

## The Peshmergas and the Future of the State



(PUK-affiliated Peshmergas of the Kurdish Regional Government's army having dinner in Kolajo, Northern Iraq, August 2012. © Edouard Beau / Agence Vu)

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Informal systems rather than formal rules and legal institutions, dominate the security and commercial sectors in Kurdistan and shape governance and the ways in which power-holders and social groups perceive their interests in the region. In doing so they shape the political and administrative system based on personal and group loyalty, which further generates divisions and sectorialization of Kurdistan, both geographically and politically and will continue to be an obstacle in Kurdistan's future as a state. Moreover, despite their reputation of being fierce fighters, the series of tactical defeats encountered by the Peshmergas in the fight against ISIS further exposed the cracks of a military institution that is in fact far from being institutionalized, and still operates for the large part as party militias.

Notwithstanding greater aspirations for independence, divisions among the political parties and their leading figures, combined with unequal wealth repartition and the regional interference of neighboring powers are considerably undermining the push for the sovereignty and legitimacy of the state. Kurdish leadership has failed so far to form a united front in dealing with central aspects to its state-building endeavor, including the formation and unification of the Peshmergas into a national army.

## **Origins**

Long-standing symbols of Kurdish identity and loyalty, the origins of the Peshmergas<sup>1</sup> are rooted in the structure of local governance systems, dating back to the 1890s, and coming from Kurdish tribal groups that would organize themselves into small defense forces, conserving local borders, and responding to local leadership above all. As grassroots and spontaneous groups of armed men, these fighters would obey to local hierarchy before bowing to a national or ethnic vision. During World War I, Malik Mahmoud, the self-proclaimed king of Kurdistan, set up what may have been the first formal Peshmergas. Embodying the ideal warriors, they slowly evolved to become an emblem whereby military ability intertwined with nationalistic ideals would be the base for loyal units to Kurdish leadership figures seeking to extend their political influence in

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<sup>1</sup> The word *Peshmerga* is composed of two Kurdish words: *pesh* which means 'in front of' and *merga* for 'death'. The combination of both literally means those who are in front of death, or those who face death. The exact origins of the word are uncertain. While some claim that the term first appeared during the Kurdish Republic of 1946 at Mahabad in Iran, other argue that it first came into use in the 1960s in Iraq. For more on the topic, see also Lortz, Michael G., "Willing to Face Death: A History of Kurdish Military Forces - the Peshmerga - From the Ottoman Empire to Present-Day Iraq" (2005).

the region. From then on, the Peshmergas evolved from a tribal-based defense force to a political one that stood against the government of Saddam Hussein's Iraq and its army. The Peshmergas underwent various stages and wars during which it progressively evolved into a more professionalized force, spanning from the tribal rebellions under Barzani in 1960s and 1970s<sup>2</sup> and turning into party militias during the Iraq-Iran war while both KDP and PUK relied on their international partners to supply them with weapons. Overall they were still fairly disorganized and lacked equipment, weaponry and logistic and strategic planning. Their main advantage lied in their knowledge of the mountainous areas and their ability to maintain unity under the principle of loyalty.

In the late 1980s, the Anfal campaign was nothing more than an attempt by Baghdad to undercut the Peshmergas' popular base and weaken them by exposing their inability to protect the populations. The civil war that later erupted in May 1994 in Kurdistan became a sore point and exposed at its height the politicization of these armed forces that were at the mercy of political allegiances. Both parties and their Peshmergas had by then more sophisticated weaponry acquired during the First Gulf War. While KDP enjoyed numerical superiority over the PUK's Peshmerga (55,000 for KDP versus 18,000 for PUK), the PUK was better equipped and on that basis Barzani and Talabani undertook the division of Iraqi Kurdistan along their own political vision, soon becoming hostage to Iraq's neighboring and interfering countries, killing Kurdish civilians who grew disheartened by their own leadership. Most Peshmergas today have expressed shame in their participation in that conflict, more particularly in the killing of their own people, while seemingly not seeing any contradiction with the party loyalty and factionalism they adhere to this day. After the 1996 Washington Agreement brokered by the US between the KDP and the PUK, the Peshmergas were able to provide intelligence to the US military, which became especially useful in 2003, when their cooperation started the process of formalization.

From then on, while providing intelligence on Al-Qaeda, the Peshmerga leadership accused on a number of occasions the Iraqi government of participating in post-2003 terrorist activities. Nearly 7000 Peshmergas were trained with the US army and were nicknamed the *Peshrambo*<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>2</sup> By fall 1962, after nearly a year of conflict, Barzani had nearly 15 to 20,000 troops at his command, including the 4 to 5,000 original peshmerga. Barzani divided the peshmerga into groups of 10 (*dasta*), 50 (*pal*), 150 (*surpal*), 350 (*lek*), and 1,000 (*surlek*). Eventually, due to high death rate in combat, Barzani relied on political loyalty to make leadership appointments.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Forces Training Kurdish Peshmerga Forces. BBC Monitoring International Reports, 4 Oct 2003.

trained in commando operations. And while the Peshmergas held joint training operations with the Iraqi army, particularly in the disputed territories stretching from Ninewah to Kirkuk, they have remained at all times under the KRG's control, more specifically at the helm of the two main parties' control. The two key factors in maintaining the *status quo* were on one hand ethnic mistrust from Baghdad in integrating the Peshmerga into the Iraqi army and vice versa, while the animosity between the PUK and KDP meant that on the other hand each party was reluctant to see their own forces integrated into a national force where they would have little to no say on their actions.

