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## **Armed non-state actors in conflict: strategic decision-making in the 2014 IS-KRI conflict**

Berge, W. van den

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# **Armed non-state actors in conflict**

*Strategic decision-making in the 2014 IS-KRI conflict*

**Wietse van den Berge**

## **Colofon**

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**Armed non-state actors in conflict**  
**Strategic decision-making in the 2014 IS-KRI conflict**

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Figure 0.1: political-geographical map of Iraq in 2014.<sup>1</sup>



1 Mason Watson, "The conflict with ISIS. Operation Inherent Resolve, June 2014-January 2020," (Washington D.C.: *United States Army Center of Military History*, 2021), 8.

Figure 0.2: political-geographical map of Syria in 2014.<sup>2</sup>



2 *Ibid.*, 13.



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

**A**rmed non-state actors (ANSAs) Islamic State (IS)<sup>3</sup> and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)<sup>4</sup> took control over northern Iraq in June 2014. IS – then still operating under the name Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – and the KRI simultaneously challenged the Iraqi state. Still, armed conflict eventually emerged between IS and the KRI. This study answers the question how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during three critical events in their mutual conflict in 2014? Chapter 1 first answers why is it relevant to study ANSAs’ strategic decision-making within the predominantly state-centric field of International Relations (IR), before elaborating on the central question and the methodology applied.

Chapter 1 addresses the setting of this study, and it sees the study’s scientific relevance in the observation that ANSAs are under-researched within IR. Yet, the societal relevance is that ANSAs play a significant role within IR. The chapter briefly introduces four IR paradigms – elaborated on in chapter 3 – which this study applies to analyze strategic decision-making of ANSAs IS and the KRI: the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm,<sup>5</sup> and complexity theory.<sup>6</sup> The added value of this study concerns applying and merging these IR paradigms to understand IS’ and the KRI’s strategic

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3 Cf. Ahmed Hashim, *The caliphate at war. Operational realities and innovations of the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15-6; Simon Mabon & Stephen Royle, *The origins of ISIS* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 6; Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of geography. Ten maps that tell you everything you need to know about global politics* (London: Elliott & Thompson, 2016), 162-3; Adam Taylor, “‘Daesh’: John Kerry starts calling the Islamic State a name they hate,” *The Washington Post*, December 5, 2014; Watson, “The conflict with ISIS,” 7n\*. Also see: Brian Fishman, *The master plan. ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the jihadi strategy for final victory* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2016), 196. This study uses IS’ names as synonyms, which refer to an organization and not the actual state or caliphate that the organization eventually claimed.

4 The KRI is sometimes referred to as Başur or Southern Kurdistan. To enhance readability, this study uses the KRI as a geographical name and political entity.

5 Graham Allison, *Essence of decision. Explaining the Cuban missile crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971); Graham Allison & Philip Zelikow, *Essence of decision. Explaining the Cuban missile crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999).

6 Cf. James Kiras, “Key concepts and terms of irregular warfare,” in *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed., David Jordan *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 307.

decision-making within the context of their mutual conflict. While the study is descriptive and explanatory on the research subject, methodologically the study is exploratory and sensitizing in character. The methodology concerns a structured, focused comparison<sup>7</sup>, with strategic decision-making as the unit of analysis, based on primary sources such as documents, media, and field research, as well as secondary and tertiary sources such as existing literature on the topic. Here, the chapter indicates the study's limitations: depending on translated primary sources and the authors' Western-biased positionality.

## 1.1 Setting

ANSAs existed before states did.<sup>8</sup> And wherever states emerged<sup>9</sup>, ANSAs challenged them.<sup>10</sup> During the 2000s and 2010s, most armed conflicts involved ANSAs, leading to an expectation that most future conflicts will too. That includes conflicts between ANSAs.<sup>11</sup>

7 Cf. Alexander George & Andrew Bennett, *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 67-72.

8 Rainer Baumann & Frank Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis, globalisation and non-state actors. State-centric after all?" *Journal of International Relations and Development* 17:4 (2014), 490.

9 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Art of war*, transl. Christopher Lynch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003 [1521]), 306; Niccolò Machiavelli, *De beerser*, transl. Frans van Doorn (Amsterdam: Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, 2002 [1513]), 125-130; Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi. Gedachten over staat en politiek*, 2nd ed., transl. Paul van Heck (Amsterdam: Ambo, 1997 [1531]), 336-338. Also see: David Jones & M.L.R. Smith, "Return to reason. Reviving political realism in Western foreign policy," *International Affairs* 91:5 (2015), 939; Kees van der Pijl, *Wereldorde en machtspolitiek. Visies op de internationale betrekkingen van Dante tot Fukuyama*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995), 16-7. Machiavelli observed that individual Italian city-states could not rely on mercenary troops to defend their interests. Instead, he proposed to raise armies based upon nations.

