegations that the PUK’s Talabani faction struck a deal with Baghdad and ordered a withdrawal of the Peshmerga forces it controls. Rasul has, however, his own protection brigade that consists of 2,000–3,000 men.

Sources: Rudaw 2016. ‘President Barzani hails historic coordination between Kurdish and Iraqi forces,’ 17 October. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/171020161>; Rudaw 2016. ‘PM Abadi hails Kurdish, Iraqi forces ‘working for one single Iraq’, 20 October. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/201020161>; Business Insider 2014. ‘Iraqi Kurds Prepared For ISIS Offensive For A Year And Expanded Their Territory By 40% In Hours,’ 13 June. <http://www.businessinsider.com/iraqi-kurds-expand-territory-2014-6?IR=T>; Abdulrazaq 2017. ‘Iraq’s reconquest of Kirkuk checks Kurdish secession,’ Aljazeera, 17 October. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iraq-reconquest-kirkuk-checks-kurdish-secession-171017063044004.html> [All accessed 25 November 2017]; BBC 2017. ‘Court in Iraq orders arrest of Kurdistan VP Kosrat Rasul,’ 19 October. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41681598> (Accessed 24 January 2018); Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton 2015. *Op. cit.*

2 The evolution of the Peshmerga

Politics in the Iraqi region of Kurdistan has generally been shaped by the Kurds' desire for greater political autonomy.¹³ Since the 1960s, Kurdish nationalism has played its part in several intra-Kurdish conflicts and various rebellions against the Iraqi state in which Peshmerga forces clashed with the Iraqi army.¹⁴ The fact that the Peshmerga originated from the Iraqi Kurds' nationalism in opposition to the regime in Baghdad means that, at their core, they are an anti-regime security organisation (see Table 1).

However, political disagreement about the nature and orientation of Kurdish nationalism soon added another layer to the Peshmerga as a security organisation. After the defeat of the Iraqi Kurds in their 1974–1975 revolt, dissenting factions within the KDP, the main Kurdish political party at the time, formed a new Kurdish political party, the PUK.¹⁵ This development divided Kurdish society and Kurdish nationalism, and gradually institutionalised two main currents. In turn, this political development set the scene for the Peshmerga – a collection of guerrilla forces at the time – to become divided along party lines (as militia to the KDP and PUK) in addition to remaining an anti-regime organisation (as 'freedom fighters').¹⁶

A second pivotal moment in the development of the Peshmerga was the 1991 Kurdish uprising. Following the defeat of Iraq in the Gulf war, both the Kurds in northern Iraq and Shi'ite groups in the south rose up against the regime of Saddam Hussein. A brutal crackdown resulted in the death of between 30,000 and 60,000 Shias in the south, and

13 There have been periodic exceptions, such as 1958–1959 and 1970–1971, during which the Iraqi political leadership in Baghdad made overtures that seemed intended to establish a genuine Arab-Kurdish state. However, these episodes were short-lived as they were usually tactically motivated. Typically, Baghdad sought temporary calm in Kurdish-Baghdad relations to enable power consolidation at the centre. Once achieved, political marginalisation or armed repression of Iraq's Kurds usually continued. See for example: Denali 2005. *The Kurds and the state: Evolving national identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

14 Chapman 2009. *Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government*. U.S. Army War College.

15 In its early days, the PUK's base was more socialist-Marxist and intellectual than the KDP's more tribal-based and conservative constituency. These ideological differences have now largely disappeared. Today, the two parties compete over power, patronage and privileges rather than over ideological leanings and political agendas.

16 Aziz 2017. *Op.cit.*; Denali 2005. *Op.cit.*

some 20,000 Kurds in the north.¹⁷ Shocked by the unfolding humanitarian crisis, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 688 condemning Iraq's repression of its civilian population. This resolution was subsequently used as a pretext for the creation of a 'safe haven' in northern Iraq, protected by US, British, French and Dutch forces.¹⁸

The protection resulting from this measure, as well as Iraq's military and political withdrawal from the region, created a power vacuum that enabled the formation of a *de facto* Kurdish state in northern Iraq.¹⁹ It was also an essential precondition for the development of the Peshmerga into a professional armed force. At an operational level, the Peshmerga could now organise, train and operate freely without fear of attack from Hussein's forces. At a political level, it allowed for the creation of regional security institutions. The initiation of the state-building process in Iraqi Kurdistan thus went hand in hand with the first moves towards the formalisation and professionalisation of the Peshmerga, which allowed them to become a formal state security organisation at a later stage. Importantly, this happened completely independently of the Iraqi government.