As mentioned above, until recently, the Peshmergas had participated in a series of conflicts: the tribal rebellion, Iraq-Iran war, the civil war, otherwise known as Raspareen (brother killing) as well as wars against the former regime. They had also provided military support to American troops seeking to gain control of territories after 2003 but military coordination remained limited then. The fight against Islamic State (ISIS) goes beyond the mere formulation of a strategic or military policy; they are combats to ensure the survival and consolidation of Kurdistan in the region, ensuring a political and territorial control of the areas in which they operate. Yet, the current structure of the Peshmergas along political parties and their neo-patrimonial system point to greater challenges in guaranteeing the government's control.

## **Factionalism**

At a political level, Kurdistan's domestic structure today is that of a relatively centralized government dominated by the two main parties' politburos, those of the KDP and the PUK. Indeed, Kurdistan political factionalism shatters the illusion of a stable and politically united Kurdistan heading towards independence. The leading parties have created interlocking mechanisms of power distribution and execution that put both of them in the driver's seat at the same time. The balance is often altered slightly in favor of one or the other party, depending on the individual at the helm. Overall, the competing vision of states that each party has is fairly healthy and is the principle of a democratic platform upon which they have managed to build constituencies. However, it is the patronage system that comes with it and the parallel alliances that end up generating contradicting policies.

The military support that the Peshmergas brought to the American Coalition forces in 2003 further exacerbated the divisions that existed among them. While the PUK and the KDP proved united in their military support, they were far from being synchronized, with KDP Peshmergas



leading their own operations in the Ninewah areas, while the PUK ones operated in the Kirkuk areas. This latter aspect formalized the territorial control that each party laid claim to in the disputed territories, with the KDP's Administration in Erbil and the PUK's in Suleimaniyah. Later on, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region was divided under the control of the two parties who had their own security forces manning checkpoints, their own Asayish (General Security) or even intelligence agencies, the Parastin (the Agency) and Zeniary (Information Intelligence), which were established during the civil war in the 1990s to spy on one another.

In doing so, the state's security apparatus was locally controlled and operated on the basis of party loyalty, eroding accountability and transparency. In 2006, the KRG launched a process of unification in an attempt to formulate more coherent policies towards Baghdad and abroad. While most ministries were successful in doing so, the Peshmerga Ministry was the last one to implement it given the highly politicized aspect of these armed forces, which were operating more like party militias. At the time, the lengthy process was attributed to a lack of means and funds, and the refusal of Baghdad to integrate the Peshmergas into the national budget. While it is true that Baghdad has little interest in seeing the Peshmergas becoming a strong united military force, the core of the problem lied mainly in the political factionalism that has affected Kurdistan.

Both parties have ruled the KRG in relative stability although they have both in fact, divided the region into two zones, under the respective control of their security and police forces<sup>4</sup>. Both parties dispose of their own Peshmergas, which are organized more like party militias than professional military units. According to an interview with Mustafa Qadir, Minister of Peshmerga with the Iraq Oil Report<sup>5</sup>, only around 50,000 are organized under Qadir's ministry. The KDP and PUK political parties each retain about 60,000 fighters under political chains of command, and each also has their own paramilitary force. Generals from the parties have squabbled publicly about failures to resupply each other during key battles with ISIS. In addition, each Peshmerga forces is trained separately and does not in fact have joint exercises, while rivalries and poor unit integration have made themselves patent on the battlefield.

Case in point, the recent fighting that took place over the summer has shown that these rivalries become an impediment to internal stability and border protection at the most crucial time. When KDP Peshmergas lost Makhmour this summer, the loss was attributed as a failure by the

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with General Secretary of the Peshmerga, Jabar Yawar.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.iraqoilreport.com/news/qa-mohammed-sayid-qadir-minister-peshmerga-affairs-13330/>

KDP to demonstrate effective leadership for the KRG. Likewise, when the Yezidis asked for weaponry and reinforcement from the KDP Peshmerga in light of a possible ISIS onslaught, the KDP allegedly refused thus generating considerable resentment among the Kurds and the Yezidis. The reasons may range from poor leadership to lack of capacity, but the most commonly circulated reason is that the KDP exploited the crisis to gain more weapons and wide international support in its bid for seceding from Iraq.

