From Resistance to Military Institutionalization: The case of the

Peshmerga versus IS

ABSTRACT

This study explores differing strategies and tactics employed by the *peshmerga* forces against Islamic State. This experience highlights a number of issues which are relevant to contemporary security debates. First the struggle highlights important aspects of the development of the *peshmerga* and their strategies as an organised non-state military force (defending as it does the Kurdistan Region in Iraq). Secondly the *peshmerga*-IS conflict is an important case study of small wars. The strategy and tactics used here are therefore useful empirical references about the effectiveness of military force in counter-insurgency. Finally the war against IS united the *peshmerga* forces, possibly for the first time, and effected a radical change in the Kurdish use of military tactics, including the shift from defensive to offensive strategies. The article examines the methods employed by the *peshmerga* forces against IS, explains why the cases of Makhmour and Shingal stand out as tipping points, and discusses the evolution of Kurdish defence capacity.

Key words: *Security; Peshmerga; Islamic State; Makhmour; Shingal; Strategy and Tactics*

"The war against IS is not a local war…it is not even a regional war. It crossed all borders and became a global war"

General Najat Ali[1]

1. Introduction

The case of Kurdish fighters and in specific of the *peshmerga* in the Kurdistan Region (KR) of Iraq is of great interest as one of the main forces in their conflict with Islamic State especially from 2014 onward. This experience highlights a number of issues relevant to contemporary security debates. First the *peshmerga*-IS conflict is an important case study of small wars. The struggle between the *peshmerga* and IS highlight debates about the effectiveness and interactions of the *peshmerga* forces, as well as the strategy and tactics used to demonstrate the effectiveness of military force in counter-insurgency. Tactically, the way the *peshmerga* have had to change to fight IS provides an important case study of modern war, detailed examples of which constitute the operations in Makhmour and Shingal. Secondly this change is important because it is directly linked to essential aspects of the evolution of the *peshmerga* as an important organised non-state military actor and therefore the focus of this paper will be on the military aspects of the *peshmerga*-IS conflict. This role in defence ironically, from the crisis, allowed Kurdish foreign policy to increase its bargaining power following *peshmerga*'s control of more territory (at least until October, 16th 2017– night of Kerkuk).[2]

This work discusses the *peshmerga* in contemporary terms using primary sources involving interviews with frontline Kurdish leaders during the fight against the IS. At the centre of the analysis is the core debate concerning how the *peshmerga* forces in Iraq have operated, previously and in current circumstances. To date a limited number of scholarly works has focused on the contemporary role of the *peshmerga* forces and more importantly explain how they have progressed *in tandem with* their evolving strategies and the methods employed from the past to the present. Topics of interest have concentrated mainly either on historical accounts[3] or the security sector in the KR *vis-à-vis* Iraq[4] and in general its structure historically.[5] The historical impact of the development and organisation of Kurdish military forces has been discussed in the work of Michael G. Lortz – an MA dissertation covering

however the period from the late Ottoman Empire to the US removal of the Iraqi government in 2003.[6] In the existing literature *peshmerga* have been mostly seen through the lens of intra-Kurdish dichotomies and party differences, [i.e., between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)], both of which are heavily over-emphasised, as well as through the security institutions of the KR as a whole within the wider Iraqi framework (and in comparison with interactions with the Iraqi armed forces). In contrast, I contend their gradual evolution in response to, and as a consequence of, external structural changes and domestic developments has occurred in relation to the Kurdish issue.[7] Detailing new developments the article demonstrates how the trajectory of these events has, in effect, modernized, progressed and developed the Kurdish armed forces into an institutional non-state army which, while preserving its own unique characteristics is answerable to the Kurdish authorities and specifically to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.

Even so, and given the transition period that is being experienced in the Middle Eastern region in general and in Iraq itself, the *peshmerga* today have evolved into players in their own right, especially since the onset of the insurgency by the IS aimed at establishing its own structures.

2. The Peshmerga as Non-State Security Force

"US and UK explained that the peshmerga are fighting on behalf of the world"[8]

Muhammad Haji Mahmoud

2.1. Evolving Strategies and Policies of the Kurdish military movement

The *peshmerga* may have developed into an internationally-recognised force as the main victims and the frontier against the IS, with limited external (or even internal) aid compared to their needs during the war (for instance covered by only by 25 percent in Sector 6 – i.e., the Makhmour and Gwer fronts);[9] yet their origin is traced back to the onset of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq as fighters, mainly against the Iraqi regime, for freedom and rights, and whose role continues unaltered to the present. From the mid-1940s the Mahabad Republic was already reliant on the fighters of Mullah Mustafa Barzani – Minister of Defense and commander of the Kurdish army – a force of around 2000 *peshmerga*, that contributed to the establishment of the Kurdish Republic (22 January 1946), and part of who later on followed him into exile in the USSR.[10] In that sense and considering regional geography,

there is in reality, no concrete date to which the formation of the Kurdish movement can be traced, but this is of minor importance compared to the fact that the Kurdish leader was the first to form a modern army comprised of units.

According to Haji Mahmoud, the term *peshmerga*

> is the name Kurds invented on their own…one who is an activist and ready to sacrifice against suppression and dictatorial regimes in order for people to live in stability and have peace[11]

Terminologically, the derivation of '*peshmerga*' is a synthesis of two words, namely 'pĕŝ' (in front of) and 'merg' (death), and refers to a member of a Kurdish nationalist revolutionary army established in the early 1960s. The Kurdish armed force in the KR of Iraq is explicitly linked to the context within which the sequence of developments occurred (i.e., the many and various structural changes), as well as to the evolution of the Kurdish movement into stages. Each phase, connected dramatically to the one preceding it, enforced the re-orientation of Kurdish strategy and fighting, thereby preserving the objectives and political long- and short-term goals that were, and have remained intact.

The inception and the establishment of the *peshmerga* forces were clearly deeply rooted and remain recognizable through their multifaceted discourse and policies. In the early days of their development, and apart from organizing the Kurdish movement, *peshmerga* also managed the society by inspiring and sparking off revolution (*rapareen*) and the awakening of Kurdish identity.[12] As discussed in greater detail below, the *peshmerga* represent an interesting case, due to their formation and the gradual phased evolution of their forces, but more specifically to their multiple duties and comprehensive roles.