10 Beatrice Heuser, *War. A genealogy of Western ideas and practices* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2022), 12-3; Kiras, "Key concepts," 302; Edward Luttwak, *Strategy. The logic of war and peace*, revised and enlarged ed. (Cambridge: Belknap, 2001), 83; Hanna Pfeifer *et al.*, "The politics of recognition, armed non-state actors, and conflict transformation" (Frankfurt am Main: Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung, 2022); Rose Mary Sheldon, "Introduction," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31:5 (2020), 933. For example: Paul Jackson, "Warlords as alternative forms of governance," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 14:2 (2003), 134-7; Anatoly Kurmanav, "Wagner's mutiny has century-old echoes of another Russian debacle," *The New York Times*, June 28, 2023. For other historical examples of ANSAs challenging states see: Caroline Elkins, "The Merchant's Leviathan. How the East India Company made the modern world," *Foreign Affairs* 102:5 (2023), 212-3; Richard Miles, *Carthage must be destroyed. The rise and fall of an ancient civilisation* (2011), audiobook. ANSAs challenging states ranged from the Indian Thugs, the Ottoman warlords, to the Wagner mercenaries of today.

11 Ersel Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics. A framework for analysis," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 28:3 (2015), 424; Edwin Bakker, *Terrorism and counterterrorism studies. Comparing theory and practice* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2015), 51-3; May Darwich, "Foreign policy analysis and armed non-state actors in IR. Lessons from the Middle East," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17:4 (2021), 1; Natasha Ezrov, *Global politics and violent non-state actors* (London: Sage, 2017), 3, 10, 201; Adrian Florea, "Rebel governance in de facto states," *European Journal of International Relations* 26:4 (2020), 1,014-7; Meirav Mishali-Ram, "Powerful actors make a difference. Theorizing power attributes of nonstate actors," *International Journal of Peace Studies* 14:2 (2009), 55-82; Amos Perlmutter, *The military and politics in modern times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 208-11; Stephen Powell & Adrian Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset (ANARD)," *Civil Wars* 23:2 (2021), 177; David Rapaport, "The four waves of modern terrorism," in *Attacking*

### 1.1.1 States challenged

One such conflict emerged after ANSAs IS and the KRI took control over northern Iraq in 2014. At first, IS and the KRI both challenged the Iraqi state. Later, they challenged one another, besides challenging other ANSAs and the state-dominated regional balance. According to some analysts, the rise of IS even ‘marked the most revolutionary change in the Middle East’s geopolitics since the implementation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement after World War I.’<sup>12</sup> States proved unable to effectively contain the emerging ANSAs and relied on other ANSAs to do so.<sup>13</sup> That reliance weakened the states’ positions further and indicated that ‘[i]n the Middle East power does indeed flow from the barrel of a gun.’<sup>14</sup>

Around the same time, similar developments happened in Syria, where Lebanese ANSA *Hezb’ollah* supported the Syrian government during the Syrian Civil War (2011-present).<sup>15</sup> Beyond the Middle East, ANSAs challenged states as well: *al-Qaeda* in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had challenged the Malian state in 2012 before being pushed back by an international coalition in late 2013, conducting attacks ever since<sup>16</sup>; in Nigeria, *Boko Haram* conducted raids daily in 2014<sup>17</sup>; and since 2014, the pro-Russian Donetsk People’s Republic challenged the Ukrainian state in its goal to establish an independent country in eastern Ukraine.<sup>18</sup>

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*terrorism. Elements of a grand strategy*, Audrey Kurth Cronin & James Ludes (eds.), 52-6 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004); Ian Speller, “Introduction to the second edition,” in David Jordan *et al.*, *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2-7. Also see: Bruce Russett, & Harvey Starr, *World politics. The menu for choice*, 5th ed. (New York: Freeman, 1996), 17. The name IR implies a focus on nations, but as a field of study, IR does incorporate ANSAs.