On the other hand, PUK Peshmergas are the ones who took control of Kirkuk, a key city in the narrative for an independent Kurdistan, but also a PUK-controlled city. However, in an interview with former KDP member of parliament who spoke under condition of anonymity, despite the blame cast on KDP by PUK members, 'many are quick to forget how Hawija was lost by PUK Peshmergas and still endure heavy fighting. At least, we regained control of our territories'. PUK's seeming ability to have maintained control over the city compared to the military and territorial losses of the KDP was interpreted by the PUK as a propitious moment to expose the political flaws of its archrival, not as a moment to strategically rethink the consequences it may have on national unity and the future of the state. Likewise, the changing situation on the ground brought President Barzani and KDP to precipitate the push for independence. It is noteworthy to remark that the animosity between KDP and PUK is also the heritage of the civil war, which is denied by both parties. In 2011 when the Kurdish demonstrators struggle against both parties, KDP send Peshmergas around Kirkuk while PUK's influence was gravely eroded in Suleymaniyah.

The current dispute and security situation between both parties revived the competition between the main parties, whereby the control of Kirkuk under PUK is providing the latter with a considerable advantage. This is particularly important in a political context where the PUK has encountered a loss of popularity to Gorran, its offshoot.

## **Understanding the Defeat**

By putting the Ministry of the Peshmerga under Gorran following the last parliamentary elections in September 2013, KRG's objective was twofold. The first one was to encourage this unification and the institutionalization of the Peshmergas under one chain of command, putting a term to the duopoly in the security sector. However, the Peshmergas have also been reluctant to adapt and to date, almost seventy percent of the Peshmerga forces are not under the Minister's command. The current existential fight against ISIS seems to have put resolving

factionalism among the Kurdish armed forces on the back burner for now. Second, it remains a priority for Gorran which as a third party took the control away from one of the main parties, especially PUK who traditionally held that role in the power-sharing system instituted in KRG. A number of Kurds believe that if Gorran was to fail fully integrating the Peshmerga under the control of the ministry, it could also mean the end of a Kurdish force and imply further defeats such as the ones experienced last summer. The Peshmergas that were under the control of KDP in Zumar and Sinjar, retreated due to lack of training and equipment, but also due to a lack of professionalism and coordinated efforts.

What exactly brought on this defeat is unclear to this day. While the government claim they were outnumbered and under-equipped, inner structural problems remains the key issue to this informal army. A number of units simply collapsed in front of the Islamic State marching into Kurdistan, while infantry units have up to now shown little military rigor, especially in joint brigades. In addition, the high numbers of deserters or wounded considerably weakens a unit, which is not replaced or rebuilt. It is simply integrated into another unit that experienced the same fate, without them knowing the area, nor the operational mode, therefore generating more problems in terms of military coordination on the ground and demonstrating a lack of tactical practices. Adding to the chaos is the number of volunteers who just show up and join a unit during the fighting, even though they may have not been trained and may therefore be more a liability.

Likewise with IEDs, particularly around Zumar and Kirkuk, where the lack of training and discipline among the ranks of the Peshmergas remains a security concern and poses as well a political issue. Unequipped to demine a number of houses where the IS has left houses booby trapped, the Peshmerga will simply detonate explosives in houses of the former inhabitants, which means that IDPs from the disputed territories will not have a place to return. In turn, this has provoked the ire of a number of Arabs who see their villages being 'liberated' with destroyed infrastructures and henceforth inhabitable. While the KRG has proven reluctant to give a precise account regarding the number of death and wounded, recent estimates dating from last October account for 1300 dead and more than 2000 wounded at the time of writing.

The current military support that is provided to the Peshmergas is further entrenching a form of complacency among Peshmergas leadership and politicians whereby they do not feel the need to reform. While coalition forces have provided important logistical and military support to the

KRG, it seems that the weapons and training are distributed according to the political control exercised in one area or another rather than according to military needs, hence highlighting the factionalism that plagues the Kurdish armed forces. Each party peshmerga is competing for military support from external donors, further affecting the coherence of a regional strategy while marking the lack of centralized military policy making. In addition, training programs provided by Germany, the US or the United Kingdom have been useful but considerably limited and small-scale. Private military contractors have also confirmed that the Peshmerga's standards and capacity is quite weak and therefore they could not offer more sophisticated training. While PUK enjoys greater support from Iran. However it is not without representing conflicts of interests as well with the international coalition. The military cooperation between PUK-controlled Peshmergas and Iran in the Kirkuk governorate represents a problem regarding a more homogenous military and political cooperation between the KRG and Western powers such as the US. The existing tensions between Iran and the US for example renders the transfer of sensitive information difficult or coordination of military efforts more complicated. This also explains why European powers and the US may favor indirectly a cooperation with the KDP, which until recently was fairly isolated after Turkey's mute reaction to ISIS' advances in Kurdistan in August. This 'selective' partnership consequently contributes to increasing lack of cohesive military policies and legitimates the *de facto* factionalism.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, factionalism, plaguing Kurdish institutions and dividing them along the main parties, remains a key obstacle to proper institution-building while impeding the sound development of a military strategy. The lack of governance combined with regional interference further exacerbates these competing visions of states that the main parties share for Kurdistan. Informal systems rather than formal rules and legal institutions, dominate the military and governmental sectors in Kurdistan. They shape governance and the ways in which power-holders and social groups perceive their interests in the region. In doing so they also shape the political and administrative system based on personal and group loyalty, which further creates divisions and sectorialization of Kurdistan, both geographically and politically as evidenced among the Peshmergas who are still confronting a war from inside as well as external enemies.

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