In parallel to the efforts to institutionalise the Peshmerga, however, both the KDP and PUK retained a high degree of control over their own Peshmerga forces, which they used not only to fight the Iraqi government but also each other.²⁰ Attempts at unifying the different Peshmerga branches have swayed according to the political tide, largely in relation to the quality of relations between the KDP and PUK.

A brief history of Peshmerga politics since 1991

After gaining *de facto* autonomy in 1991, the Kurdistan region held its first general elections in May 1992, in which the KDP and PUK gained a roughly equal share of the vote. The parties agreed on a 50-50 power-sharing agreement and created a unified government under the leadership of President Masoud Barzani. Subsequently they passed Law No. 5 on the Peshmerga, transforming them – on paper – from party militias into a regular armed force under KRG authority. They also passed a law prohibiting

17 Zenko 2016. 'Remembering the Iraqi Uprising Twenty-Five Years Ago.' Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/remembering-iraqi-uprising-twenty-five-years-ago> (Accessed 5 December 2017).

18 Chapman 2009. *Op. cit.*

19 Jüde 2017. 'Contesting borders? The formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's *de facto* state.' *International Affairs* 93: 4, 847–863.

20 Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton 2015. *Op. cit.*

political parties from maintaining private militias or armed groups.²¹ Finally, they created their own proto-defence ministry: The Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.

However, because the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs had little real clout during the first years of its existence, the Peshmerga operated as a hybrid security organisation vis-à-vis the KRG, alternating between competition and collaboration. The loyalty of the Peshmerga continued to lie with the KDP and PUK, and the forces therefore answered to their party leaders rather than the Minister.²² This lack of unity was painfully exposed when clashes broke out between different party-aligned Peshmerga forces in 1993, deteriorating into a low-intensity civil war that lasted until 1998. The war, referred to in Kurdish as the 'brotherhood fight,' created a division in Kurdish society that has yet to be overcome. As Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton explain, 'The KDP's temporary alliance with Saddam Hussein to expel the PUK from Erbil in 1996 is still remembered as a grave betrayal; conversely, many KDP members recall being driven out of other territories by the PUK. In part for these reasons, each side keeps a portion of its own forces under direct party control as a final guarantee to maintain the balance of power.'²³

A US-brokered peace agreement signed by the PUK and KDP in September 1998 brought an end to intra-Kurdish fighting, but failed to reconcile the political parties. The KDP and PUK each set up their own government and administration in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, respectively, and guarded their areas of control with separate security forces.²⁴ Importantly, this separation applied not only to the Peshmerga, but also to Iraqi Kurdistan's internal security apparatus. The PUK and KDP each established their own security, intelligence, gendarmerie and counter-terrorism units in addition to their Peshmerga forces.²⁵

This dual political and security structure persisted until the KDP and PUK signed a Unification Agreement in 2006, at which time they renewed their commitment to the integration and depoliticisation of their Peshmerga forces.²⁶ The key factor that ensured the persistence of the Peshmerga as a hybrid security organisation (i.e. party militia) rather than its transformation into a unified anti-regime organisation that could be mobilised against Baghdad was the distrust between the different Kurdish political parties.

21 Like Law No. 5, this rule was never properly implemented. Chapman 2009. *Op. cit.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton 2015. *Op. cit.*

24 The KDP controlled Erbil and Duhok Governorates, while the PUK controlled the Governorate of Sulaymaniyah. These areas continue to be the parties' main spheres of influence and demarcate their Peshmergas' activity.

25 Hadad and Wallace 2017. *The Kurdish Security Apparatus: Vulnerability and Structure*. Small Wars Journal; Chapman 2009. *Op. cit.*

26 KRG 2006. 'Kurdistan Regional Government Unification Agreement, Article 7,' 21 January. <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=&l=12&r=24&a=8891&s=010000> (Accessed 12 October 2017).

Formalisation of the Peshmerga forces

One of the main drivers behind the 2006 Unification Agreement was the radically changed political landscape in Baghdad.²⁷ After the fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime in 2003, the Kurds needed to have a 'united voice' in the new Iraq.²⁸ The 2005 Iraqi constitution recognised Kurdistan as a federal region *along with its existing authorities*, creating a legal basis for the Peshmerga as a formal security organisation of the state of Iraq.²⁹ This was further stipulated in Article 117 of the Iraqi constitution, which states that federal regions are responsible for 'the establishment and organization of the internal security forces for the region such as police, security forces and guards of the region.'³⁰ Since the adoption of this constitution, the KRG has therefore carried sole responsibility for the protection of the Kurdistan region, in which the Peshmerga forces are a key instrument. Arguably, therefore, it was the risk of losing Kurdish political influence in a new Iraq with an emergent democracy that enabled the Peshmerga to adopt a new role of formal state security organisation – without, incidentally, discarding their two other roles.