Despite historical accounts of the *peshmerga* forces already covered,[13] the article adopts a different perceptive with regard to the identification of specific chronological phases through which the Kurdish military movement passed and which are enmeshed with a parallel evolution of strategies and policies that are analysed sequentially. Starting from the first Iraqi–Kurdish War (1961–1970), the onset of the Kurdish revolution in 1961 was primarily a battle front against the Iraqi regime, with the Kurds united under the umbrella of a single political party, namely the KDP (پارتى ديموكراتى كوردستان). The party in fact consisted of two wings; one represented by the *peshmerga* and its political constituents, a combination of

members from the civilian, urban sector and other educated people, alongside components from the police, and soldiers who joined the movement. The idea of partisanship became stronger in the aftermath of 1964 (when the first split was witnessed) .This was a result of the division from 1966 onwards between the political bureau (into Jalalis[14]) and the military (مكتب عسكري) (into Malayis) wing under the control of Mullah Mustafa Barzani. Until 1975 the Kurds were united in fighting against the Iraqi regime, whereas the partisan dimension expanded throughout this period with the creation of the PUK.

Therefore, the second Kurdish-Iraqi War that followed the collapse of the Autonomy Talks during the 1970s marks the second phase of the Kurdish military movement (1976-1979), in the aftermath of the onset of the first stage as a preparatory phase of their organization within Iraq, and with the *peshmerga* remaining an irregular army, rather than a regular force. During this four-year period, even though the *peshmerga* preserved and employed the same strategy of 'attack and return' to the mountains, waging a partisan war identified by insurgency tactics and aiming to increase people's awareness, they nevertheless intensified their activities and became further organized. The period from 1979 onwards represented a third stage for the *peshmerga* movement, consisting of a variety of policies and strategies. "The collection of weapons, capture of prisoners, [and] the establishment of committees to solve the Kurdish problem", the aim of retaking "different areas, [to] make radio and newspaper [reports]", along with "the division of lands for farmers while developing relations with other parties", accurately demonstrated the role of the *peshmerga* as a social, and political force beyond its military duties.

An era of transition ensued, following Kurdish political fragmentation in 1975, the death of Mullah Mustafa in 1979, the reorientation of Iraq's foreign policy towards the West and the latter's interest in Iraqi oil, in addition to the Gulf War I (1980–1988) and the Anfal Campaign (1986-1988); all of which elements contributed to the evolution of the Kurdish movement into a military force. US-Iraqi rapprochement thus had an inverse impact on Iraqi–Kurdish relations.[15] The Algiers Agreement of 6 March 1975, and the subsequent defeat of the Kurdish rebellion, along with Kurdish disputes, intensified by the Gulf War I, between the KDP and the newly-formed PUK (*Yeketi Niştimani Kurdistan*, 1975) – which was officially announced from Damascus in June 1976 by Jalal Talabani and Ibrahim Ahmad, launched a new phase for the Kurdish military movement in Iraq. The Kurdish rebellion of 1983 led to the division of the Kurdish parties, with the establishment of two fronts between

early 1982 and 1987. These were respectively the JWD (الجبهة الوطنية الديمقراطية, National Democratic Front) which included the KDP, PUK, PSK (Revolutionary Party of Kurdistan), PASOK, and the ICP (Iraqi Communist Party), and the short-lived JWQD (1981) (الجبهة الوطنية القومية الديمقراطية, National Progressive Nationality Front): until the formation in 1987 of the Iraqi Kurdistan Front they are indicative examples of the nature of Kurdish unity and the balances of power throughout the 1980s.

Apart from the period of the Kurdish civil war between 1994 and 1998, which ended with the Washington Agreement (September 1998), it was not until the beginning of the 1990s that a rapid shift occurred from the 'mountains and resistance' phase towards a new institutionalized form of governance within a federal context, at which point "the *peshmerga* handed their weapons over to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (1992)".[16] The aftermath of the Washington Agreement was important as it signalled the start of the process of gradual institutionalization of the Kurdish forces. Even so, according to the Kurdish *peshmerga* in charge of the Kirkuk frontlines during the anti-IS war, this integration was fairly gradual: "It was a very difficult period economically, due to the sanctions against Iraq and subsequently on Kurdistan since there was no economic infrastructure and the Iraqi regime destroyed 4,500 villages. Nevertheless, we could manage the administration of Kurdistan".[17]

The evolution of the *peshmerga* forces clearly indicates the need for its division into stages rather than abstract and general periods (according to the existing literature), considering the impact of structural changes upon their stages of development which peaked with the 2003 Iraq War for 'regime change'. At this point, the second round of this gradual integration saw the emergence of the *peshmerga* as an indispensable military force and a strong ally of the US armed forces. During this fifth phase, the institutionalization of the *peshmerga* was acknowledged,[18] and with international recognition, the military movement evolved into a more organized force, along the lines of a regular army with the potential to develop into a state army to the extent that "until now 14 brigades have been integrated".[19]

2.2. The Peshmerga in Contemporary Context

The *peshmerga* have played a central role as the *de facto* self-defence forces of the Kurdish people in Iraq. In the current context, the *peshmerga* forces as they exist today emerged after

the 2003 Iraq War for 'regime change'. The *peshmerga* became reliable allies of the US military, for example assisting in the assault on Falluja in 2004, and more recently in the anti-IS war as intrinsic component of the international coalition forces.

Their paramount and explicit role is recognized by the Iraqi Constitution of October 2005 as 'security forces and guards of the region'[20] in implementing the foreign policy of the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government), as well as in preserving and providing the conditions necessary for the stability and security of the KR. Based on figures from Rozh Nuri Shaways – former Kurdish Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq (2005-2006): "One guard equals fifty people, whereas the total number of the regional guards, that is the *peshmerga*, is estimated at around 190,000 among whom 120,000 are active".[21] Other sources, however, have reckoned the number at around 200,000.[22] The unification process, which has just restarted, vis-*à-vis* the KRG Unification Agreement of (21 January) 2006, was postponed as "one of the main reasons was…the emergence of Islamic State."[23]

Despite unification being necessary for achieving the goal of institutionalization, it does not appear to have affected the operation of the *peshmerga* forces in their recent war, since they have confronted IS as their common enemy, united as a single force rather than as fractions. The Kurdish *peshmerga* leader, Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, shares a similar view, arguing that: "Even in the early beginning of the domestic problems among the Kurdish *peshmerga* fronts…these fronts reinforced the Kurdish cause both inside and outside Iraq".[24] This indeed is an interesting point since, in spite of various differences, the formation and existence of multiple fronts raised the importance of the Kurdish cause even further. In addition, the same leader's outlook that "the army is embedded as a part, and as a basic tool, of the KR and its foreign policy for the establishment of Kurdistan", indicates continuity in the long-term aims of the Kurdish strategy as against changes in the Kurdish military movement *per se*, and shifts in the methods employed.[25] Despite their limited capacity in logistics and required techniques, the Kurdish forces have managed to become competent. The Kurdish guerrillas' fight for autonomy in opposition to Baghdad in the past was succeeded by Kurdish participation in the Iraq War (2003) as an ally of the US, so that the Kurds constitute a crucial partner within the anti-IS coalition forces. Indeed, according to Masrour Barzani there have been "25,000 IS fighters killed on our [Kurdish] fronts".[26]

