

# Divided forces

The US is relying on Iraqi and Kurdish forces to carry out ground operations following air strikes against Islamic State militants. Michael Knights considers whether disunity within Peshmerga ranks will hamper their ability to defeat the insurgents.

## EXCLUSIVE

By Michael Knights

Iraqi Kurdistan is gaining in importance by the day as a launchpad for military operations against Islamic State. The US military and CIA are expanding their pre-existing facilities at Erbil International Airport and may soon begin basing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and combat search-and-rescue aircraft at the site. Other coalition partners such as the UK, Canada, Australia and France may follow. In return, Iraq's Kurds are pushing for greater international support for the development of the Peshmerga,

the armed force of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Since the Kurds fully committed to the fight against IS in August, many countries have pledged support in training and equipping the Kurdish military. The US has provided small-arms and ammunition to Iraqi Kurdistan since August, using CIA channels rather than conventional state-to-state sales. These deliveries prioritised much-needed heavy machine-guns and armour-piercing ammunition to defeat IS light armoured vehicles. Various European countries have also stepped forward to provide non-lethal equipment following the 9 September statement by the EU

that its member states were free to pursue their own national policies on arming the Iraqi Kurds. The UK, France, Germany and Italy are the main donors.

Nevertheless, Germany's case has underlined the limits on such security co-operation to a sub-state entity such as the Iraqi Kurdistan. On 31 August, Germany pledged 4,000 combat helmets, 4,000 protective vests, 700 radios, 680 binoculars, night vision equipment, explosive ordnance disposal equipment and medical supplies from Bundeswehr stocks. However, Germany balked at directly providing weapons to the Iraqi Kurdistan without an import

license issued by the central Iraqi government in Baghdad. As well as 24,000 small-arms and seven million rounds of ammunition, the German pledge included 30 Milan wire-guided anti-tank launchers (with 500 missiles) and 240 shoulder-held anti-tank rocket-launchers (with 3,500 rounds). Italy pledged further unspecified numbers of Milan systems.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has cited the need for Baghdad's approval to reduce the risk of such weapons falling into the hands of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), the KRI-based pro-independence guerrilla movement whose war against the Turkish state

Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters watch smoke billow from the town Makhmur, 280 km north of Baghdad, during clashes with Islamic State militants on 9 August.

Credit: Getty Images

has lasted more than 40 years. For Baghdad, the concern is that Iraqi Kurdistan will use advanced anti-tank capabilities to shift Iraq's domestic military balance against the federal government, bolstering their ambitions for independence from Iraq. Meanwhile, with IS falling back in the face of a US-backed Kurdish counter-attack, the urgency to provide Iraqi Kurdistan with heavy weapons may now be fading.

#### **A non-unified Peshmerga**

The US and other international partners are likely to seek closer military-to-military ties with Iraqi Kurdistan in the forthcoming years, both to counter IS in Iraq and also to capitalise on Iraqi Kurdistan's potential as a base from which to train and equip Syrian Kurdish fighters. Baghdad is likely to support this engagement under the rubric of the new National Guard scheme being developed by Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, under which the KRI's military forces would receive financial support from the federal government. The remaining obstacle to international training is the structure of Iraqi Kurdistan's armed forces, which remain bifurcated along party political lines.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is the regional body that governs Iraqi Kurdistan and it boasts a Ministry of Peshmerga that commands 11 light infantry Region-

al Guard Brigades (RGB) and two small armoured brigades, comprising approximately 40,000 troops. The KRG's Ministry of Interior commands a further 30,000 Zerevani, Carabinieri-type paramilitary police troops that are often as heavily armed as RGB units.

Alongside these units are the Peshmerga cadres of the two main political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The KDP presently has around

Special Operations Forces.

The US government has long-demanded that the Iraqi Kurdistan unify all its armed forces under the Ministry of Peshmerga or KRG Ministry of Interior before US military support could be increased. As recently as May 2013 the Deputy Minister of Peshmerga, Anwar Haji Osman, outlined plans to create "22 unified brigades [i.e. RGBs] which will be classified into two divisions, 20 of them will consist of mechanised, motorised, armoured,

The concept of unified RGBs has therefore taken a knock. The KRG Ministry of Interior Zerevani units were shown to be KDP-dominated and have failed in a number of engagements. For example, Kurdish suffered military defeats in early August at the hands of IS. The militant group captured Zumar, Sinjar and the Mosul Dam (which have both since been recaptured by the Kurds), triggering serious political tensions within the KRG. Meanwhile, the PUK and the third major KRG party, Gorran, have accused the KDP of monopolising CIA-facilitated covert arms deliveries.

These internal disputes and lack of professionalism suggest that the KRI armed forces will continue to face difficulties in operationalising the level of foreign training and equipment that they receive, potentially hampering their ability to follow up air strikes with ground operations. That said, direct US military support in the form of intelligence and air strikes will continue to underwrite Kurdish military operations to retake lost ground from IS. Moreover, if Iraqi Kurdistan receives major new supplies of heavy weapons, they will be forced to rely upon under-the-table illicit transfers as in years past.

*Guest contributor Michael Knights, of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.*

## **'Fighting against IS has exposed the weakness of the Peshmerga'**

60,000 party members mobilised as Peshmerga under Yakay (unit) 80. This includes two Special Forces brigades, Gulan and Barzan, that field a total of 6,000 heavily armed troops with their own BM-21 multiple-rocket launcher battalion. The PUK similarly has approximately 50,000 party members mobilised as Peshmerga under Yakay (unit) 70. The PUK's Special Forces are the Dizha Tiror (Counter-Terrorism Group), a 5,000-strong heavily armed light infantry force whose troops are equipped and uniformed very similarly to US-trained Iraqi

artillery, air defence, engineers, signals and logistic unit brigades while the last two will be combat support unit brigades". On 25 August, KRG President Massoud Barzani ordered the process to be accelerated and completed within six months.

Nevertheless, unification of the Peshmerga and Zerevani will be a challenge for Iraqi Kurdistan. The fighting against IS in 2014 has exposed the weakness of the Ministry of Peshmerga's RGB units, which are newly formed and sometimes lack the morale and reputation of the party-run Peshmerga units.

