

### **3. The IS Factor: The Kurds as a Vanguard in the War on the Caliphate**

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#### **IS versus the Kurds**

This chapter sets out the IS-Kurdish conflict in detail by providing an up-to-date account of the conflict, its main trends thus far and the motivations behind the attacks by the Islamic State (IS) against the Kurds in Syria, Iraq and Turkey. The success IS had in capturing large swathes of land in Syria and Iraq in 2014 and 2015, together with its ability to carry out terrorist attacks internationally, has made it one of the biggest international security threats of recent decades. The ongoing atrocities that IS has been committing against various communities in Iraq and Syria, particularly against the Yazidi Kurds, and its destruction of historic and heritage sites has been drawing widespread condemnation from the international community. Amidst the terror and chaos caused by the group, the resistance of the Kurdish forces against it in Syria and Iraq has also been drawing widespread admiration from the international community.

The growing influence of the jihadist groups in the rebel-controlled areas in Syria from 2012 onwards has coincided with a significant increase in attacks against the Kurdish majority

regions of the country. This has become the case especially since mid-July 2013, when fighting broke out between the al-Qaida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (or al-Nusra Front) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Ras al-Ayn (Serêkaniye). However, since early 2014, the conflict has been mainly fought between IS and the Kurdish YPG and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). IS captured Mosul in June 2014 and together with it large quantities of weapons from the Iraqi Army and sums of money. This has significantly increased IS' resources and propelled it to increase its attacks against the Kurds in Syria and Iraq.

In Syria, IS made significant territorial gains in its conflict with the Kurds in 2014 but from the beginning of 2015 onwards Kurdish forces managed to turn the tide against it by taking back a significant portion of the territory they had lost. The Kurdish town of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) on the Turkey-Syria border became the centre stage in the struggle against IS during 2014 and 2015. At the end of January 2015, IS was expelled from Kobani and in June 2015 the Kurdish forces captured the strategic town of Tel Abyad, also on the Turkey-Syria border, which had often been described as an IS stronghold. Since then YPG expansion into IS-held territory has continued. The IS-Kurdish conflict spread to the neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan in August 2014 and there too it is still ongoing. The conflict is taking place mainly in the governorates of Kirkuk and Nineveh. One of the main highlights of the conflict was the humanitarian crisis following IS' capture of the Sinjar region, which is the historic home of the Yazidi Kurds. In August 2014, IS arrived as far as the town of Gwer, which is 40 kilometers southwest of Erbil, the capital city of the Iraqi Kurdistan. The U.S. air strikes halted IS' advance and subsequently the Iraqi Kurdistan's military forces, the *peshmerga*, managed to contain the IS onslaught.

The IS-Kurdish conflict in Iraq and Syria has spread to Turkey with the pro-Kurdish political and peace network becoming one of its main targets. These include the bombing attack in Diyarbakir on 3 June 2015 that targeted an election rally of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which killed three people and injured 100<sup>1</sup>. On 20 July 2015, IS stepped up its campaign against the pro-Kurdish network by bombing a meeting of socialist activists as they gathered in the town of Suruç near the Turkey-Syria border, killing 32 and injuring another 100<sup>2</sup>. Another attack targeting the pro-Kurdish peace network was carried out in Ankara by two suicide bombers on 10 October 2015 that killed more than 100 and injured more than 400 people<sup>3</sup>.

In Syria, IS and the Kurds are rivals for the same territory but the conflict has an ideological dimension and is also propelled by antagonisms based on ethnic differences. IS' goal of establishing a state run according to Islamist fundamentalist ideology is in stark contrast with the Kurds' vision of a democratic, secular, gender-egalitarian and plural Syria. IS' rhetoric targets the secularism of the main Kurdish political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its views on gender equality. Competition over resources and holding strategically important towns need also to be cited as the motives behind the IS attacks. In Iraq, the Kurds' long established alliance with the U.S. and other Western states has made them IS' enemy. In addition, as the attacks on the Yazidi

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<sup>1</sup> "Blasts hit Kurdish party's election rally in Turkey", *Al Jazeera*, 5 June 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/blasts-hit-kurdish-party-election-rally-turkey-150605171236899.html>

<sup>2</sup> C. Gunes, "Turkey bombing risks further unrest in a country already living on the edge", *The Conversation*, 21 July 2015, <https://theconversation.com/turkey-bombing-risks-further-unrest-in-a-country-already-living-on-the-edge-45020>

<sup>3</sup> "Ankara blasts: Bombers linked to Islamic State", *BBC News*, 14 October 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34533522>

Kurdish communities in Sinjar showed, the non-Muslim Kurdish religious communities have been identified as targets to be exterminated as they are considered heretical by ISIS<sup>4</sup>.