In addition, in this conflict, *peshmerga* as the main security apparatus of the KR, also joined with the forces of the People's Protection (or Defence) Units (YPG) fighting against the IS in Syria. The role of the Kurds in Syria as a co-fighting force with the KR's Kurdish army (2 brigades of 3,000 *peshmerga*) in the frontlines,[27] and YPG's cooperation with the US and the coalition forces *via* the Kurdish Coalition centre at Erbil airport[28] has been noted by the *peshmerga* leadership as a positive platform for mutual cooperation, when and where needed. This interaction also appears as an attempt to overcome inter and intra Kurdish differences provided that each Kurdish force is a different entity shaped by its own distinctive characteristics as well as by the domestic (socio-political) structures of its state of residence and by external conditions.

So far, the twenty-first century has demonstrated the critical role the *peshmerga* continue to play in the KR of Iraq, and has revealed their further transformation into a powerful force with international support. The rise of Islamic State in the broader region of the Middle East highlighted the effect of the Kurdish fighters as the main frontline troops against IS; thus the Kurds – in perhaps not the most auspicious of ways – have had the opportunity to advance their strategy and policies, even though this has not been easy after a lengthy abstention from involvement in hostilities.

2.2.1 The Kurds and the threat from the Islamic State

Initially the *peshmerga* were not prepared for an assault by a new military force and as Muhammad Haji Mahmoud confirms: "During this phase the focus was not on the *peshmerga* and their further organization but how to reconstruct our homeland", after a prolonged series of clashes.[29] Following the advance of IS forces, the KRG sent *peshmerga* forces to Kobane to "protect a 1,500 kilometre border line that had been in difficulty. Each week the US President made a statement with a direct reference to the *peshmerga*".[30]

Interestingly, the security stakes of the KR brought the Region closer to European powers such as Germany or France. More importantly this took place through the role of the *peshmerga* and their military cooperation with international forces, including the Americans, a fact that strengthened strategic US-Kurdish interrelations (as opposed to scholarly writings that argued for a different trajectory of relations following the 2003 cooperation). Today the

French are delivering shipments of military aid to the Kurds "through the Ministry of *Peshmerga* to assist the Kurdish [fighters] who are battling the IS"[31] and Russia declares its continuing support for the *peshmerga* forces.[32] Germany also provided the *peshmerga* with anti-tank MILAN missiles 'that we [*peshmerga*] use against IS's VBIED (vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices)' and more recently opened two military training centres near Erbil (19 July 2016). "The US has provided a set of 4,000 pieces of equipment, multi-weaponry that we are in need of" but according to Sirwan Barzani, "with 1,400 martyrs we are in need not only of military cooperation but also of broader ties…".[33] In June 2016, the British Defence Secretary announced an increase in support of £1 million worth of ammunition to the *peshmerga* forces. Undeniably, the core basis of this collaboration has been the fact that "we [the Kurds] support and belong to the anti-terrorist camp".[34]

As Zaim Ali remarked

> Our war and types of war are different…the composition of our army is different from what it was at the beginning of the revolution (11 September 1961), and the structure and organization of our *peshmerga* forces have been different. Our national feeling is different. Before, the war was in the mountains and it was a partisan war that consisted of small forces with a limited warehouse of tanks, and heavy weapons compared with the new artillery that we have now… Our weapons were not light, so they could not easily be transferred.[35]

Similarly Zaim Ali, as the Lieutenant-General in charge of the 302 kilometre Zumar, Rabia'a and Shingal (also known as Sinjar) frontlines during the war, noted: "Our position against our enemy was not clear. We did not have frontlines. Today, on the contrary, we have trenches, hills, fortifications and battlefields. We have worked out this method of fighting as it is a new type of war and now we have become experts at it".[36] This was how the Kurds "…gained good experience".[37] Whereas the Kurdish movement – mainly in its war of resistance against the Iraqi regime – had so far been limited to guerrilla tactics, based on geography and fighting with small troop numbers in mountainous areas that precluded the use of technology, the *peshmerga* were for the first time able to fight across level terrain and the more built-up areas, although, according to Haji Mahmoud, the fact that the Kurds had no experience of urban warfare and flat territory made them more vulnerable.[38] In addition, the Kurdish

border, a 1,400 kilometre-long line, made it very difficult to control such a vast area, which was why IS was able to take so many areas in so short a time. Not only did IS capture 1,700 of the Iraqi army's tanks and 86,000 weapons of war, but it also seized an oil refinery in Mosul along with chemical weapons, all of which it used against the *peshmerga*. The war against the IS fighters compelled the *peshmerga*, who had had no experience in frontline wars, to confront IS and to do so successfully.

IS's offensive attack on 9 June 2014 against Mosul and the Sunni areas in Iraq, as well as the group's advancement within a brief fifteen-day period (1–15 August 2014) towards Kurdish territory some 40 km southwest of Erbil (6 August 2014) changed the course of events into a unique war that first and foremost affected the morale of the *peshmerga*.

3. The Kurdish War: Confronting State and Non-State Armies

"The War determines what sort of Tactics are useful"[39]

Masrour Barzani

3.1. Tactics: Peshmerga versus Islamic State

Defence remains the long-term strategy of both the KR and the Kurdish army. Up to the war in Iraq (2003), the Kurds were mainly involved in defending the KR, in addition to their struggle against the Iraqi regime, and compared to the Iraqi army's structure and capacity; saw only limited alterations in their own resources. However, the war against IS brought about a radical change in the Kurdish use of military tactics. Following the IS offensive, the Kurds had to change their strategies to enable them to confront an "organized force founded on military principles" and the Kurdish army had to organize itself to face a frontline war. General Najat Ali asserted that

> Before we [the Kurds] fought with state-armed forces, we had a partisan war and were mainly fighting Saddam Hussein's regime…now we are fighting against a terrorist organization, we have a frontline, and we are confronting new battle tactics because the types of methods and the ways of attacking are different…We have forteen brigades, neutral soldiers, and cooperation between

parties, despite the fact that we have not yet been completely institutionalized.[40]

Structurally the *peshmerga* have been divided into eight sectors (the frontlines). Sector 1 is located in Jawlala (i.e., Germian, Germasin); in Kirkuk is Sector 2, which starts from the main highway from Kirkuk to the East, while Sector 3 extends from the main Kirkuk to Baghdad road. Sectors 4 and 5 (which start in Dibiz towards the main road to Baghdad) are divided between the main roads from Kirkuk to the East and West respectively. Sector 6 is a 120km frontline which extends to Makhmour and Gwer; Sector 7 is in charge of the areas around Khazir and Nawaran; while Sector 8 is a crucial frontline formed by the Mosul dam, Zumar and Rabia'a – an important gateway – with Shingal, right at the borders with Syria.