The Iraqi constitution thus 'formalised' the Peshmerga, allowing them to be nationally and internationally recognised as an official state security force. They are not typical of a formal state security organisation, however, since the Peshmerga forces do not execute the state's authority. The Peshmerga's command structure operates at the regional level and has remained completely separate from the national security institutions. As a result, the Iraqi Ministry of Defence exercises no control over the Peshmerga's operations.

National, regional, party or personal forces?

After the 2006 Unification Agreement, significant progress was made in unifying Peshmerga forces under a single command. A crucial step was the organisational reunification of the parties' separate Peshmerga ministries into the single KRG Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs in 2009. In the following years, 14 integrated Peshmerga brigades were created under the Ministry's command, together comprising around 40,000 fighters.³¹ Recruitment for the integrated brigades was not conditional on

27 Interview with a senior representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government, 14 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

28 Chapman 2009. *Op. cit.*

29 See Article 113 of the Constitution of Iraq: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/12/AR2005101201450.html>

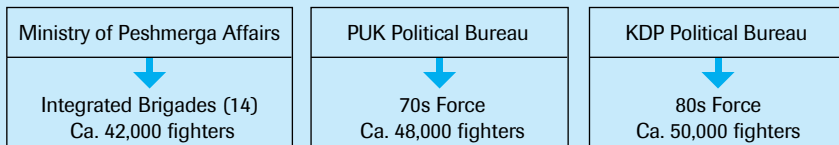
30 *Ibid.*

31 Interviewees related to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs provided different estimates of the number of Peshmerga in the integrated brigades, ranging from roughly 37,000 to circa 42,000 fighters.

party membership, which marked an important initial step towards depoliticisation of the forces. It appears, however, that the loss of the disputed areas in October 2017 is causing a reversal of this process, with integrated brigades being repartitioned along party-political lines of command.³²

Despite the positive steps made to decrease the influence of party politics, they continue to play a decisive role in the Peshmerga's organisation. The command structure of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs' integrated brigades remains structured according to party affiliation as each brigade is equipped with a commander from one party and a deputy from the other. In addition, the majority of Peshmerga forces has not yet been institutionalised. There are around 100,000 Peshmerga fighters outside the Ministry's 14 brigades, divided roughly equally between the PUK (the 70s Force) and the KDP (the 80s Force). Both parties' Peshmerga forces maintain their own organisational and financial structures,³³ and are geographically confined to their party's traditional sphere of influence.³⁴ Moreover, the KDP and PUK have retained their own security, intelligence and counter-terrorism forces, whose politicisation is even further entrenched. They are not just divided along party lines, but also by personal loyalties to powerful individuals from the ruling Barzani and Talabani families.³⁵ The Peshmerga thus retain a clear profile as a hybrid security organisation in relation to the KRG, despite their official status as a formal state security organisation. Their role as an anti-regime security organisation faded into the background in the post-Saddam period, but did not disappear.

Box 2 Current structure of the Peshmerga forces



32 See for example: Azhans.krd 2017. 'The Disintegrated Peshmerga Battalions Are Not in Duty but Still Receive Payment,' 6 December. <http://azhans.krd/%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%88%D8%A7-%D9%87%DB%95%DA%B5%D9%88%DB%95%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%95%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%8C-%D9%BE%DB%8E%D8%B4%D9%85%DB%95%D8%B1%DA%AF%DB%95-%D9%84%DB%95-%D8%AF%DB%95%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%85/> (Accessed 11 January 2018). Further corroboration of this apparent development is needed.

33 Interview with a senior official from the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

34 See footnote 24.

35 Hadad and Wallace 2017. *Op. cit.*

The conflict with Islamic State

The process of Peshmerga reform came to a sudden halt when IS swiftly and unexpectedly invaded Kurdish-controlled areas in northern Iraq in August 2014. While the Kurdish leadership blamed the Peshmerga's inability to repulse IS on poor equipment,³⁶ the KRG itself was partly responsible. Despite IS's rapid advancements in Iraq's Sunni Arab-populated areas earlier that year, the KRG leadership had not prepared for serious conflict.