Another reason that IS targets Kurds is due to its desire to restart a Kurdish Islamist mobilisation in Turkey and Iraq. IS seems to have targeted the Kurds as part of its recruitment policy because in both Turkey and Iraq there is a history of Kurdish Islamist mobilisation. In fact, the 1990s witnessed widespread attacks by the Kurdish Islamist Hizbullah (or Hezbollah) movement against the pro-Kurdish activists in southeast Turkey<sup>5</sup>. So far IS attacks against the Kurds in Turkey have been predominantly carried out by the Kurdish Islamists recruited by IS in the city of Adiyaman<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, Ansar al-Islam – a Kurdish Islamist group close to al-Qaida – was active in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 2000s and carried out a number of attacks in the Iraqi Kurdistan<sup>7</sup>. The IS-Kurdish conflict in Syria has had a huge impact in Turkey and worsened security and the relations between the state and the Kurdish community, contributing to further polarisation of Kurds and Turks<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> “According to the United Nations, ISIS attacks against the Yazidis may constitute an act of genocide” (“IS Yazidi attacks may be genocide, says UN”), *BBC News*, 19 March 2015,

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31962755>

<sup>5</sup> C. Gunes, *Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*, London and New York, Routledge, pp. 126-130.

<sup>6</sup> M. Bozarslan, “Islamic State’s Secret recruitment ground in Turkey”, *Al Monitor*, July 23, 2015,

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/turkey-adiyaman-isis-connection-suruc-bombing.html#>

<sup>7</sup> A. Speri, “Not All Kurds Are Fighting Against the Islamic State – Some Are Joining It”, *The Vice*, 7 November 2014, <https://news.vice.com/article/not-all-kurds-are-fighting-against-the-islamic-state-some-are-joining-it>

<sup>8</sup> C. Gunes, R. Lowe, *The impact of the Syrian war on Kurdish Politics across the Middle East*, Research Paper, London, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, July 2015.

Additionally, the rise of IS and its attacks against the Kurds are dragging the Kurds into a much larger regional sectarian conflict. As a corollary of the IS attacks on the Kurds, Kurdish movements in Iraq, Turkey and Syria started to cooperate more closely. The Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq are likely to have a key role in the operations to retake the IS strongholds of Raqqa and Mosul in the coming months.

### **The IS-Kurdish conflict in Syria**

This section will provide an overview of the developments in the IS-Kurdish conflict in Syria. It is impossible to cover the conflict in a detailed way in a short space given the numerous turns and twists that it has taken so far. Instead the focus will be on charting the main events taking place and highlighting the dominant trends in the conflict. The Kurds took control of the Kurdish majority regions of Syria on 19 July 2012, mainly the towns along the Syria-Turkey border, including Afrin and Kobani in northern Syria, and Ras al-Ayn in the northeast, following the withdrawal of state forces in Kurdish majority areas. In subsequent months, the Kurds gradually expanded the territory they hold by gaining control of more towns and villages in northern Syria. However, the Kurdish majority areas do not constitute a continuous enclave, and areas populated by Arabs and other ethnic groups divide their population centres. Much like other rebel-held areas in Syria, Kurds began to administer their own affairs and subsequently build autonomous self-administrations in the territories they control. From 2012 onwards, the Kurdish forces were organised within the YPG and YPJ but since October 2015 they have been part of the newly formed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). From January 2014 onwards, the Kurds' political organisation took on a new dimension with the establishment of the cantons of Rojava as an administrative structure to manage *de facto* Kurdish autonomy. There are three cantons in Jazire, Kobani and Afrin but due to

the widespread destruction as a result of the IS attacks, the majority of the population of Kobani and the surrounding villages have left Syria for Turkey. Recently, the Rojava cantons were brought together to form a federal administration on 17 March 2016<sup>9</sup>.