Considering that each army is identified by four elements – i.e., a sufficient number of soldiers, an adequate to good standard of training, armaments based on new technology, and morale – it is the latter that has been the prime feature in determining the Kurdish fight against IS. The Makhmour (and Gwer) operation which, as far as boosting the *peshmergas'* confidence (at that time quite low) was concerned, was more or less a landmark, changed the course of Kurdish combat on the ground. Combined with almost a decade of inactivity on the part of the Kurdish army (since the Kurds had so far not been involved in any real battle), together with IS propaganda based on images circulated *via* social media (a relatively new way of confronting the enemy with methods other than military ones), this operation produced devastating results for the Kurdish and Iraqi armies, since IS, exploiting terror as their main tool, was able in a very short period of time to occupy vast areas of land. Morale and loyalty have therefore proved to be essential elements for the effectiveness of the Kurdish war. Indeed Clausewitz raises the significance of morale and psychological factors in warfare emphasizing "the capacity of the commander to maintain his determination and will against all odds and concentrate his forces against the decisive point".[41] Equally, key to Sun Tzu's thought is the same notion that "it is more important to kill the enemy's courage than to kill the enemy's soldiers".[42]

Islamic State fights in the name of Islam, targets oil-rich regions, and is externally funded; in addition to its suicide bomber tactics, it uses ordinary drones, but has the ability to transform them into surveillance drones, as was the case against *peshmerga* vanguards in the Mosul

district on the Bashiqa frontline (26 May 2016).[43] Former Minister of *peshmerga*, Sheikh Jafar notes that

> IS always tried to spread fear by blowing up bodies and burning people with explosives. It is a force made up of multi-national individuals and local nationals ready to launch decisive attacks and carry out bombings in order to kill innocent people and destroy stability. This force is experienced in the use of up-to-date artillery and small arms, as well as in ways of producing explosive weapons with missiles and rockets. There were experts within IS, along with people based in Kirkuk or Mosul who were ready to pursue terrorist acts.[44]

In the case of Islamic State it seems there are echoes of the partial use of Sun Tzu's indirect approach [blitzkrieg], according to which a commander or initiator, by choosing the line of least resistance, can avoid the adversary's physical strengths, as centred in the weight of the enemy troops, the centre of gravity or his strength, by focusing instead on mental and psychological weaknesses so that the opponent's will is bent or forestalled.[45] The strategy of indirect approach can be only effective when both the physical and psychological dislocations are combined, that is manoeuvre and surprise.[46] Thus an attack can occur in unexpected or unprotected places that the enemy is unable to defend. A strategy may then involve sudden appearances in places where the enemy is not waiting; thus the course of operations occurs throughout areas in which there is no enemy. IS has employed such tactics from the outset of its activities, and its waging of psychological warfare and creating panic through its brutal and merciless presence, largely communicated by way of social media, is what initially caused fear and confusion among both the Iraqi and Kurdish armies. However, the Islamic State's strength has also stemmed from the vast stockpiles of weaponry and armoured vehicles seized from the Iraqi army. Zaim Ali stated that "IS has captured a military warehouse full of equipment that will last for ten years, in particular from Mosul".[47]

Regarding the tactics in use, Islamic State's war offers clear evidence as to why traditional war is very different. Given the case of a state-organized army, because the forces follow a specific timetable, fighting is easier since, for example, "state regular forces will fight from 3am until 6pm" but an extremist non-state actor like IS "will fight continuously",[48] this is due to the fact that "as an irregular army…they are ready to kill and [to commit] suicide".[49]

Islamic State has also been different in terms of the methods and means that it uses. These are technologically advanced (bombs and explosives), difficult to control (including attacks against civilians), involve use of TNTs, and different sorts of mines stuffed with explosive material and operated by remote control, new types of binoculars, mortar shells, and VBIED vehicles.[50] (Sector 6, for instance, destroyed more than 60 VBIEDs and missiles before they actually reached the *peshmerga* positions).[51] Other weaponry includes ordinary cars laden with explosives, suicide bombings and other unconventional means and asymmetric threats.[52] Regarding their battle tactics, these also vary, from launching full frontal attacks such as blitzkriegs,[53] to laying ambushes among the Kurdish forces to prevent collaboration when the former method does not succeed.

An IS operation, according to Zaim Ali, involves

> Large numbers of forces using hummers and tanks and stuffing them with mines and bombs, as well as turntables to put the weapons on (type: 12.5/14.5) in addition to ten to twelve people as suicide bombers. First, they do the shelling using heavy 23mil weaponry; then they send lorries and tanks to protect them and when reaching their target they explode…the sound of the explosions covers a 200m radius.

IS's tactic of mounting suicide attacks is standard practice for penetrating the *peshmerga* forces, but "is the last resort after having exhausted all the previous means of an offensive, that is to say, they are using snipers to infiltrate the *peshmerga*, and when they realize they cannot capture an area".[54]

On the Kurdish side, and bearing in mind that strategy needs tactics and tactics need an efficient strategy, IS's offensives have also given the Kurds' sufficient experience to shift to the offensive themselves (apart from maintaining defensive strategies).[55] This change is, by and large, due to the shift in the concept of war, since wars *per se* are no longer as they were known in either classical or modern times, having become very different. The transfer of conflicts from the international and global to the national and even more local level, the asymmetric warfare between non-state entities (other than state and non-state military conflicts), and the transition from conventional methods and means of war to advanced technological tactics pursued even by non-state armed groups, and in particular fundamentalists of religious orientation such as the IS, have compelled the change in tactics.