One of the main reasons for this lack of preparation was that the Kurdish parties had different perceptions of IS. While the PUK advocated that it was a terrorist group that had to be fought – arguably under pressure from Iran and the Iraqi government³⁷ – the KDP did not think that IS was their problem. It saw the group as an anti-Baghdad force and was ready to accept IS as its new neighbour,³⁸ confident that it would not attack Kurdish territory.³⁹ The KDP leadership saw the chaos created by IS as an opportunity to increase its influence and control in the disputed areas, and realise Kurdistan's national ambitions, rather than as a threat.⁴⁰ An important factor underlying this difference in perception was the fact that the KDP and PUK each had its own intelligence services, which relied on different sources of information. The parties shared intelligence only selectively, creating gaps along the frontline that allowed IS to invade.⁴¹ Indeed, some view the inability or unwillingness to share evidence indicating that IS was about to attack as a primary factor behind the Peshmerga's defeat in Sinjar in August 2014.⁴²

36 International Crisis Group 2015. *Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*, Middle East Report N°158. Baghdad/Erbil/Brussels: International Crisis Group.

37 Interview with a Kurdish researcher, 11 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq. Also see: Ekurd Daily 2014. 'Iran pressures Iraqi Kurds to step up fight against ISIS militants,' 10 July. <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/7/state8188.htm> (Accessed 28 July 2017).

38 Interview with a senior PUK official, 16 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq. Also see: VICE 2014. 'Top Kurdish Official: 'Iraq Is Not Our Neighbor, ISIS Is Our Neighbor'', 23 June. <https://news.vice.com/article/top-kurdish-official-iraq-is-not-our-neighbor-isis-is-our-neighbor> (Accessed 11 October 2017).

39 As one senior KDP official admitted, 'there was a lack of preparedness for the worst-case scenario.' Interview with a senior KDP official, 11 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

40 Indeed, President Barzani first expressed his intention to hold a referendum on independence in June 2014, only weeks after IS invaded Iraq. Arguing that Iraq was 'obviously falling apart,' Barzani stated that the time had come for the Kurdistan people to determine their future: CNN 2014. 'EXCLUSIVE: Iraqi Kurdistan leader Massoud Barzani says 'the time is here' for self-determination,' 23 June. <http://amanpour.blogs.cnn.com/2014/06/23/exclusive-iraqi-kurdish-leader-says-the-time-is-here-for-self-determination/> (Accessed 11 October 2017).

41 Interview with a Kurdish researcher, 11 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

42 International Crisis Group 2015. *Op. cit.*

In addition to the lack of preparation, divisions within the Peshmerga forces also obstructed their response. Because the party forces had not yet been integrated, they fell back on their traditional command structures and responded along party lines. Kurdistan's military operations were territorially divided into eight sectors, four of which were commanded by the KDP and four by the PUK.⁴³ Many of the commanders were older-generation Peshmerga, creating a schism in the armed forces that was not just political but personal. Most older officers were directly involved in the 1994–1998 Kurdish civil war, and still bear a grudge against their former opponents.⁴⁴ As one interviewee put it, 'The civil war of 1998 is still too fresh in the memories of many of the commanders. They are too much aware of who killed whom. This is also why the old commanders can only command people from their own party, not everybody.'⁴⁵

As a result, the KDP and PUK effectively fought separate wars against IS in their respective territories, hampering coordination, communication and the sharing and use of intelligence.⁴⁶ However, it was arguably the best the Peshmerga could do at the time given their existing constraints. As one interviewee asked, 'When the enemy is on your doorstep, would you wait for the perfect organisation to exist? The Peshmerga had to respond immediately, so they organised around the structures that were there.'⁴⁷ Although not ideal, this was sufficient to achieve the primary goal of their mobilisation: the liberation of Kurdistan's territories from IS.

Despite the many challenges faced in the early phases of the conflict, Kurdish military officials considered the war against IS a blessing in disguise for the Peshmerga. It was a wake-up call that painfully exposed their lack of professionalism: they were unprepared, disorganised, untrained, and under-armed. There were several reasons for these gaps: the Iraqi government did not meet its commitment to allocate 17 per cent of the federal budget to the KRG, obstructing payment of the Peshmerga forces; the KDP and PUK were reluctant to relinquish control over their party-aligned forces, thus inhibiting the centralisation of command and control; and the KRG failed to invest in professionalising its armed forces, because it made the mistake of thinking that the Kurds had fought their last war in 1998.⁴⁸

43 Interview with a senior official of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, 20 September 2017, Sulaymaniyah, Iraq.