### *2012-13: the growing tensions*

There has been growing tension between the Kurdish forces and Islamist groups and some of the armed units within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) from the end of 2012 to date in particular in Aleppo and Ras al-Ayn. The initial reason for the conflict was competition for territorial control in mixed Arab-Kurdish areas but with the ascendancy of the Islamist groups within Syria's opposition and the failure of the Syrian opposition to accommodate Kurdish demands into its programme and incorporate Kurdish representatives into its structure, the conflict began to be fuelled by ethnic differences and ideology. One of the early sites of the Kurdish-Islamist conflict was Ras al-Ayn and the tensions began to flare up in November 2012. The initial fighting was between some military units of the FSA who entered the town on 8 November 2012 and the Kurdish YPG forces<sup>10</sup>. Not too long after the first outbreak of violence in the town, the Jabat al-Nusra (JN) fighters also joined the fight against the Kurdish forces<sup>11</sup>. There were two ceasefires in December and February but attempts to find a settlement did not succeed. The conflict in Ras al-Ayn ended in July 2013 with

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<sup>9</sup> "Syrian Kurds declare new federation in bid for recognition", *Middle East Eye*, 17 March 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kurdish-pyd-declares-federalism-northern-syria-1311505605>

<sup>10</sup> "Ra's al-Ayn: Heavy fighting between PYD and FSA", *Kurdwatch*, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2697&z=en>

<sup>11</sup> "Jihadist rebels in standoff with Syria Kurds: NGO", *Al Arabiya News*, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/11/22/251219.html>

the YPG expelling the JN and other groups from the town<sup>12</sup>. After Ras al-Ayn, another of the mixed Kurdish and Arab towns, Tell Abyad (Gre Spi), became the site of conflict between the Kurdish forces and the jihadists. There, the initial conflict was between YPG and the JN but subsequently the town fell to IS hands on 30 June 2014<sup>13</sup>. Prior to the capture IS and the FSA were present in Tell Abyad and struggled for control. IS' capture of Tell Abyad was a significant setback for the Kurdish forces as it meant that they were not able to territorially connect the Kobani and Jazire cantons. Also, as the subsequent months showed, this made the Kobani canton particularly vulnerable to an IS attack as all the supply routes to Kobani were cut off. In fact, Kobani seems to have been one of the main targets for IS from the start as it attempted to lay siege to the town on 1 August 2013 by surrounding it on three fronts but was not able to forcefully capture it.

On 30 August 2013, further fighting took place between the Kurdish forces and IS, JN and the FSA units in the rural areas of Kobani<sup>14</sup>. On 28 August 2013, IS and Kurdish forces battled for control of the Yarubiya border on the northeast part of the Iraq-Syria border, which finally fell to YPG control on 26 October 2013<sup>15</sup>. On 26 September 2013, FSA and IS attacked Kurdish forces in the village of Atme and town of Jandairis near

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<sup>12</sup> "Syria Kurds expel jihadists, seize weapons: NGO", Fox News, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/07/20/syria-kurds-expel-jihadists-seize-weapons-ngo.html>

<sup>13</sup> T. Daloglu, "ISIS raises flag at Turkish Border", *Al Monitor*, 30 June 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/daloglu-isis-syria-iraq-mosul-caliphate-flag-border.html>

<sup>14</sup> "Ayn al-'Arab: Fighting between YPG and FSA", *Kurdwatch*, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2919&z=en>

<sup>15</sup> "Kurdish Fighters Gain Control of Syria-Iraq Border Town", *Rudaw*, 26 October 2013, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/26102013>

the Turkey-Syria border in the northwest of the country<sup>16</sup>. Towards the end of 2013, the IS presence in areas between Hasakah and Qamishli was targeted by the YPG. In 2013 Kurdish action seems to have focussed on consolidating their control in Hasakah and other Kurdish majority areas. However, both IS and Kurdish forces were unable to hold on to the areas they captured for long periods, which has meant that the conflict was to become a long drawn out one and certain towns and villages changed hand a number of times between IS and the YPG. During 2014, as the territory held by both IS and the Kurdish forces controlled expanded, the conflict between the Kurdish forces and IS spread to a larger area. The capture of the towns on the Turkey-Syria border, such as Tell Abyad, has allowed IS to bring in via Turkey the jihadists that it recruited internationally<sup>17</sup>.