This has also been the case with the Kurdish army in Iraq, which has changed specifically from defence to attack. The old training for conventional warfare that advised 'attack and withdraw safely' is no longer effective. Dr Noori Shawayis, former Deputy Prime Minister in Iraq, comments that: "The change in tactics and in weaponry is obvious, through the use of artillery and air strike support from allies who are defending a long line of more than 1,000 kilometres, while conventional weapons have been replaced by suicide bombers and explosive metals and vehicles".[56]

The Kurds now have large units of 36 brigades with each brigade consisting of around 2600 soldiers who use weapons such as RPGs (*Ruchnoy Protivotankoviy Granatomyot*, *Hand-held anti-tank grenade launcher*, also known as rocket-propelled grenade) and machine guns and mortars. These new tactics and techniques have been built up, step by step, with experience. According to Masrour Barzani: "Whereas in partisan operations previously, we [the Kurds] would attack and retreat to our bases, and use extensive tactics against the Iraqi government such as devising ambushes; now we fight the enemy and protect our territory so that it cannot be invaded and civilians are not harmed".[57] Another example is the building of trenches "that protected the *peshmerga* and also meant that insurgents or cars loaded with explosives found that they could not easily enter the city by using the networks of smaller roads".[58] Trenches were succeeded by barricades, which in turn were replaced by artificial hills, as the previous barriers did not work in practice. Indeed, in the case of the VBIEDs which were heavily used by suicide bombers in cars:

> ...we [the Kurds] had to build berms so that the cars did not crash, but even these were used to detonate their weapons, so we dug 2m and then 4m-long trenches that were 3m deep but then IS used these trenches to fight the Kurds by placing mines in them.[59]

Peshmerga have also made extensive use of the tactic of 'penetration' in operations in small towns like Baqert, or in villages such as Jedyda, Sultan Abdullah, Tela Rim, Jarula and others. Therefore, the need to change tactics regarding the war being waged by the enemy at various moments, to a great extent determines the military response. For instance, it reveals how tactics are developed and decided according to the military responses of the opposing side, and consequently how the nature of war is established. For example, the Chancellor of Kurdistan Region Security Council asserted that: "The enemy used thermal binoculars to find

where we were located, and we then had to use coal (as a foil for infrared sensing) to capture heat and create a cloud in order to make us invisible".[60]

It is also a common perception among the Kurdish Generals that, on the whole, it is more difficult to fight against the new irregular armies, such as the Islamic State, whose strategies and fighting methods give rise to novel techniques and ideas, than it is to do battle against a state army. This is not only related to the means of war and the strategies employed, but more importantly it concerns the absence of a direct interlocutor; i.e., the threat is asymmetrical and the leadership is loose and impersonal because "there is no commander to communicate with, there is nobody to negotiate".[61] This is very often the case since, in the first instance the war is asymmetrical and unexpected events increase, whereas in the second, it is a conventional and more traditional army that "consists of special institutions and norms of struggle, from the timetable for fighting and the well-known strategies and tactics to the legality of their economic means". Yet, in the long run, the former is much weaker.[62]

However, Kurds also faced difficulties in this anti-IS war because the enemy, as an army, had no line of defence, the constitutionally-recognized 20 percent of budget given to the *peshmerga* by the Central Government was never implemented, and their equipment was insufficient. Commander Sirwan Barzani pointed out that:

> We fight without having any budget, our second-hand weapons date back to the 1980s…our MILAN anti-tank missile system, as part of our army's technology, was an outdated twenty-five year-old version of a portable medium-range 2km class whereas the enemy's extended range of 4km has been more effective. I could attack with mortar guns once every three weeks, whereas I have had to deal with 300 raids every day.[63]

Beyond any doubt, the contribution of external support – both military and financial – to any war, especially one with global dimensions like the Kurdish war against the Islamic State, is *sine qua non* given that the Kurds would not have been able to retake 40 percent of the Kurdish territory had it not been for the international coalition forces taking a collective stand against the Islamic State. Problems such as night vision equipment and the Kurdish need for strong armaments and training were transcended by Kurdish sacrifice; it was noted that "not all Kurdish soldiers are professional *peshmerga* but they are ready to sacrifice themselves and protect Kurdistan";[64] that 1,529 martyrs (شهداء), 8,977 wounded and 62 *peshmerga* were lost

in the fighting against the Islamic State,[65] the US, and its anti-IS coalition air and drone strikes;[66] and that the retreat of the Iraqi army at various crucial points was coupled with the fragmentation of the Central government in Baghdad, as well as Kurdish strategies *per se*. Thus in the summer of 2014, the Kurds were able to regain control over some of the disputed areas, like parts of Kirkuk and Diyala, but they also retook Makhmour, Zumar, the Mosul dam, and Shingal (Sinjar) – a strategic point – following the withdrawal of the Iraqi army from its bases (16 August 2014). This gave the Kurds the opportunity to advance even into disputed areas and also increased cooperation between Erbil and Baghdad within the Coalition context, as verified by the Kurdish Commander Sirwan Barzani, who confirmed "the joint cooperation with Baghdad since they have a coordination centre in Makhmour."[67]

3.1.1. The operations in Makhmour and Shingal

A. The Makhmour Case

> *"The Makhmour front is strategically very important for the*
> *peshmerga and IS alike, because it lies on a triangle between*
> *Kirkuk, Erbil and Nineveh"*
> General Najat Ali[68]

It has been demonstrated that the Kurdish army has responded at all levels of warfare, from the tactical and the operational to the strategic and political, in view of its interactive relations with international coalition forces and alliances. The Kurds are following a grand strategy, since in the KR the President is also the Army Chief and the one who is largely responsible for formulating the set of ideas and plans that are implemented by the *peshmerga* for the eradication of the IS from their territories. Even though the *peshmerga* do take an active and significant role *vis-à-vis* their contribution to devising strategies and tactics, the formulation of strategy is based primarily on the Presidency. In this case it appears that in planning their grand strategy, the Kurds, by placing greater emphasis on political leadership, are adopting somewhat of a Clausewitzian approach since[69], according to Platias and Koliopoulos, "war is viewed as tool that is being used exclusively for the achievement of objective aims under the political leadership".[70]

The liberation of Makhmour represented a historical moment for the *peshmerga* and more importantly the Kurdish war against the IS. Even though the Kurdish struggle against the IS could initially be identified by what Clausewitz termed 'the Iron Calculus of War', thus indicating a lack of moral ascendancy that cost them dearly, this soon became subject to change. As the *peshmerga* moved successfully from defensive to offensive strategies, low morale was quickly overcome, with the tipping point occurring when the *peshmerga* regained control of Makhmour and the surrounding areas. Since Makhmour was regarded as a centre of some significance, this constituted a decisive moment. Given IS's comparative advantage since "they took weapons from six divisions of the army in Iraq and accessed all artillery and transportation vehicles",[71] and because their strategically-located warehouses also made it easier for them to bring forces to Mosul from Syria, the capture of Makhmour was effectively the starting point of the *peshmerga*'s moral recovery and the reversal of their fortunes. Sirwan Barzani explained the importance of the Makhmour operation:

> The first action against IS was in Makhmour – 55 kilometres from Erbil – with 150 soldiers on the frontline. On the evening of the 6th August 2014 we stationed our fighters close to Gwer. In the morning of 7th August the first frontline was established, and on the 8th, small missions were initiated to boost the morale of the *peshmerga* and on 10th August we started the war.[72]

In the case of Makmour, the Kurds struck an entirely unexpected blow. Since IS were following their own planned advance, the *peshmerga* attack, which occurred simultaneously from three different points (i.e., front, rear and side) caught them completely by surprise and as a result, both Gwer and Makhmour were liberated.