44 Hadad and Wallace 2017. *Op. cit.*

45 Interview with a senior PUK official, 16 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq. Also see: Hadad and Wallace 2017. *Op. cit.*

46 International Crisis Group 2015. *Op. cit.*

47 Interview with a Kurdish researcher, 11 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

48 Interview with a senior representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government, 14 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

The war with IS rapidly forced the Peshmerga to overcome these hurdles, at least in part. It also generated momentum for the Peshmerga to get organised more as a formal state security organisation. The Peshmerga only had experience in guerrilla warfare, and now learned how to fight a war with more traditional frontlines in defence of territory. In the course of a few short years, the Peshmerga transformed from a defensive into an offensive force that pushed back IS – aided by air support, equipment, military training and operational advice from the global coalition against the Islamic State.⁴⁹

Perhaps most importantly, the IS war also instilled the KRG's political and military leadership with a renewed commitment to reform the Peshmerga forces, and expand the limited progress they had made. Together with an advisory group from the US, UK and Germany, in 2017 it agreed on a 35-point reform plan. One of the main priorities of the plan is to unify the PUK and KDP's 70s and 80s Forces under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.⁵⁰ Among other changes, it further seeks to reduce the size of the overall fighting force, streamline its bureaucracy, and tackle problems of corruption.⁵¹ One of the more pertinent issues appears to be the issue of 'ghost soldiers', i.e. Peshmerga fighters who are either deceased, do not exist or fail to show up for duty. Some sources estimate that 'ghost soldiers' make up well over half of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs' payroll.⁵²

What is of interest from the perspective of this report is whether the proposed reforms will reduce the Peshmerga's role as a hybrid security organisation in favour of its role as a formal state security organisation, or rather its role as an anti-regime security organisation. The answer to this question could potentially have far-reaching consequences for the future of the Iraqi state.

49 Interview with a senior official of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, 17 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

The Global Coalition against Daesh was initiated by the US in September 2014, and currently consists of 74 members who have pledged their commitment to 'degrading and ultimately defeating Daesh.' For more information, see <http://theglobalcoalition.org>

50 Rudaw 2017. 'Kurdish government approves coalition proposal to restructure Peshmerga ministry,' 14 May. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/14052017> (Accessed 30 October 2017).

51 Helfont 2017. *Getting Peshmerga Reform Right: Helping the Iraqi Kurds to Help Themselves in Post-ISIS Iraq*. Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute.

52 For one estimate of the size of this problem: Azhans.krd 2017. 'Out of a total of 400,000 people who get salary from the Ministry of Peshmerga only 100,000 are real Peshmerga,' 20 December. <http://azhans.krd/%D7%B4%D9%84%DB%95-%D9%83%DB%86%DB%8C-400-%D9%87%DB%95%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%88%D9%88%DA%86%DB%95%D8%A9%DB%86%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D9%88%DB%95%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%95%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D9%BE%DB%8E%D8%B4/> (Accessed 11 January 2018).

Obstacles to further reform

While Kurdish officials are well aware that the planned changes are vital to the Peshmerga's ability to confront future challenges, the obstacles to their implementation are many. At the party level, it is questionable whether the KDP and PUK have the political will to relinquish authority over their armed forces. The parties harbour deep mistrust of each other and have come to see their guns as a means of survival. This is particularly true for the PUK, whose armed forces allow it to punch above its political weight.⁵³ As one opposition member explained, 'The PUK is afraid that Peshmerga institutionalisation will effectively bring all the Peshmerga under the control of the KDP. That would be an existential risk to the PUK: the party currently operates from a position of weakness and needs its armed force to hold onto power. Without its Peshmerga, they cannot maintain the status quo.'⁵⁴

Considerable resistance is also to be expected at the command level. The eight sector commanders were politically appointed, and most are also members of their party's leadership. Few have enjoyed formal military training; they are either older officers or younger party figures who lack military experience.⁵⁵ A professionalised Peshmerga bureaucracy will be based on merit rather than patronage, and is therefore likely to exclude those commanders who owe their positions to their connections. Afraid to lose their status and means of subsistence, they are likely to use their political network to obstruct the reform process.⁵⁶

The KRG is also likely to face opposition from the Peshmerga's rank-and-file, whose size will have to be reduced significantly. Emblematic of the embeddedness of clientelist politics, the political parties have long used Peshmerga employment as a vehicle to obtain political support. This policy has resulted in a bloated and inefficient armed force that is financially unsustainable.⁵⁷ With few other job opportunities available, the reorganisation of the Peshmerga forces may well lead to popular unrest among the young and unemployed.

53 Since the establishment of the Gorran movement in 2009, the PUK has lost considerable popular support. While the PUK now holds fewer seats in the Kurdistan Parliament than Gorran, the latter cannot effectively wield power without the support of the PUK because 'the Peshmerga forces ... command the real power in Iraqi Kurdistan.' Stratfor 2016. 'A Political Reunion in Iraqi Kurdistan,' 17 May. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/political-reunion-iraqi-kurdistan> (Accessed 28 November 2017). Also see: Rudaw 2018. 'PUK to keep grip on security forces even if defeated in elections, official,' 8 January. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/08012018> (Accessed 24 January 2018).