### *The spread of conflict*

After IS captured large amounts of weapons from the Iraqi army in Mosul in June 2014, it began to carry out more attacks against the Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria. The conflict significantly escalated during the second half of 2014 with IS capturing large areas in the Kobani canton. The initial attacks on the town and its surrounding areas began in July 2014 but IS intensified its attacks on Kobane from 15 September 2014 onwards and the battle of Kobani is of critical importance in the conflict. To escape the onslaught, thousands of Kurds have taken refuge in Turkey. IS' advance into Kobani was rapid and

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<sup>16</sup> "Arabs battle Syrian Kurds as Assad's foes fragment", *Reuters*, 27 September 2013, <http://in.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-kurds/id/INL5N0H3M220130926>

<sup>17</sup> A. Albayrak, J. Parkinson, "Turkey Struggles to Halt Islamic State 'Jihadist Highway'", *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 September 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-struggles-to-halt-islamic-state-jihadist-highway-1409777884>



it took the Kurdish forces by surprise that IS was investing such a considerable number of fighters in its siege of the town. The U.S. airstrikes targeting IS around Kobani started on 27 September 2015, in aid of the lightly armed Kurdish forces who were not able to stop IS advances.

In early October 2015, IS captured the strategically important Mishtenur Hill on the south side of Kobani as well as several buildings inside the town<sup>18</sup>. In the following weeks, as IS' expansion into Kobani continued, an urban fight ensued that resulted in widespread destruction of the town's buildings. The U.S. air-dropped weapons, ammunition and medical supplies to the Kurdish forces on 19 October 2014<sup>19</sup>. The *peshmerga* fighters from the Iraqi Kurdistan were allowed to travel to Kobani via Turkey on 31 October 2014 to offer support to the Kurdish forces battling IS<sup>20</sup>. On 19 January 2015, Kurdish forces recaptured the Mishtenur Hill and then started to drive IS out of Kobani<sup>21</sup>.

Henceforth, from early 2015 onwards, the Kurdish forces gained the momentum in the fight against IS. On the evening of 27 January, Kurds celebrated the liberation of Kobani from the IS siege. The celebrations started after the YPG and YPJ declared that all parts of the town were free from IS control but it was still present in more than 300 villages surrounding Kobani. The intensification of U.S. air strikes against IS positions around Kobani helped to slow IS advances but the

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<sup>18</sup> "Battle for Kobane: Key Events", *BBC News*, 25 June 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>

<sup>19</sup> "Kobani: US drops weapons to Kurds in Syria", *The Guardian*, 20 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/20/us-drops-weapons-to-kurds-in-syria>

<sup>20</sup> H. Pamuk, R. Salman, "Kurdish peshmerga forces enter Syria's Kobani after further air strikes", *Reuters*, 31 October 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-idUSKBN0IK15M20141031>

<sup>21</sup> "Kobane battle: Kurdish fighters capture strategic hilltop", *BBC News*, 19 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30883041>

biggest burden in ending Kobani's siege was shouldered by the YPG and YPJ fighters although their task was eased by the support received from the *peshmerga* forces of the Iraqi Kurdistan and some FSA military units. The widespread mobilisation of the Kurds of Turkey and Syria and the help and aid obtained from the donations provided by the Kurdish Diaspora community in Europe and North America were also important in pushing IS back. There have been significant civilian casualties in the conflict, with the massacre in Kobani of 164 Kurdish civilians on 25 June 2015 being one of the most deadly so far. They were attacked by IS fighters in disguise in Kobani, who also injured nearly 200 more<sup>22</sup>. IS also kidnapped Kurdish civilians and children who were held for long periods of time<sup>23</sup>.

### *Kurds turn the tide against IS*

The isolation of Kobani and the inability of the Kurdish forces to bring in fighters and materiel made it an easy target for IS but the success it had against the Kurdish forces there was not repeated elsewhere. In the Al-Hasakah governorate, IS made many attempts to capture Kurdish controlled-territory but even if clashes with IS took place in the rural areas, the YPG forces were able to protect the large population centres from IS attacks. The YPG seized control of Tell Brak, a town northeast

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<sup>22</sup> K. Shaheen, "Kurdish forces besiege Isis fighters in Kobani after massacre of civilians", *The Guardian*, 26 June 2015,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/26/kurdish-forces-have-besieged-isis-fighters-in-kobani-say-activists>

<sup>23</sup> J. Harkin, "Up to 186 Kurdish students kidnapped by Isis in northern Syria", *The Guardian*, 24 June 2014,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/26/186-kurdish-students-kidnapped-isis-syria>

of Al-Hasakah, from IS at the end of February 2014<sup>24</sup>. The Kurdish forces were unable to hold the town and fighting between the Kurdish forces and IS in the area continued with the town coming under Kurdish control again in March 2015<sup>25</sup>.