Another reason for the importance of the Makhmour operation was because this area had been primarily the responsibility of the Iraqi army rather than the *peshmerga* forces, but when IS captured Mosul and the surrounding areas, the Iraqi army had fled to Baghdad through Erbil and Kirkuk. At this point, the President of the KR decided to bring *peshmerga* forces to both Makhmour and Gwer, even though time was pressing and although the number of forces brought in was limited because of the area's geostrategic difficulties as a vast locality to be defended. Makhmour was also of strategic value because of its proximity to the KR's capital – a distance of around 55km – and it is indicative that "when Gwer was captured, people fled

from Hawler (Erbil) to neighbouring regions".[73] The Makmour operation was also of particular interest since communication with the enemy was achieved, possibly for the first time, through a social media message. In this regard, a live interview with the Commander of Sector 6 (Sirwan Barzani) held near Makhmour on 8 August 2014, prior to the onset of the attack, posed a direct challenge when he issued a strong statement: "We are here, waiting for the IS". On 19 August, and "within less than four hours IS was pushed back from the Gwer and Makhmour front – a historic point for the Kurdish operation in the North".[74] Evidently the part played by the coalition strikes and good relations with the Iraqi army had a positive impact on the operation.

B. The case of Shingal

As with the military campaign in Makhmour, Gwer and the smaller towns and surrounding villages, the approach in Shingal was, "interesting and difficult strategically but also militarily; [in this] operation participated 7,000 *peshmerga*, and there were also around 200 PKK/YPG forces who supported the manoeuvres".[75] The Shingal operation was also a success, considering that IS destroyed almost 80% of the area under their control before its liberation, because of its geostrategic location as an 'island' separated from the rest of the Kurdistan Region and interspersed with a scattering of around 100 Arab villages whose populations were, however, occasionally supportive of the IS. The same view is shared by Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, Former Minister of *Peshmerga* Affairs, who emphasized that "When the *peshmerga* forces passed through Habur towards Shingal all those Arab villages in between had armaments and weapons that they used to attack the *peshmerga* with, and thus assistance was not easy".[76]

Zaim Ali, Former Commander of Sector 8, confirmed Shingal's complications as "a mountainous area at an altitude of 1,300km and around 18 km wide and 74 km in length, whose liberation took 7,500 *peshmerga* and their artillery in many sectors two days to complete".[77] The same commander, who was on the Rojava frontlines, confirmed the cruelty of the tactical methods used by IS when the *peshmerga* experienced them for the first time; such methods represented another aspect of the difference between state warfare as practised by a state army and an extremist non-state mercenary army. The Lieutenant-General discussed special tactics like IS's expertise in excavating tunnels, which involved "the

digging of 93 metres of tunnels under the roads – smaller in dimension than a barrel – and stuffing them with explosive material so that when the *peshmerga* had penetrated to a particular distance they were blown up". These tunnels were also used "to connect different houses at ground level in which they deposited clay and mud". IS's methods for opening a tunnel, as already explained, varied from the use of "cell phones and walkie-talkie explosives to magnets with dynamos that produced electricity when pulled by a rope, through a tunnel or under the roads".[78] One of the most popular combination of strategy and tactics for isolating and surrounding enemy forces was 'encirclement' which, for example in the case of Shingal, involved attacking the opponent from the side or rear with a flanking manoeuvre, "with one section of *peshmerga* coming from Gulat village and the other force from the mountains in order to create a line of defence",[79] while, as Shaikh Jafar also remarked, "we can consider that encirclement also helped the operation in Mosul".[80]

3.2. Kurdish Objectives and the War on Islamic State

"If you do not declare independence, you cannot control your borders that are now 95 percent uncontrollable. Without a state there will be increasing interference from every side"

Sirwan Barzani[81]

Strategy is the political objective, coupled with the appropriate means, including the military, for the accomplishment of a goal in light of real or potential conflict. Having analysed the means that have been employed by the Kurds during their gradual 'learning of war' against the IS, the short-term goal has clearly been the defeat of the Islamic State, while the long-term goal, by and large, is to defend and protect the KR, extended by a border line of more than 1000 kilometres. Protection of the borders, the opportunity to regain the territorial claims and the freedom of the Kurdistan Region, an aim that has existed since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire[82] and to date remains uppermost, is entangled with the ultimate goal of independence that has developed different modes of constitutionally-recognized expression from decentralization to autonomy, and from federalism to a potential confederal mode of governance, if not total separation.

As far as the *peshmerga* forces are concerned, Shaikh Jafar argues: "The protection of the Kurdish achievements and the preservation of good neighbourly relations should be coupled with the unification of the *peshmerga* in terms of training and armaments". In this way, institutionalization could become effective with the *peshmerga* having developed a counter to the past. Now "they hold responsibility for the people, to provide security, prosperity and stability for the region".[83] Moreover, the failure of federalism as a working model of governance for Iraq (an intrinsic dimension of which constitutes the Sunni-Shia rivalry that has apparently affected the war against IS in an Iraq divided between Sunni and Shi'a political forces), and the subsequent strengthening of the Kurdish army (aided by the international coalition which resulted in changing the balance of power to favour the Kurds and as noted shifted Kurdish tactics from defensive strategies to offensive attacks in cooperation with the allied forces), has further upgraded the status of the Kurds. The threat thus posed by the activities of IS in the Iraqi, and specifically, in the Kurdish territories, has intensified Kurdish aspirations for independence, 'in order to take on the control of the borders' and avoid further interference.[84] It is thus understood that issues of independence – now even more connected with practical *rationales* – and national security become interwoven objectives and the basis of the strategic long-term objectives of the Kurdish authorities in Iraq.

4. Conclusion

This article has provided a contemporary analysis of the *peshmerga*'s struggle against the forces of the Islamic State. This situation has led to the *peshmerga* undergoing a 'learning process' in response to Islamic State attacks and this represents an important case study of counter insurgency or small war. They have had to maintain or increase organisation, re-equip and develop new tactics to fight against IS. This was a particularly acute situation due to the collapse of the Iraqi army – at least in the beginning of the fight – as the IS advanced. It is important to note that the progress of means and strategy throughout these decades evolved *in tandem with* the development of the Kurdish movement that became both a political and military entity.