54 Interview with a member of Gorran, 12 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

55 International Crisis Group 2015. *Op. cit.*

56 Interview with a senior official of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, 17 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

57 Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton 2015. *Op. cit.*

3 Peshmerga politics, Kurdistan and the Iraqi state

In the war against IS, the Peshmerga forces fought on the same side as the Iraqi army for the first time in history. Indeed, the Peshmerga originated from Kurdish opposition to the Iraqi state, and fought many battles against it.⁵⁸ But when they faced a common threat, the Peshmerga 'had to go from fighting the Iraqi government to fighting *for* it.'⁵⁹ However, they did not feel an obligation to protect Iraqi territories other than their own. Hence, they acted as a formal state security organisation only in defence of those objectives that suited them.⁶⁰

Despite their shared military successes in the war against IS, the Peshmerga harbour a lot of resentment against the Iraqi government. Throughout the war, the Peshmerga forces felt completely unsupported and believed that Iraq failed to uphold its promises towards them because they did not receive any equipment or financial support.⁶¹ Adding to their frustration was their perception that the Hashd al-Sha'abi – a range of largely Shi'a militia groups that rapidly grew to prominence in their defence of Iraq against IS – were immediately armed, equipped, and paid by the Iraqi government.⁶²

Moreover, while the newly established collaboration between the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Security Forces required a drastic change in mindset, the reality on the ground remained unaltered. The Iraqi government had no control over the Peshmerga forces.

58 For an excellent analysis of the history of the Peshmerga, see Chapman 2009. *Op. cit.*

59 Interview with a Kurdish civil society activist, 10 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

60 Interviews with senior officials from the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, 10 and 13 September 2017, Erbil/Sulaymaniyah, Iraq.

61 Since the Kurdistan region is not an independent country, its government cannot obtain end-user certificates. As a result, it cannot legally purchase weaponry on its own accord. The Peshmerga therefore had to be equipped by the international community. Other reasons for Baghdad's caution and reticence in supplying the Peshmerga lie in the longstanding political disputes between Baghdad and Erbil about the distribution of national oil revenues (a significant part of Iraq's oil lies under KRI soil) and about the territorial status of the disputed territories themselves – in addition to Baghdad's suspicion of the Peshmerga as an anti-regime security organisation. See for example: BBC 2015. 'Iraqi Kurdistan's battle with Baghdad over oil revenues,' 10 April. <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-32220764> (Accessed 22 January 2018).

62 Interview with a senior official from the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, 17 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

Coordination of operations took place in the context of the global coalition against Islamic State, but the Peshmerga and the Iraqi army operated completely independently of one another. It was the US that divided labour between them, while both forces maintained their own chains of command.⁶³ Hence, despite the fight against IS presenting a historical novelty, it also featured a high degree of continuity. While their role as formal state security organisation enabled the Peshmerga to solicit international assistance and resources, they also retained their functions as anti-regime and hybrid security organisations.

Table 2 below depicts the priority of the three different roles that the Peshmerga play and demonstrates which factors dominated their orientation and performance between 1960 and today.

Table 2 Evolution of the different security organisation functions the Peshmerga represent at different points in time

	1960–1975	1975–1991	1991–2006	2006–2014	2014–2017	Looking ahead
Primary function	Anti-regime security organisation	Anti-regime security organisation	Hybrid security organisation	Hybrid security organisation	Anti-regime security organisation	Hybrid security organisation
Secondary function			Anti-regime security organisation	Formal state security organisation	Formal state security organisation	Formal state security organisation
Tertiary function				Anti-regime security organisation	Hybrid security organisation	Anti-regime security organisation
Turning point at start of period	Arab nationalist discourse	Creation of the PUK	Kurdish uprising	Unification agreement	Rise of IS	Independence referendum
Factors influencing the shift	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political marginalisation - Identity suppression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intense regime violence - Splits in Kurdish nationalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal Kurdish violence - Elite solidification and elite capture in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - US overthrow of Hussein - Need for one voice in Baghdad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunity to enlarge Iraqi Kurdistan - Threat of Islamic State - Cooperation with Baghdad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal Kurdish infighting - Tough response from Baghdad