- 12 Daniel Chigudu, “Sectarianism and the ideology of the Islamic State (IS). Terrorism threat and policy issues,” *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6:9 (2022), 5,146-7. Also see: Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 148.
- 13 Yaniv Voller, “Rethinking armed groups and order. Syria and the rise of militiaocracies,” *International Affairs* 98:3 (2022), 853. Also see: Steven Simon & Adam Weinstein, “Iraq as it is. America can help the country, despite Iranian influence,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 27, 2023.
- 14 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 186. Cf. Mao Zedong, *Problems of war and strategy* (November 6, 1938), n.p. Also see: Feike Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan? Assessing the nature and functions of the Peshmerga in Iraq” (The Hague: *Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael*, 2018), 7; Jones & Smith, “Return to reason,” 940; David Jones & M.L.R. Smith, “The strategy of the mind. Maoism and culture war in the west,” *Military Strategy Magazine*, 8:1 (2022).
- 15 Darwich, “Foreign policy analysis,” 5; Lawrence Freedman, *Command. The politics of military operations from Korea to Ukraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 488; Zafer Kizilkaya, “Hizbullah’s moral justification of its military intervention in the Syrian Civil War,” *The Middle East Journal* 71:2 (2017), 211-28; Robert Mason, “Strategic depth through enclaves. Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah,” *Middle East Policy* 28 (2021), 96-108; Hanna Pfeifer & Regine Schwab, “Re-examining the state/non-state binary in the study of (civil) war,” *Civil Wars* 25:2-3 (2023), 445n5; Simon & Weinstein, “Iraq as it is”; Marisa Sullivan, “Hezbollah in Syria” (Washington D.C.: *Institute for the Study of War*, 2014), 11-8; “The long haul. Hizbullah’s involvement in the Syrian civil war,” *Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, January 21, 2015.
- 16 Sergei Boeke, “Understanding Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” PhD diss., Leiden University, 2022, 14-5; Liesbeth van der Heide, “A group affair. Understanding terrorism involvement in Mali,” PhD diss., Leiden University, 2022, 9.
- 17 “Boko Haram,” *Counter Terrorism Guide*, accessed October 14, 2022.
- 18 Oliver Carroll, “Welcome to the people’s republic of Donetsk,” *Foreign Policy*, April 18, 2014.

IS and the KRI stood out among ANSAs: they controlled territories where they exercised monopolies of violence and collected taxes. They joined alliances and conducted warfare as part of what seemed autonomous foreign policies.<sup>19</sup> As such, they made strategic decisions as states would have done<sup>20</sup>, connecting ends, ways, and means.<sup>21</sup> Much literature on both IS and the KRI considered their strategies as given, discussing them<sup>22</sup> without considering how IS and the KRI decided on their strategies. This qualitative study describes and explains how IS and the KRI conducted their strategic decision-making.

Next to their unique position among ANSAs, IS and the KRI reflected the religious and nationalist tendencies within international relations of the 2010s, respectively.<sup>23</sup> Both aspired to become independent states themselves<sup>24</sup> using opposite approaches:

‘[t]he international community is presented with two antithetical images of rebel governance: a “malign” rebel governance image whereby radical insurgencies, such as the one carried out by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, secure territorial control, operate economies of warfare, engage in clandestine activities, forge bonds with the local population, attract ideologically committed recruits, and create a cauldron of instability across large pockets of territory; and, a “benign” rebel governance image whereby moderate rebellions, such as the one in Iraqi Kurdistan, successfully manage local affairs and provide order and security in what might otherwise be an anarchic environment.’<sup>25</sup>

This study analyzes three key events that involved both IS and the KRI, which are part of their mutual conflict. The first key event concerned both ANSAs trying to fill the power vacuum in northern Iraq after the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) had withdrawn from the area in June 2014. Although skirmishes occurred between the ANSAs, they were not in full conflict. That

19 Florea, “Rebel governance,” 1,008, 1,015. Also see: Mark Leonard, *The age of unpeace. How connectivity causes conflict* (London: Penguin, 2022), 123; Ahmad Talha, “Administrative and judicial frameworks for armed non-state actors’ law enforcement and organizational structures,” *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 5:4 (2022), 31.

20 Cf. Bridget Coggins, “Rebel diplomacy. Theorizing violent non-state actors’ strategic use of talk,” in *Rebel governance in civil war*, Ana Arjona *et al.* (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 105. Also see: David Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking, The Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq,” *Kurdish Studies* 8:2 (2020), 343.

21 Luttwak, *Strategy*, 89. Also see: Hew Strachan, “The elusive meaning and enduring relevance of Clausewitz,” in *The new makers of modern strategy. From the ancient world to the digital age*, Hal Brands (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 130.

22 For example: Benjamin Bahney & Patrick Johnston, “Who runs the Islamic State group?” RAND, May 22, 2015; Yigal Carmon *et al.*, “Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the phenomenon of the Islamic Caliphate State,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, September 14, 2014; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Thomas Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far. How jihadist groups strategize, plot, and learn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 28, 233.

23 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity. Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition* (London: Profile, 2018), 74-5. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 103.