Following the preparatory phase in the early 1960s, the Kurds embarked on a second phase during the period 1976-1979 and entered a new stage from 1979 onwards. The fourth shift in their evolution was marked by their institutionalization. Interrupted in this endeavour by the Kurdish civil war during the 1990s, the Kurdish fighters managed to evolve into a standing force, the army of the Kurdish Region, which was legally recognized from 1996 onwards but in practice this was the case following the Iraq War that signalled the fifth phase of their evolution.

During this progress, the Kurds abandoned their prolonged 'attack and return' tactics and the partisan war identified by insurgency tactics to a variety of policies and strategies affected by regional developments, Iraqi domestic politics as well as the Kurdish movement's fragmentation. Only from 1998 onward the Kurds came together in one structure with the formation of the KRG and the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. Since the 1990s and the second Gulf War the importance and the essential role of foreign aid, a critical factor in facilitating the *peshmerga* fighting is demonstrated. The latter's constant interactions with the international anti-IS coalition, and the military leadership of strong states such as the US, indicate the role as well as the impact of the Kurdish army – irrespective of its non-state status – in implementing the foreign policy objectives of both international and also regional powers, including the KRG. The sixth phase is identified by the emergence of the *peshmerga* into an international force that the international community can rely upon, and the implementation of new strategies in order to phase in new structural changes, such as the confrontation of a new type of asymmetric warfare (the war on terror against the IS) while gradually consolidating their status. The use of advanced weaponry, heavy weapons and the new artillery compared with the transition from conventional methods and means of war to advanced technological tactics resulted in the organisation of the Kurdish army, in need of institutionalisation, even further as it was indicated in the two respective cases of Makhmour and Shingal. Above all the war against IS united the *peshmerga* forces, possibly for the first time, and effected a radical change in the Kurdish use of military tactics, including the shift from defensive to offensive strategies.

In a wider sense the actions of the *peshmerga* appear an important factor in the developing capabilities of the KR, even including the idea that it may see the KRG develop more into a *de iure* confederal state. For example despite the US attitude hesitancy to encourage the KRG to become an independent state entity in the north of Iraq, the US presidency has had to

accept and publicly support the *peshmerga* in their defensive and offensive operations against the IS.[85] The European Union and states such as the UK have also increasingly provided diplomatic and material support.[86] Had not been for the (albeit limited) airstrikes, operations against IS would have been less effective due to the massive stocks of weaponry acquired by IS through occupation and looting. Thus foreign aid and support also appears to have been a critical factor in facilitating the *peshmerga* fighting.

It may be the case that the unsuccessful federalist mode of governance in Iraq has further laid stress on the importance of the KRG as a security actor in northern Iraq. This is particularly the case as non-state actors have become increasingly important in the rest of Iraq after 2003. For example the deepening rift between Sunni and Shi'a and the latter's (militias) control of power within Iraq as well as their battle against the Sunni elements. Indeed, the role of the Hashd al-Sha'abi (The People's Mobilization, الحشد الشعبي) appears problematic as an "element of friction between the Shi'a and the Kurds",[87] and therefore with the Iraqi peace process itself, as well 'a threat under Iranian control'.[88]

Finally, the recent phase of fighting and *peshmerga's* development has not only been important for the KRG but for regional politics. Albeit devastating, the increase of asymmetry threats in the international relations system, have also enabled the Kurds to gain experience, wage wars of different types, develop a diverse range of tactics (as determined by the needs of fighting *per se*), and operate with more precise strategies compared with past practices. Yet, even though policies and strategies might have changed according to the different contexts that have arisen on each occasion, the objectives of the Kurdish movement have remained unaltered throughout.

As far as the Kurds are concerned, it is a common belief among the Kurdish military leaders that politics will, to a great extent, determine the geography of the Middle East. 'After the elimination of the IS, the international powers will have various zones to control since Iraq now consists of three parts; the KR, the IS-occupied area, and the federal government including the South of Iraq'.[89] Within this context, and following the example of the Kurdish forces in Syria, according to Kurdish officials, it is likely 'international politics to lead the Kurds to gain a degree of access to the Mediterranean Sea', thereby transcending their non-state status and turning them into players of strategic interest.[90]

Notes on Contributor

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Notes

[1] Nuri, *Rudaw*, http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/201220154, December 21, 2015.

[2] Charountaki, *Harvard International Review*, December 25, 2017.

[3] O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle 1920-94*, 1995.

[4] Hama, 'Politicization of Kurdish Security in Iraq since 2003', 137–158.

[5] Chapman, *Security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government*, 2011.

[6] According to Lortz, "the roots of the modern-day *peshmerga*, especially in regards to training, can be found in the early attempts of the Ottoman Empire to create an organised Turkish-Kurdish military force. In 1891, Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) created the Hamidiya Cavalry" in Lortz, *Willing to Face Death: A History of Kurdish Military Forces - the Peshmerga - From the Ottoman Empire to Present-Day Iraq Up to 2005*, 5.

[7] Unlike Chapman who claims that 'the *peshmerga* phenomenon represents a significant break from the past', I divide the evolution of the Kurdish movement into phases rather than periods (e.g., classical, transitional, contemporary), given the latter's broad and more abstract sense (since, for instance, 'classical' could even refer to the period before the 1960s), and more importantly, because this development is quite simply still on going. Furthermore, each phase carries its own specific determinants with the most dominant each time being the differing content emerging that actually contributes to the formation of the *peshmerga*. See Chapman, *Security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government*, 39.

[8] Interview with Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, March 18, 2016.

[9] "In my Sector as Military Commander I have maximum 25% of my needs", in Interview with Commander Sirwan Barzani, March 30, 2016.

[10] In contrast Chapman refers to a force of 1500 fighters which seems though to be less than the actual number of the participants in Chapman, *Security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government*, 58.

[11] Interview with Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, March 18, 2016.

[12] Ibid.

[13] O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle, 1920-94*, 1995.

[14] Supporters of the Kurdish leader, Jalal Talabani *versus* Mullah Mustafa Barzani.

[15] Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*,142.

[16] Interview with Masrour Barzani, April 6, 2016.

[17] Interview with Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, March 18, 2016.

[18] According to KNA Law No38 (2007) Law of Service and Retirement of *Peshmerga* – article 1 section 9: '…person who participated in Kurdistan liberation revolution to achieve the democratic and national rights of Kurdistan people or may join the *peshmerga* force...' In the same line we find the Transitional Administrative Law and the Laws of 2007 (Nos. 19, 33, 34, 38 respectively) as well as articles 13, 99, 104 in the Draft of the Kurdish Constitution that also recognize them. See Chapman, *Security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government*, 39, 98,100,102.