63 Interview with a Kurdish researcher, 11 September 2017, Erbil, Iraq.

This brief overview and the preceding analysis allow for a few initial observations with regard to the relevance and impact of the Peshmerga on both governance in Kurdistan and relations with the Iraqi state. Key among these is the observation that political disunity among the Kurds appears to be their greatest obstacle. This means that there is an urgent need to face the shortcomings of present governance systems and habits, the dynamics of political dialogue, and the nature of authority structures *within* the Kurdish region.⁶⁴ At present, the Peshmerga help to maintain rather than confront Kurdish political disunity and entrench KDP/PUK control of the KRG. Because the parties retain an oligopoly over the use of armed force in the KRI, a return to violence – or the use of violence to underline political demands – remains an option.⁶⁵ More importantly, it acts as a barrier to challenger parties like Gorran – which could capitalise on popular discontent with poor KDP and PUK governance, and quite possibly corruption – and prevents them from gaining more political influence.⁶⁶

A second observation is that the KRG and PUK have cleverly pooled their armed Peshmerga resources just enough to attract foreign support and investment via the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs while also retaining their own party-affiliated Peshmerga forces. This has enabled them to gain access to new resources while not surrendering any of their existing power base. Buoyed by the international focus on the fight against IS, they have better equipped themselves for a potentially violent future without having to make concessions in areas like democratisation or the quality of governance. Unconditional support by the global coalition thus unintentionally strengthened the oppressive policies and attitudes of the KDP and PUK, enabling the traditional Kurdish political elites to maintain power and suppress opposition groups. The crackdown on popular demonstrations in the KRI in December 2017 – resulting in at least six dead and 70 injured – was a case in point.⁶⁷

A third and final observation is that the episode of Peshmerga withdrawal after the Kurdish independence referendum – from Kirkuk in particular – suggests that intra-Kurdish mistrust and division at both the political and military level remain rife. In fact, this episode is bound to have further deepened such feelings and appears not only to

64 See also: Hassan 2015. *Op.cit.*

65 Farhan 2018. 'Reality Versus The Rules: Kurdish Parties Bend Iraq's Electoral Rules On Politics With Guns.' Niqash. <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5830> (Accessed 21 February 2018).

66 An example of the use of armed force to obstruct opposition political activity was when security forces loyal to the KDP prevented Yusuf Muhammad (the former speaker of Parliament from Gorran) from entering Erbil in October 2015 because of the party's resistance to the extension of Barzani's presidential term. See: Hama 2017. *Op. cit.*

67 CNN 2017. 'At least 6 killed during violent protests in Iraqi Kurdistan,' 19 December. <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/19/middleeast/iraq-kurdish-protests/index.html> (Accessed 24 January 2018).

define relations between the two key parties, but also those within them.⁶⁸ Looking to the future, this suggests that Prime Minister Al-Abadi's strategy to bring the KRI back into the Iraqi fold might succeed if he manages to pull the right strings, for example by insisting on direct payment of Peshmerga salaries on condition that the forces are downsized and brought under Baghdad's control.⁶⁹ The lack of a united political and military front in the KRI offers an opportunity for re-unifying Iraq, but only if financial incentives are combined with a more positive narrative of socio-political inclusion of Kurdish society in the Iraqi polity. A consistent reconciliation policy needs to be initiated from the centre that avoids the stalling-for-time and start-stop pitfalls that plagued similar initiatives in the past under Iraqi Prime Minister Abd al-Karim Qasim and President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr.⁷⁰

68 Workshops at Clingendael on 21 November 2017 and at the EastWest Institute on 8 December 2017 suggested that particularly the PUK is internally divided - to the point of paralysis. See also: Sayigh 2017. *Past the Crossroads*. Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center. <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/73475> (Accessed 3 November 2017).

69 Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Abadi no longer wants to accept the Peshmerga as an autonomous element of Iraq's national defence system. Instead, he wants all forces to be controlled by the Iraqi government, and said that he was prepared to pay only those Peshmerga under the control of the federal state. Cockburn 2017. 'Iraq to end decades-old policy of semi-independent rule in Kurdistan, says PM,' *The Independent*, 30 October, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kurdistan-iraq-prime-minister-abadi-interview-independence-haider-baghdad-kirkuk-patrick-cockburn-a8028201.html> (Accessed 30 October 2017).

70 For a more in-depth analysis: Denali 2005. *Op. cit.*

Conclusion

The defeat of IS has allowed longstanding contradictions to re-emerge in Iraq's security landscape, while new ones have been added. Combined with the Kurdish independence referendum of 2017, these two events have significantly raised the stakes of the Peshmerga's triple hatting as a formal state security organisation, hybrid security organisation and anti-regime security organisation.