24 Florea, “Rebel governance,” 1,008. Also see: Kiras, “Key concepts,” 306.

25 *Ibid.*, 1,026.

changed with the second key event, which concerned the battle for the KRI in August 2014. IS then advanced into the KRI, and the KRI defended its territory, which it eventually did successfully. After the threat of IS towards the KRI was no longer existential, in October 2014, the KRI decided to support Syrian Kurdish fighters in the Syrian town of Kobanî (Ayn al-Arab)<sup>26</sup>, which was under siege by IS. When the odds turned against IS in Kobanî, IS decided to continue the siege, leading to massive losses among its ranks. The siege of Kobanî is the third key event in this study.

### 1.1.2 IR

Although this study borrows from numerous fields<sup>27</sup>, it primarily concerns the field of IR. Within this study, the term international relations, in lowercase, refers to a political process: the actions – directed toward the external world – and interactions of actors, on a regional level or above. Capitalized, IR here refers to the study of these actions and interactions.<sup>28</sup> While IR originates in the classical world<sup>29</sup>, a structured IR perspective focusing on power and security matured during the 1930s and 1940s. This IR perspective was state-centric and assumed that states pursue national interests – relative to other states – within a quasi-anarchic environment.<sup>30</sup> This perspective dominated IR during the Cold War (1945-1989), although scholars developed alternative views focusing on non-state actors.<sup>31</sup> With the end of the Cold War, an approach that suggested economic interdependence shortly emerged.<sup>32</sup> Yet, scholars

26 Tanya Goudsouzian, “Kobane explained. What’s so special about it?” *Al-Jazeera*, October 21, 2014.

27 Including, but not limited to: history, regional studies, social movement theories, strategic studies, and terrorism studies.

28 Cf. Deborah Gerner, “The evolution of the study of foreign policy,” in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack et al. (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 18; Joshua Goldstein, *International relations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longmen, 1999), 4-6.

29 John Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken. Een masterclass over Herodotus, Sun Tzu, Von Clausewitz, Machiavelli en andere grote strategen*, transl. Willem van Paassen (Amsterdam: Hollands Diep, 2022), 42-3; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 26. For example: Thucydides, *De Peloponnesische oorlog*, transl. Wolther Kassies (Amsterdam: Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, 2013 [c. 404 bce]). Also see: Jeremy Black, *Geopolitics and the quest for dominance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 278.

30 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 11-5; Richard Little & Michael Smith, “Introduction. The study of IR,” in *Perspectives on IR*, 2nd ed., Richard Little & Michael Smith (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1998), 3. Also see: Phil Haun, “Air power in the age of primacy. Air warfare since the Cold War,” in *Air power in the age of primacy. Air warfare since the Cold War*, Phil Haun et al. (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1.

31 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 392. Also see: Goldstein, *International relations*, 6-10; Ole Wæver, “Figures of international thought. Introducing persons instead of paradigms,” in *The future of international relations. Masters in the making*, Iver Neumann & Ole Wæver (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1997), 7-15. For Cold War, see: Richard Crockatt, *The fifty years war. The United States and the Soviet Union in IR, 1941-1991* (London: Routledge, 1996), 162; Wayne McWilliams & Harry Piotrowski, *The world since 1945. A history of international relations*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1997), 93-100; David Petraeus & Andrew Roberts, *Conflict. The evolution of warfare from 1945 to Ukraine* (London: Harper Collins, 2023), 16.

32 Jones & Smith, “Return to reason,” 935-6. Also see: Francis Fukuyama, *Het einde van de geschiedenis en de laatste mens*, transl. Anna Kapteyns-Bacuna et al. (Amsterdam: Olympus, 1992), 269-70.

observed an increasing role of non-state actors within IR – in small wars and hybrid conflicts since the 1990s and terrorism since the 2000s.<sup>33</sup>

Three mainstream conceptual models – or paradigms – for analyzing strategic decision-making within IR provide the analytical frameworks for this study. The first model is the rational actor paradigm, which assumes actors behave as calculating, unitary entities. The second model is the organizational behavior paradigm, which assumes bureaucratic routines and standard operating procedures lead to strategic decisions. The third model concerns the governmental politics paradigm, which assumes power games take place among individual decision-makers.<sup>34</sup> Analysts usually applied the paradigms implicitly until foreign policy researcher Graham Allison observed and explicitly mentioned them in his 1971 study *Essence of decision*. Much academic debate has occurred on whether analysts can merge the paradigms.<sup>35</sup> The paradigms complement one another<sup>36</sup>, suggesting that a merger has more explanatory power than the separate paradigms.<sup>37</sup> While combining the paradigms is an interesting avenue, this study instead applies complexity theory to the cases as an additional fourth analytical framework. Complexity theory acknowledges conflicts' multi-causal and multi-directional dynamics to provide explanations.<sup>38</sup>

## 1.2 Relevance

ANSAs remain under-researched and misunderstood within the predominantly state-centric field of IR, although worldwide, during the 2000s and 2010s, most armed conflicts involved ANSAs.<sup>39</sup> In particular, a lack exists regarding conflicts between ANSAs.<sup>40</sup> ANSAs remaining under-researched makes studying a conflict between ANSAs scientifically and socially relevant.