[19] Interview with Commander Najat Ali. April 2, 2016.

[20] Article 121 section 5 of the Iraqi constitution provisions the establishment of the internal security forces for the region, such as policy, security forces and regional guards; in Smith, Lunn and Page, House of Commons, British Library, Standard Note SNIA 6963: 'UK arms transfers to the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan', August 18, 2014.

[21] Public library of US Diplomacy. *Telegram*. Available at: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BAGHDAD408_a.html. February 7, 2007.

[22] "The number of the *peshmerga* forces before the IS were 120,000 for KDP and around 80,000 for PUK but now the number is subject to increase". Interview with Zaim Ali, April 8, 2016.

[23] Interview with Commander, Najat Ali Salih, April 2, 2016. See also Fumerton and Wilgenburg. *Carnegie Endowment*. Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/12/16/kurdistan-s-political-armies-challenge-of-unifying-peshmerga-forces-pub-61917. December 16, 2015.

[24] Interview with Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, March 18, 2016.

[25] Ibid.
[26] Interview with Masrour Barzani, April 6, 2016.

[27] Ibid.
[28] Interview with Commander Najat Ali, April 2, 2016.
[29] Interview with Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, March 18, 2016.
[30] Ibid.
[31] *Rudaw*. Available at: http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/16062016. June 16, 2016.

[32] Sattar. *BasNews*. Available at: http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/world/281960. June 16, 2016.

[33] Interview with Commander Sirwan Barzani, March 30, 2016.
[34] Interview with Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, March 18, 2016.
[35] Interview with Zaim Ali, April 8, 2016.
[36] Ibid.

[37] Interview with Commander Najat Ali, April 2, 2016.

[38] Interview with Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, March 18, 2016.

[39] Interview with Masrour Barzani, April 6, 2016.
[40] Interview with Commander Najat Ali, April 2, 2016.
[41] Malik, *Contemporary Security and Strategy*, 21-22.
[42] Ibid, p.27.
[43] *BasNews*, http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/kurdistan/278114. May 26, 2016.

[44] Interview with Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, April 5, 2016.
[45] Sun Tzu (mid- to late 6th century BC) was an early Chinese general, military strategist and philosopher, renowned as the author of the military treatise *The Art of War*. See Platias and Koliopoulos, *Η Τέχνη του Πολέμου* [The Art of War: Sun Tzu], 94.

[46] Mali, *Contemporary Security and Strategy*, 28.

[47] Interview with Zaim Ali, April 8, 2016.

[48] Interview with Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, March 18, 2016.

[49] Interview by the researcher with Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, April 5, 2016.

[50] IED is Improvised Explosive Device placed inside a car or other vehicle and detonated.

[51] Interview with Commander Sirwan Barzani, March 30, 2016.

[52] 'IS insurgents used many armoured vehicles, bulldozers, and suicide bombers to pass the *Peshmerga* fronts, said Mansour Barzani'. Dolamari. *Kurdistan 24*. http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/46ee2aa9-ec0a-4940-888e-801c72fe5303/%E2%80%98Doubt-Peshmerga%E2%80%99s-bravery?-Count-IS-bodies-on-battlefield%E2%80%99, May 4, 2016.

[53] This is a tactic used by IS to attack, using concentrated force and rapid speed to break through enemy lines.

[54] Interview with Zaim Ali, April 8, 2016.

[55] Interview with Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, April 5, 2016.

[56] Interview with Dr Noori Shawayis, March 28, 2016.

[57] Interview with Masrour Barzani, April 6, 2016.

[58] Paasche and Sidaway, *Environment and Planning A*, 2123.

[59] Interview with Masrour Barzani, April 6, 2016.

[60] Ibid.
[61] Interview with Commander Sirwan Barzani, March 30, 2016.

[62] Interview with Dr Noori Shawayis. March 28, 2016.

[63] Interview with Commander Sirwan Barzani, March 30, 2016.

[64] Interview with Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, April 5, 2016.

[65] Interview with Commander Najat Ali, April 2, 2016.

[66] For instance, US and the coalition forces 'carried out 48 air strikes (19/08/2016) throughout the country over a 3 day period'. 'Chronology'. The Middle Eastern Journal, 123-126.

[67] Interview with Commander Sirwan Barzani, March 30, 2016.

[68] According to the *peshmerga* forces' Army General, 'there is also the Qarachugh mountain range which would give total control of the area to whoever holds it'. Nuri. *Rudaw*. http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/201220154, December 21, 2015.

[69] Clausewitz stresses on the supremacy of the political leadership as the one to take the final decision and this is because 'the nature of policy determines the nature of war and political circumstances are those to shape strategy'. Malik. *Contemporary Security and Strategy*, 22.

[70] Sun Tzu perceives that 'the Grand Strategy is formulated by a political leadership that poses the political objectives that would be targeted within the war or a conflict context and then implemented by the military leadership – in contrast to Clausewitz who gives a deeper role in the political leadership'. Platias and Koliopoulos. *Η Τέχνη του Πολέμου* [The Art of War: Sun Tzu], 84-85, 87.

[71] Interview with Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, April 5, 2016.

[72] Interview with Commander Sirwan Barzani, March 30, 2016.

[73] Interview with Commander Najat Ali, April 2, 2016.
[74] Interview with Commander Sirwan Barzani, March 30, 2016.

[75] Interview with Commander Najat Ali, April 2, 2016.
[76] Interview with Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, April 5, 2016.
[77] Interview with Zaim Ali, April 8, 2016.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Interview with Masrour Barzani, April 6, 2016.
[80] Interview with Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, April 5, 2016.
[81] Interview with Commander Sirwan Barzani, March 30, 2016.

[82] Interview with Dr Noori Shawayis. March 28, 2016.
[83] Interview with Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, April 5, 2016.
[84] Interview with Zaim Ali, April 8, 2016.
[85] The *peshmerga* cooperated on an equal level with strong state entities through a succession of direct high-level meetings, such as, for instance, the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford (April 2016), and President Obama's Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Mr Brett McGurk (19 June 2016) among others.
[86] Some 10,000 Peshmerga soldiers are reported to have been trained by Germany. *Rudaw*. http://www.rudaw.net/NewsDetails.aspx?PageID=273482, January 8, 2017.

[87] Interview with Masrour Barzani, April 6, 2016.
[88] Interview with Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, April 5, 2016.
[89] Interview with Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, March 18, 2016.
[90] Interview with Sheikh Jafar Mustafa, April 5, 2016.

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---------------- Interview with Najat Ali Salih. Commander of 80 Unit. Former Commander of Sector 6. Makhmour Front: Black Tiger Camp, Malaqira, April 2, 2016.

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