Theoretically, the Peshmerga could never be both a formal state security organisation and an anti-regime organisation at the same time. Yet regional autonomy and US-support between 2006 and 2014 and the fight against IS from 2014 to 2017 made that paradox a reality. That reality is now under serious pressure, interestingly as a result of Kurdish actions themselves and in particular those of Masoud Barzani. It appears that the Peshmerga have reached a fork in the road: they must choose between being a formal state security organisation and an anti-regime security organisation. For them to perform successfully in either role, they must shed their function of also being a hybrid security organisation that serves distinct political parties and powerful members of the Kurdish political elite. Such transitions will happen very gradually as the current situation is the result of decades of politics, events and sentiments.

Practically, the KRG – and the Peshmerga – will face an acute financial dilemma in the short term. The loss of Kirkuk's oilfields to Baghdad in October 2017 slashed the KRG's revenues in half, exacerbating an already mounting economic crisis. In response, the KRG drastically cut the salaries of public employees, including security personnel.⁷¹ As many civil servants were already struggling to make ends meet, this is likely to cause further social unrest.⁷² This means that the KRG must either bow to demands from Baghdad to bring the Peshmerga under central government 'control' as a quid pro quo for financial support, or that the KRG must itself initiate substantial downsizing.

In the former scenario, central government control will inevitably remain notional for a while, as distrust between the Shi'a political parties that dominate it and the Kurds runs high and old Peshmerga loyalties will die slowly. However, if accompanied by a positive political initiative of reconciliation and inclusion that capitalises on the poor governance track record of the KRG, some progress on the matter of identity and loyalty might

71 Rudaw 2018. 'Salary, pension reform bill introduced in KRG parliament,' 10 January. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/100120182> (Accessed 24 January 2018).

72 Hama 2018. *Systemic Crisis in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*. Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute.

nevertheless be made. An important question here is whether Al-Abadi can gather enough support among Iraq's Shi'a political parties and the Hashd al-Sha'abi to offer positive inducements in addition to negative threats.

In the latter scenario, the economic prospects of many Kurds will decline further, and this will inevitably raise questions about the quality of KRG leadership and governance. It might boost the rise of other political parties and accelerate the transition towards a coercive apparatus that is under more democratic and transparent control, and less based on revolutionary credentials and legacies of larger-than-life leaders.

For either of these scenarios to unfold with as little friction and violence as possible, it is important that those countries of the international community currently supporting either the Peshmerga or the Iraqi Security Forces take three recommendations to heart:

1. ***Develop an integrated security sector reform (SSR) strategy that considers support for the Iraqi Security Forces and the Peshmerga in relation to each other.*** Today, all eyes are on the Hashd al-Sha'abi, especially as some of these outfits are seen as Iranian proxies in the highly salient frame of regional geopolitical conflict. It tends to be overlooked that the Peshmerga are of similar size and could create a larger problem if a new civil war were to break out. An integrated strategy should take account of the consequences of strengthening different forces in relation to each other, and take on the need for joint command structures and operational mechanisms. This would avoid encouraging one armed force to think it might prevail over the other in a situation of active conflict.
2. ***Ensure that such an integrated SSR strategy is embedded in a broader political strategy for re-including Iraq's Kurds in the Iraqi polity*** on favourable, inclusive and reconciliatory terms without, however, accepting a continuation of the entrenchment of the KDP and PUK in the KRG. Above all, this requires finding a satisfactory solution to the 'disputed areas' after the 2018 Iraqi elections. External help, for example from the UN, will need to be solicited as the levels of trust between Iraq's political parties (including the Kurds') are, in all likelihood, too low.⁷³ It also means that withholding payment from the Peshmerga forces without an adequate transition plan must be avoided, as it will leave the KRI with a large pool of armed and desperate men who are likely to create societal unrest. Iraq has been in the same situation before when, in 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority achieved the same effect by different means.

73 Van Veen et al. 2017. *Op. cit.*

3. ***Consider the need for reform and reconciliation within the Kurdistan region to prevent further intra-Kurdish conflict.*** As a result of the pervasive social, political and economic crisis in the KRI, disappointment with a failed independence referendum, and anger over the use of armed force against protesters, disillusionment and distrust of Kurdistan's political and security institutions are at an all-time high. Conditional international support and oversight can play a positive role in rebuilding popular trust in the KRG's institutions, and its Peshmerga forces in particular. International actors should use their leverage over the KRG – the KDP and PUK in particular – to push for greater transparency, political neutrality and more democratic control over the Peshmerga forces. A good start would be a clear call by the international community to the KDP and PUK to abstain from using Kurdish internal security and Peshmerga forces to influence the results of the upcoming Iraqi parliamentary elections. As much Peshmerga equipment and many of its weapons are provided by the same international community, it has a legitimate stake in the question as to how these will be used in the post-IS era.

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