33 Black, *Geopolitics*, 272. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 138. For contrary views see: Thomas Hegghammer, "Resistance is futile. The war on terror supercharged state power," *Foreign Affairs* September/October 2021, 44; Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 936.

34 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*.

35 Barton Bernstein, "Understanding decisionmaking, U.S. foreign policy, and the Cuban missile crisis. A review essay," review of *Essence of decision. Explaining the Cuban missile crisis*, 2nd ed. by Graham Allison & Philip Zelikow. *International Security* 25:1 (2000), 126. Also see: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 3n7; Nicolas Guilhot, "The Kuhning of reason. Realism, rationalism, and political decision in IR theory after Thomas Kuhn," *Review of International Studies* (2015), 19.

36 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 392.

37 Raymond Tanter, "International system and foreign policy approaches. Implications for conflict modelling and management," in *Theory and policy in International Relations*, Raymond Tanter & Richard Ullman (eds.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 12.

38 Cf. Kiras, "Key concepts," 307.

39 Cf. Jochen Prantl & Evelyn Goh, "Rethinking strategy and statecraft for the twenty-first century of complexity. A case for strategic diplomacy," *International Affairs* 98:2 (2022), 468-9.

40 Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics," 424; Bakker, *Terrorism and counterterrorism studies*, 51-3; Darwich, "Foreign policy analysis," 1; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3, 10, 201; Florea, "Rebel governance in de facto states," 1014-7; Mishali-Ram, "Powerful actors make a difference," 55-82; Perlmutter, *The military*

## 1.2.1 Scientific relevance: under-researched

### 1.2.1.1 State-centric IR

Studying ANSAs within IR is scientifically relevant because the topic is under-researched. IR as a field was and remains state-centric.<sup>41</sup> IR's state-centeredness is remarkable, not only because non-state actors prove the historical continuity and states the anomaly<sup>42</sup>, but also because analysts have observed an increasing role of non-state actors within IR since the end of the Cold War.<sup>43</sup>

Foreign policy researchers Rainer Baumann and Frank Stengel observed a spike in academic attention for non-state actors in foreign policy research in the 1990s. In the 2010s, they observed renewed attention due to a '(complex, multidimensional and not at all unidirectional) transfer of authority from the state to various NSAs [non-state actors] of various kinds,' in which non-state actors 'also exert authority in foreign policy,' continuing that 'today almost no one in IR would doubt that NSAs make a significant impact in IR [...]. If anything, scholars argue that NSAs have been here all along and that in fact the state (still) is the "new kid on the block."' In fact, some non-state actors operated as 'autonomous actors that can have a serious impact on IR.'<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, a lack of academic attention concerning strategic decision-making by non-state actors remained.

Baumann and Stengel analyzed to what extent authors mentioned non-state actors in a leading journal called *Foreign Policy Analysis* between 2005 and 2010. Adopting a categorization of actors within IR into four categories<sup>45</sup>, they found that 'transnational actors are by far the least significant group of NSAs'<sup>46</sup>: of 138 articles, five addressed transnational actors; eleven articles international actors, twenty articles private actors, while the remaining 102 addressed state actors.<sup>47</sup> Baumann and Stengel observed that many scholars stuck to traditional topics, with some 'notable exceptions that highlight promising new avenues for FPA [foreign policy

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*and politics in modern times*, 208-11; Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 177; Rapaport, "The four waves of modern terrorism," 52-6; Speller, "Introduction to the second edition," 2-7. Also see: Russett, & Starr, *World politics*, 17.

41 Erik Ringmar, *History of international relations. A non-European perspective* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019), 1-4; Hajar Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum. The role of foreign policy in maintaining the de facto Kurdish entity in Iraq," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 23:3 (2023), 2.

42 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 490. Also see: Ian Bremmer, "The technopolar moment. How digital powers will reshape the global order," *Foreign Affairs* 100:6 (2021), 112-28; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3.

43 Moises Naim, *The end of power: From boardrooms to battlefields and churches to states, why being in charge isn't what it used to be* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 5-15. Also see: Prantl & Goh, "Rethinking strategy and statecraft," 443-4.