The Kurds' improving relations and cooperation with the U.S. military has enabled them to repel IS attacks and become a key fighting force on the ground against IS in Syria. On 15 June 2015, the border town of Tell Abyad was liberated from IS control by the Kurdish forces with support from some Arab militia units. This was described as a major blow to IS because of its proximity to its *de facto* capital city of Raqqa and because it was a major supply route. This has propelled the Kurdish forces to make further gains against IS and expand the territories they hold. During August 2015, the YPG made significant gains in Al-Hasakah governorate. On 23 June 2015, IS started a large military campaign to capture Hasakah city, which was controlled jointly by the Kurdish and regime forces<sup>26</sup>. Clashes took place throughout July and on 1 August 2015 the Kurdish forces declared that Hasakah was cleared of IS' presence<sup>27</sup>.

The advances of Kurdish forces against IS continued throughout the end of 2015 with the strategically important

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<sup>24</sup> T. Perry, "Syrian Kurds take town from Islamists: watchdog", *Reuters*, 22 February 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-town-idUSBREA110JJ20140222>

<sup>25</sup> "Under Kurdish Attacks ISIS loses main stronghold in Hasakah", ARA News, 1 March 2014, <http://aranews.net/2015/03/under-kurdish-attacks-isis-loses-main-stronghold-in-hasakah/>

<sup>26</sup> "Islamic State suicide bombers attack Hasaka, 10 killed", *Reuters*, 23 June 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-bombings-idUSKBN0P32N420150623>

<sup>27</sup> T. Wyke, "Kurdish forces declare Syrian city of Hasakah liberated from ISIS", *Mail Online*, 2 August 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3183235/Kurdish-forces-declare-Syrian-city-Hasakah-liberated-ISIS-jihadi-group-execute-three-men-promoting-engaging-homosexuality.html>

Tishrin Dam in the Al-Raqqa governorate falling into Kurdish-led SDF control in late December 2015<sup>28</sup>. Further gains were made in the eastern part of the Al-Hasakah governorate in November 2016 with the town of al-Hawl being captured by the SDF on 14 November 2015<sup>29</sup>. The SDF continued its advance further south in the Al-Hasakah governorate with capture of the town of El-Shaddadi on 20 February 2016<sup>30</sup>. In February 2016, there were reports of clashes in northern Aleppo between Kurdish forces and the Islamist groups and FSA units. Kurdish gains against IS have not resulted in improving relations with other Arab opposition groups in Syria and we may yet witness acceleration in the conflict between Kurdish-led forces and a collection of Islamist and moderate Arab groups.

## **IS-Kurdish conflict in Iraq**

This section will provide an account of the IS-Kurdish conflict in Iraq. At the beginning of 2014, IS started to increase its influence in Iraq but the initial attacks it carried out against Iraqi security forces took place in the Al-Anbar governorate. Having established a stronghold there by capturing the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah in the first half of 2014, it then started to move north and northeast into the Nineveh and Kirkuk governorates and increasingly targeted the Kurdish controlled or populated territories. As mentioned previously, IS' capture of Mosul – Iraq's second largest city – in early June 2014 with

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<sup>28</sup> "U.S.-backed alliance captures key dam from Islamic State: alliance spokesman", *Reuters*, 26 December 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/u-backed-alliance-captures-key-dam-islamic-state-153550929.html>

<sup>29</sup> "Syrian Democratic Forces recapture key town near Iraqi border amid ISIS decline", *ARA News*, 14 November 2015, <http://aranews.net/2015/11/syrian-democratic-forces-recapture-key-town-near-iraqi-border-amid-isis-decline/>

<sup>30</sup> "Syrian Democratic Forces announce liberation of last ISIS bastion in Hasakah", *ARA News*, 20 February 2016, <http://aranews.net/2016/02/syrian-democratic-forces-announce-liberation-of-main-isis-bastion-in-hasakah/>

relative ease greatly expanded the resources it had. In the subsequent weeks, it further expanded the territory it held and on 1 August 2014, it began its Kurdish campaign in which it captured territory, including the towns of Zumar and Sinjar.

