

# The Iraqi Kurdish Battle Against ISIS: Reports from the Front

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



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Lahur Talabani is head of Iraqi Kurdistan's Zanyari intelligence service and a founding member of the Counter-Terrorism Group.



Brief Analysis

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**An Iraq expert and a top Kurdish intelligence official provide an on-the-ground account of how the coalition can mobilize greater Kurdish military support for the fight against ISIS.**

*On November 3, Michael Knights and Lahur Talabani addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Knights, a Lafer Fellow with the Institute, recently conducted a three-week tour of coalition forces in Iraq. Talabani is the head of Kurdistan's Zanyari intelligence service and a founding member of the Counter-Terrorism Group (CTG). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## MICHAEL KNIGHTS

Coalition forces in Iraq are at the beginning of what might be called the al-Jazirah campaign, the war between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In the year ahead, their operations will likely focus on the space between Mosul and Ramadi, extending north toward the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa, Syria. The Kurds will play an increasingly important role in this campaign because they run two of the three major fronts against the so-called Islamic State. The coalition is moving toward a land power concept, where they arm and equip existing units that can deliver battlefield results rather than trying to build massive new units. Two Kurdish forces -- the Peshmerga of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq and elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces -- will be key players in this

concept.

One Kurdish role will be to cut the ISIS line from Mosul to Raqqa, which is not only a military line but an important economic and political one as well. Currently, ISIS patronage moves back and forth readily between these two "capitals," and breaking this line will require attacking places such as Sinjar, Hasaka, al-Hawl, and Shadadi. Kurdish support will be central to such efforts, and to cutting off the southeastern part of ISIS territory in Iraq's Diyala and Salah al-Din provinces, below Bayji. The Kurds can also support Sunni tribal attacks on the "hinge" at Hawija and al-Zab, just west of Kirkuk.

Although large units are important in holding and administrating areas (e.g., ISIS, the Iraqi security forces, and the Kurds use a majority of their manpower for these tasks), smaller units are winning the individual battles that will determine who wins the war. Prevailing on key battlefields such as Bayji and Ramadi does not require huge new forces -- solid, cohesive units like the Kurdish Counter-Terrorism Group and Counter-Terrorism Department can break the small forces that ISIS typically uses in such situations. For example, ISIS had only 400-600 soldiers in Ramadi. In short, the coalition is not facing a mountainous manpower task.

To be sure, the Iraqi Kurds do face a number of challenges in providing greater military assistance. One is the perception of a Kurdish limit of advance -- that if they push too far into hardcore Arab areas where their involvement is not welcome, they could anger the locals. Recently, however, the Kurds have signaled their willingness to move beyond certain limits for the greater cause of defeating ISIS, and such signals will attract greater coalition support.

Another challenge is that the KRG has far less developed military institutions than other parts of the country. Consequently, the Kurds lack the ability to soak up U.S. security assistance and turn it into new units. They never had a large U.S. train-and-equip program like the rest of Iraq, so they need to develop a more recognizable training structure. If the Kurds want brigade-size levels of equipment, they must provide brigade-size recruitment numbers and training areas.

The disunity of Kurdish command elements is another challenge. This exists even at the front, where intra-Kurdish competition is prevalent in Sinjar and other key spots. Iraqi Kurdish forces are split in three directions: between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the KRG's Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (whose top official has been suspended due to political differences). This fragmentation impedes coalition support and even battlefield performance.

In sum, the campaign against ISIS needs much greater contributions from the northern front. If Kurdish parties cannot overcome their differences and take the offensive, then coalition support for them will slowly tail off. This is a performance-related issue: if the Kurds can help retake Mosul by isolating it from the west and south, they will receive greater coalition support. The same goes for Kurdish forces in Syria if they push toward Raqqa.

## LAHUR TALABANI

**T**he Iraqi and Syrian arenas of the anti-ISIS campaign need to be dealt with as one. The border between the two countries has largely eroded, and Raqqa and Mosul are only four hours apart. In Iraqi Kurdistan, this connection should be broken at Sinjar, which would greatly increase the amount of time needed to move supplies from Raqqa to Mosul.

The good news is that while ISIS remains the region's top threat, it is not as strong as it was a year ago. The group's weaknesses become clearest when the fight is brought to it in a coordinated fashion. Attacking from multiple directions is necessary in order to overstretch its forces, which are limited in many areas. For example, ISIS will sometimes leave ten men to patrol a large area, knowing that Kurdish forces will not go past a certain point into Sunni Arab territory. This awareness of Kurdish limitations allows it to concentrate forces where it wants to fight, either against the Iraqi army or in Syria against the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG). Therefore, ISIS can be

defeated with a more focused plan involving the YPG, the Syrian Democratic Forces (including Arab units), the Iraqi security forces, and Iraqi Kurdish forces.

The campaigns to retake Raqqa and Mosul will face different challenges. Mosul will be more difficult because the coalition lacks a unifying Sunni force or figure. Around three-fourths of Sunni Arab tribal leaders in the city have pledged allegiance to ISIS, largely because they have little choice: their only options are Shiite militias or Sunni ISIS.

Raqqa could be different because cohesive Sunni Arab tribal forces can partake in the fight for their own liberation. This is essential because the YPG is not keen on taking Raqqa without Arab partners. In fact, one of the U.S. government's best foreign policy decisions was supporting the YPG in the battle for Kobane. That victory became a symbol -- the first proof that ISIS could be broken and defeated. Although there are sensitivities with regard to Turkey, the YPG is one of the only forces on the ground in Syria that is bringing the fight to ISIS and making a difference. YPG leaders have signaled to Ankara in many ways that they do not want to threaten Turkey -- for example, unlike Iraq's border with Turkey, the Syrian border has not served as a conduit for attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Ankara needs to accept that Washington has a lot of influence over the YPG, and that working with the group is safe for Turkey as well.

As for the Kurdistan region of Iraq, many financial and political challenges remain. The KRG has not been able to pay soldiers or civil servants for several months, and its income has been severely affected by the drop in oil prices. The Kurds are looking for ways to fix this problem, but it is unlikely to dissipate completely in the next year.

These budgetary problems could affect the fight against ISIS. For example with winter approaching, ISIS may try to punch a hole in the Peshmerga's lines, yet the KRG is currently unable to provide winter gear for these troops. And while they are grateful for all the assistance they have received over the past year-and-a-half, they do not have enough ammunition in storage and require more. Supporting the Peshmerga is vital because even if they do not advance any further, they have been crucial to tying down ISIS forces along a wide front.

Kurdish factions should also work together more closely. Four years ago, the Kurdistan Region Security Council was created to increase information exchanges between various intelligence agencies. Although it has not functioned as planned so far, it could still be used to bring the KDP, PUK, and others to the table to improve intelligence sharing.

Finally, the Kurds need to be realistic when it comes to calling for independence. The KRG economy is in shambles, while the military situation with ISIS and the pressure from surrounding countries make it obvious that now is not the time to be discussing independence. Maybe in the future, but not today.

*This summary was prepared by Omar Mukhlis.*

**[Read a response to Talabani's remarks \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8049\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8049) by the Kurdistan Region Security Council and a related editor's note, as published on Fikra Forum.** ❖

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