44 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 490. Also see: Bremmer, "The technopolar moment"; Elkins, "The Merchant's Leviathan," 212-3; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3; Miles, *Carthage must be destroyed*.

45 Philipp Genschel & Bernhard Zangl (2011) "L'état et l'exercice de l'autorité politique. Dénationalisation et administration," *Revue française de sociologie* 52:3 (2011), 514-5. Chapter 2 elaborates on the categorization by Genschel and Zangl.

46 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 510.

47 *Ibid.*, 506.

analysis] research, such as the attempts to utilise FPA's toolkit to analyse non-state actors' actions.<sup>48</sup> Baumann and Stengel suggested examining 'how decisions are made across policy fields and arenas [...] and to what extent and how exactly NSAs are involved.'<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, 'foreign policy analysts should start analysing decision making in these different settings and probe to what extent their models are applicable, how they could be modified, etc.'<sup>50</sup>

Security studies scholar Ersel Aydinli agreed with the above: '[w]hen it comes to nonstate actors, however, we have far less comprehensive research on what they are, how they interact and how they may be changing over time. If we accept that a polity shift is occurring, we must develop a deeper understanding of this form of agency.'<sup>51</sup>

Additionally, foreign policy researchers Thomas Juneau *et al.* – focusing on foreign policies in the Middle East, not on ANSAs – found that the 'scholarly community's understanding of foreign policy dynamics in the Middle East is often poor, ad hoc, or mostly based on case studies, while there are few theoretically informed comparisons.'<sup>52</sup> This impacts understanding Middle Eastern ANSAs. Furthermore, the Middle East is a contested, Western-invented concept<sup>53</sup>, and analysts have developed many traditional IR paradigms in – and for – Western contexts. Whether these same paradigms are applicable in non-Western contexts, such as the Middle East, is uncertain and requires research.<sup>54</sup>

### 1.2.1.2 Impact

While IR remained state-centric, scholarly research found that intra-state conflict historically happened more often than inter-state conflict. Moreover, the intra-state conflicts lasted longer and proved more destructive than the inter-state conflicts.<sup>55</sup> Researchers have observed an increase

48 *Ibid.*, 509.

49 *Ibid.*, 511.

50 *Ibid.*, 512.

51 Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics," 425.

52 Thomas Juneau *et al.*, "Neoclassical realism. Domestic politics, systemic pressures, and the impact on foreign policy since the Arab Spring," in *Routledge handbook of international Relations in the Middle East*, Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 8.

53 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 148.

54 Mohammed Ayoob, "Subaltern realism meets the Arab world," in *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East*, Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 59, 65-7; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 16; Alex Mintz & Karl DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 145. Also see: Emil Hokayem, *Syria's uprising and the fracturing of the Levant* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 32; Thomas Lawrence, *Zeven zuilen van wijsheid*, transl. Sjaak Commandeur (Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 2009 [1926]), 93-99; Ibrahim abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab thought. Studies in post-1967 Arab intellectual history* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 140-1; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1978); Himmet Umunc, "A hope so transcendent. The Arab revolt in the Great War and T.E. Lawrence," in *The Great War in the Middle East. A clash of empires*, Robert Johnson & James Kitchen (eds.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 189. For example: Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 17, 21.

55 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3. Also see: Stathis Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war* (Cambridge: Cambridge

in the number of civil wars since 1945.<sup>56</sup> Although different definitions of civil wars are in use<sup>57</sup>, these definitions usually include at least one ANSA fighting either authorities or other ANSAs.

Political scientist Shanna Kirschner counted 128 intra-state wars in which an ANSA challenged a state actor between 1945 and 2008<sup>58</sup>, while conflict researchers Lotta Harbom and Peter Wallensteen calculated 240 armed conflicts in the same timeframe.<sup>59</sup> However, the number of ethnically motivated rebellions since 1990 decreased as states increasingly assimilated minorities. The exception to that trend is the Middle East, where minorities increasingly rebelled against states.<sup>60</sup> The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research counted 177 violent crises in 2014, including one limited war, eleven inter-state crises, 21 wars, and 25 limited wars.<sup>61</sup>

The statistics above referred to wars between states and ANSAs, implicitly acknowledging IR's state-centeredness. Yet, ANSAs engage in armed conflict with other ANSAs. The Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset (ANARD) contains 2,489 militarized disputes in 468 dyadic rivalries between Middle Eastern and North African ANSAs from 1993 to 2018.<sup>62</sup> ANARD analysis indicated that 2014 was the year that most inter-ANSA conflicts started, probably due to the Arab Uprisings (2010-2012) followed by IS' rise.<sup>63</sup> Some conflicts continued over multiple years. Applying this criterium, 2014 is the culmination point, again probably due to the Arab Uprisings and IS' rise.<sup>64</sup> Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre recorded 20,311 attacks by ANSAs in 2014, of which 51.2 percent occurred in Iraq and Syria. IS was the most active ANSA, with more than 2,000 attributed attacks.<sup>65</sup> IS activities might explain why, regarding IS, academic attention has focused primarily on the struggle against IS.<sup>66</sup>

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University Press, 2006), 53; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 57; Petraeus & Roberts, *Conflict*, 3.