The Iraqi Kurdistan has been relatively safe and secure in the post-2003 period, when compared with rest of Iraq, which has witnessed ongoing sectarian violence for much of the time. However, the bomb attack in Erbil on 29 September 2013 that IS carried out and that killed 6 people was a sign that it had the potential and intention to destabilise the Kurdish region<sup>31</sup>. Additionally, IS' expansion in Iraq and Syria has increased the pressure on the resources of the Iraqi Kurdistan significantly, with many of the internally displaced Iraqis and Kurdish refugees from Syria arriving there. Also, following the IS offensive in northern Iraq in June 2014, *peshmerga* forces moved into disputed areas such as the city of Kirkuk and the surrounding areas that were in danger of being captured by IS. Consequently, both the population and the territory of the Iraqi Kurdistan increased significantly, increasing the strain on the *peshmerga* forces as they had to provide security to a much larger area. Another area that IS had a strong presence in was the Kirkuk governorate. In fact, it was one of the cities that IS threatened during its June offensive and there too the Iraqi army abandoned its positions in expectation of an impending IS attack<sup>32</sup>. However, the Kurdish forces were able to swiftly move

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<sup>31</sup> T. Arango, "Once-Calm Area of Iraq Is Shaken by Bombings", *The New York Times*, 29 September 2013,

[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/world/middleeast/relatively-calm-kurdish-region-of-iraq-is-shaken-by-rare-attack.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/world/middleeast/relatively-calm-kurdish-region-of-iraq-is-shaken-by-rare-attack.html?_r=0)

<sup>32</sup> F. Hawrami, P. Beaumont, "Iraqi Kurdish forces take Kirkuk as Isis sets its sights on Baghdad", *The Guardian*, 12 June 2014,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/12/iraq-isis-kirkuk-baghdad-kurdish-government>

into the area and to defend it against IS in the subsequent months.

The increased threat levels and the worsening security situation have revealed the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Kurdish *peshmerga* forces. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that IS' August offensive against the Iraqi Kurdistan was a threat that it had never experienced in 25 years of its existence as an autonomous region. Described as a "near-death experience" by Gareth Stansfield, the biggest shock to the Iraqi Kurdistan was when IS came as far as the towns of Gwer and Makhmour in the Nineveh governorate and within 40 kilometres of its capital city Erbil, causing widespread panic amongst its population<sup>33</sup>. The consequences could have been far worse for the Iraqi Kurdistan as well as the entire region had the U.S. not carried out prompt air strikes against advancing IS forces<sup>34</sup>. In addition, the military aid the *peshmerga* has received from numerous countries has enabled them to stabilise their position and become more effective in combating ISIS<sup>35</sup>.

IS advances in Sinjar and surrounding areas in early August 2014 resulted in a humanitarian crisis. Without a doubt the Yazidi Kurdish minority based in the northern part of the Nineveh governorate can be singled out as the group that suffered the most from the hands of ISIS. A quick glance at the available figures shows the scale of the devastation they suffered: 5,000 Yazidi men were executed, as many as 7,000

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<sup>33</sup> G. Stansfield, "The Islamic State, the Kurdistan Region and the future of Iraq: assessing UK policy options", *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 6, pp. 1329-1350.

<sup>34</sup> R. Spencer, "American air strikes help Kurdish forces reclaim towns from Islamic State", *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 August 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/11024844/American-air-strikes-help-Kurdish-forces-reclaim-towns-from-Islamic-State.html>

<sup>35</sup> L. Berman, *The Status of Western Military Aid to Kurdish Peshmerga Forces*, Jerusalem Centre for Contemporary Affairs, 11 May 2015, <http://jcpa.org/article/the-status-of-western-military-aid-to-kurdish-peshmerga-forces/>

Yazidi women taken as slaves, almost 200,000 Yazidis were displaced, with many moving to Iraqi Kurdistan, and thousands were stranded on the Sinjar Mountain in an attempt to escape the IS assault<sup>36</sup>. Had it not been for U.S. military action, UN aid and the swift action of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) guerrillas and YPG forces who provided safe passage to Yazidis, the scale of the devastation would have been far worse<sup>37</sup>.

### *Kurdish fightback*

Although the Kurdish forces were able to regain some of the lost territory in Nineveh soon after, progress in eradicating the threat IS poses to the Kurds and the Iraqi Kurdistan has been slow. After the initial shock and retreat, the *peshmerga* forces made progress against IS in and around the towns of Gwer and Makhmour one week after IS captured them in early August 2014<sup>38</sup>. Since the end of August 2014, the *peshmerga* forces have recaptured the territory they lost. The capture of Mosul dam in August 2014 was one of the highlights of the *peshmerga* forces' advance against IS, which was achieved as a result of an intense U.S. air campaign against IS targets and with the

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<sup>36</sup> R. Spencer, "Isil carried out massacres and mass sexual enslavement of Yazidis, UN confirms", *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 October 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11160906/Isil-carried-out-massacres-and-mass-sexual-enslavement-of-Yazidis-UN-confirms.html>

<sup>37</sup> I. Tharoor, "A U.S.-designated terrorist group is saving Yazidis and battling the Islamic State", *The Washington Post*, 11 August 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/08/11/a-u-s-designated-terrorist-group-is-saving-yazidis-and-battling-the-islamic-state/>

<sup>38</sup> S. Khalel, M. Vickery, "Battle for Makhmour: a frontline in Iraq's latest war", *Middle East Eye*, 18 August 2014, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/battle-makhmour-frontline-iraq-s-latest-war-147748868>

support of the Iraqi Army<sup>39</sup>. The *peshmerga* forces made further gains in the Nineveh governorate throughout 2015 but progress was more gradual and cautious<sup>40</sup>. On 13 November 2015, the town of Sinjar was captured jointly by the *peshmerga* forces, PKK guerrillas and local Yazidi defence forces<sup>41</sup>. Subsequently the *peshmerga* forces began to push back IS further in other parts of Nineveh and in early February 2016, they captured 5 villages from IS in the Nineveh governorate<sup>42</sup>

Another front on which Kurdish forces have been actively fighting IS is the city of Kirkuk. IS reached as far as the outskirts of the city and is present in the areas west of Kirkuk but the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces have by and large kept the city secure. IS carried out bombings in Kirkuk and sabotaged the oil infrastructure and on numerous occasions tried to capture the city by launching surprise attacks but the *peshmerga* forces have been able to repel IS attacks in each case<sup>43</sup>. Being an oil

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<sup>39</sup> H. Cooper, M. Landler and A. Ahmed, “Troops in Iraq Rout Sunni Militants From a Key Dam”, *New York Times*, 18 August 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/19/world/middleeast/iraq-mosul-dam.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/19/world/middleeast/iraq-mosul-dam.html?_r=1)

<sup>40</sup> A. Doran, “Holding Down the Fort in Kurdistan: Peshmerga Play Defense against ISIS”, *National Review*, 16 June 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/419811/holding-down-fort-kurdistan-peshmerga-play-defense-against-isis-andrew-doran>

<sup>41</sup> M. Chulov, “‘Tyranny has gone’: Kurds and Yazidis celebrate recapture of Sinjar from Isis”, *The Guardian*, 13 November 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/13/tyranny-has-gone-kurds-and-yazidis-celebrate-recapture-of-sinjar-from-isis>

<sup>42</sup> “Kurdish Peshmerga, Iraqi allies recapture five villages in Nineveh amid ISIS retreat”, ARA News, 2 February 2016, <http://aranews.net/2016/02/kurdish-peshmerga-iraqi-allies-recapture/>

<sup>43</sup> N. Malas, “Islamic State Militants Launch Offensive Outside Kurdish-Controlled Kirkuk”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 January 2015, [http://www.wsj.com/articles/senior-kurdish-military-commander-killed-in-iraq-fighting-islamic-militants-1422614353?mod=WSJ\\_hppMIDDLENexttoWhatsNewsSecond](http://www.wsj.com/articles/senior-kurdish-military-commander-killed-in-iraq-fighting-islamic-militants-1422614353?mod=WSJ_hppMIDDLENexttoWhatsNewsSecond)



rich city, it is likely to face threats until IS is completely defeated. The Kurdish forces are still engaged in a conflict with the IS around Kirkuk and there they have prevented IS from entering the city or laying siege to it. Since IS is positioned in nearby areas, the attacks on the city and on the positions of the *peshmerga* forces have continued regularly.