56 Lawrence Freedman, *The future of war. A history* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), xiv; Heuser, *War*, 63.

57 Freedman, *The future of war*, xviii.

58 Shanna Kirschner, *Trust and fear in civil wars. Ending intrastate conflicts* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 34.

59 Lotta Harbom & Peter Wallensteen, "Armed conflicts, 1946-2008," *Journal of Peace Research* 46:4 (2009), 577. The criterium for armed conflict Harbom and Wallensteen used was at least 25 deaths in at least one year.

60 Lars-Erik Cederman, "Blood for soil. The fatal temptations of ethnic politics," *Foreign Affairs* 98:2 (2019), 62. Also see: Ted Gurr, "Ethnic warfare on the wane," *Foreign Affairs* 79:3 (2000), 53; Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 433.

61 "Conflict barometer 2014" (Heidelberg: *Institute for International Conflict Research*, 2015); "Conflict barometer 2014" (Heidelberg: Institute for International Conflict Research, 2015); Speller, "Introduction," 6.

62 Stephen Powell, "The ANARD blog," *The ANARD blog*, accessed December 17, 2022; Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 177-9.

63 Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 186-7.

64 *Ibid.*, 187. This study's case studies resemble eight different cases within the ANARD.

65 "JTIC yearly data shows intensification of key insurgencies across 2014," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, January 20, 2015. Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) was the second most active (539 attacks), followed by Afghan Taliban (460 attacks), Communist Party of India – Maoist (358 attacks), and Syrian-Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (331 attacks; YPG, People's Defense Corps).

66 Burak Kadercan, "This is what ISIS' rise means for the 'Kurdish Question.'" *The National Interest*, September 9, 2015. Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 461-90; Eitan Shamir, "Deterring violent non-state actors," in *Netherlands annual review of military studies 2020. Deterrence in the 21st century – insights from theory and practice*, Frans Osinga & Tim Sweijts (eds.) (The Hague: Asser Press, 2021), 263-86.

Nevertheless – perhaps as part of the struggle – some scholars wondered how to analyze ANSAs like IS.

### 1.2.1.3 *Insufficient paradigms*

Historian Jeremy Black studied IR from the fifteenth century onwards<sup>67</sup> and stated that ‘it is far from clear that effective governance can be organized in alternative forms to that of the conventional state. [...] the state remains the key player in international and domestic politics, as well as a vital source for identity.’<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, tensions between different ethnicities in the Middle East since 2003 made Black doubt whether existing geopolitical theories remained valid.<sup>69</sup>

Kurdish studies researcher Michael Gunter expressed similar doubts as Black, whether the traditional paradigms for analyzing foreign policy – assuming it to be the monopoly of states – still sufficed after the rise of IS and the KRI in 2014.<sup>70</sup> In particular, some analysts regarded IS as ‘a unique and important case study through which to examine the achievements of a militant organization in an extremely competitive environment.’<sup>71</sup> Gunter suggested developing ‘a new paradigm to classify and understand the changing geopolitical reality of the Middle East.’<sup>72</sup>

Others claimed that ‘ISIS has established itself as a new paradigm’ by its brutal behavior<sup>73</sup>, urged ‘to update the dominant paradigms of security’ by adopting insights from other disciplines<sup>74</sup>, questioned the ‘state paradigm’<sup>75</sup> in general as they assumed several non-state actors to hold power, or wondered whether existing Western-centric IR paradigms applied to other contexts.<sup>76</sup>

During the 1960s, Allison observed three foreign policy analysis paradigms in IR. Allison’s research became one of the most influential in the field of IR, and together with his later co-

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67 Black, *Geopolitics*, 278.

68 *Ibid.*, 272. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 138.

69 *Ibid.*, 243-4.

70 Michael Gunter, “The Kurds in the changing political map of the Middle East,” *Kurdish Studies* 3:1 (2015), 78.

71 Daniel Milton, “Structure of a state. Captured documents and the Islamic State’s organizational structure,” (West Point: *Combating Terrorism Center*, 2021), 1.