Being a highly mobile force has enabled IS to carry out attacks in a wide area. It has engaged in combat with the *peshmerga* forces but also used car bombs and suicide bombings in its attacks. These have mainly taken place on the combat fronts but the Iraqi Kurdistan's capital city Erbil has also been targeted on a number of occasions since the attack on 30 September 2013 that I discussed above. On 19 November 2014, IS carried out a car bomb attack targeting a checkpoint and killing 4 people<sup>44</sup>. On 17 April 2015, IS again carried a car bomb attack in Erbil close to the U.S. consulate, killing 3<sup>45</sup>. This has meant that the threat it poses to the Kurds in Iraq continues. Currently, the Iraqi Kurdistan has 1,000 kilometers of border with IS, which has meant that IS attacks on Kurdish positions continue to occur regularly. The human cost of the conflict with IS for the *peshmerga* forces has been quite high and rising steadily as the conflict drags on. In January 2016, according to official figures, the number of *peshmergas* who lost their lives reached 1,345 with over 8,000 injured in combat.<sup>46</sup> Many of the casualties lost their lives in combat and as a result of car bombs. For example, IS carried out a

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<sup>44</sup> "ISIS claims suicide bombings in Iraq's Erbil", *Al Arabiya News*, 21 November 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/11/21/ISIS-claims-suicide-bombings-in-Iraq-s-Erbil.html>

<sup>45</sup> I. Coles, "Car bomb kills three outside U.S. consulate in Iraq's Kurdish capital", *Reuters*, 17 April 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-us-consulate-idUSKBN0N81RF20150417>

<sup>46</sup> "New Figures Reveal Peshmerga Casualties in anti-IS War", *BasNews*, 12 January 2016, <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/kurdistan/253202>

“surprise attack” against the *peshmerga* forces in Gwer on 11 January 2015, resulting in 34 fatalities<sup>47</sup>. Also, early on in the conflict, the *peshmerga* forces did not have suitable weapons and armour to fight an enemy such as IS. The task has been made more difficult by the fact that the Iraqi Kurdistan has not been paid its share of the combat budget by the Iraqi government. Historically low oil prices have meant that the export of oil via Turkey has not brought in the necessary income to finance the expenditures and as a result the Iraqi Kurdistan’s fight against IS has generated much social and economic pressure.

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented an account of the IS-Kurdish conflict in Syria and Iraq. As Kurds in Syria expanded the territories under their control from July 2012 onwards, they have come under increasing attacks by the Islamist groups. The IS-Kurdish conflict in Syria has been ongoing since July 2013 but it has spread to a wider area and seen an increase in its intensity during 2014 and 2015. Fighting has taken place in the Al-Hasakah, Al-Raqqa and Aleppo governorates but much of it has focused on Kobani and Al-Hasakah. In fact, the Kurdish-IS conflict has been one of the main subplots of the Syrian civil war. As IS increased its operational capacity with the money and materiel from the Iraqi Army, it has intensified its attacks against the Kurds in Syria. The conflict has been active for much of the past two years with the Kurdish forces containing IS attacks from early 2015 onwards and they have subsequently pushed IS out of the territories it had captured from the Kurds. More recently in 2016, Kurdish forces around Aleppo came

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<sup>47</sup> “Islamic State kills 24 Kurds in surprise attack in North Iraq”, *Reuters*, 11 January 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-idUSKBN0KK0CX20150111>

under attack by various Islamist groups, particularly the JN and Ahrar al-Sham, which indicates that the Kurdish-Islamist conflict may yet accelerate in future.

The IS-Kurdish conflict has been ongoing in Iraq since August 2014 and it continues to pose a serious security risk for the Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdish forces were caught by surprise and lost territory against IS in August 2014 but subsequently they have consolidated their positions and made gradual progress against IS in the governorates of Nineveh and Kirkuk. The Iraqi Kurdistan has been supported by a number of states who have provided much needed military aid. In the past two years, IS has continued its attacks against the *peshmerga* forces but also carried out car bomb attacks in Erbil, increasing the risks to civilians. IS attacks in Sinjar resulted in a humanitarian crisis and widespread displacement of the Yazidi Kurdish community.

In both Iraq and Syria, we have witnessed a significant mobilisation and the Kurdish forces in both countries have become one of the central actors in the fight against ISIS. The Kurdish advance against IS in both Syria and Iraq has been welcomed by the international powers fighting against IS who have provided the Kurds with vital military support and air cover. The Kurds are likely to take a key role in forthcoming battles against IS in Mosul and Raqqa, which are considered the strongholds of IS in Iraq and Syria respectively. In addition to its attacks in Syria and Iraq, IS has also targeted the pro-Kurdish political and peace movement in Turkey, with bomb attacks causing the death of many activists and civilians in Diyarbakir, Suruç and in Ankara in 2015.