72 Gunter, “The Kurds in the changing political map,” 78. Also see: Black, *Geopolitics*, 243; Gareth Stansfield, “The unravelling of the post-First World War state system? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the transformation of the Middle East,” *International Affairs* 89:2 (2013), 259-82.

73 Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS. The state of terror* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2015), 235. Also see: Brian Jenkins, “ISIS’s calculated barbarity,” *RAND*, February 10, 2015.

74 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 204.

75 Bremmer, “The technopolar moment,” 121-2. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 204.

76 Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 344. Also see: Jeremy Black, “Strategic practice, an introduction,” in *The practice of strategy. A global history*, Jeremy Black (ed.) (Società Italiana di Storia Militare, 2024), 13.

author Philip Zelikow, Allison claimed that the three paradigms are applicable in contexts other than state-level decision-making:

‘the Rational Actor, Organizational Behavior, and Governmental Politics models can be applied beyond foreign policy to the domestic policy of national governments; state and local governments; nongovernmental organizations like the United Nations or Red Cross; schools, universities, and hospitals; business enterprises; and other aggregate actors whom one encounters in normal, everyday life.’<sup>77</sup>

The quote suggests that the paradigms mentioned are appropriate for ANSAs too. That implies that the paradigms can explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI. It also means that no new paradigms are needed, as suggested by Black and Gunter.

Existing IR literature has addressed strategic decision-making. This includes critical scholarship, which emphasizes eclectic theorizing to shed light on the complexity of strategic decision-making<sup>78</sup>; behavioralist scholarship, focusing on the implications of leaders for unit-level action<sup>79</sup>; comparativist scholarship, emphasizing the structure of governing mechanisms for unit-level action<sup>80</sup>; and, schools of institutionalism, especially historical institutionalism, focusing on path dependence, lock-in, and positive and negative feedback mechanisms<sup>81</sup>, and sociological institutionalism, focusing on legitimacy.<sup>82</sup> In general, though, these studies have remained state-centric. When addressing non-state actors, it typically concerned supra-state actors. This urges for academic attention to ANSAs and whether existing IR paradigms suffice.

Embracing the suggestions by Baumann and Stengel to explore how non-state actors make decisions and whether existing paradigms suffice<sup>83</sup>, this study aims to explain the strategic decision-making of both IS and the KRI in 2014 by applying the different foreign policy paradigms. As such, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of ANSAs’

77 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 7.

78 For example: Fred Chernoff *et al.*, “Analytic eclecticism and International Relations. Promises and pitfalls,” *International Journal* 75:3 (2020), 383-91; Amandine Orsini *et al.*, “Forum. Complex systems and international governance,” *International Studies Review* 22:4 (2020), 1,008-38.

79 For example: James Davis, “Better than a bet. Good reasons for behavioral and rational choice assumptions in IR theory,” *European Journal of International Relations* 29:2 (2023), 476-500.

80 For example: Charles Lees, “We are all comparativists now. Why and how single-country scholarship must adapt and incorporate the comparative politics approach,” *Comparative Political Studies* 39:9 (2006), 1084-108.

81 For example: Stephanie Hofmann & Andrew Yeo, “Historical institutionalism and institutional design. Divergent pathways to regime complexes in Asia and Europe,” *European Journal of International Relations* 30:2 (2023), 306-32; Peter Tangney, “Path contingency. Advancing a spatial-institutionalist perspective on decision pathways for disaster risk governance,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 59:1 (2024), 37-54.

82 For example: Mike Zapp, “The authority of science and the legitimacy of international organisations. OECD, UNESCO and World Bank in global education governance,” *Compare. A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 51:7 (2021), 1022-41.

83 Baumann & Stengel, “Foreign policy analysis,” 511-2.

strategic decision-making. This study also uses the foreign policy paradigms in a non-state and non-Western setting, thus examining whether the claim by Allison and Zelikow of the applicability of the foreign policy paradigms beyond state decision-making is correct or that a new paradigm is needed.

## 1.2.2 Societal relevance: ANSAs in international relations

### 1.2.2.1 *Intra-state conflict*

Whereas intra-state conflict historically happened more often, lasted longer, and proved more destructive than inter-state conflicts<sup>84</sup>, practitioners of international relations remained state-centric, like the analysts of IR. A better understanding of ANSAs' strategic decision-making during conflicts in which they are involved could potentially contribute to avoiding intra-state conflicts, shorten them, or make them less destructive.<sup>85</sup> A better understanding could help international relations practitioners anticipate ANSAs' actions and decisions, yet 'conflict regulation has mostly focused on the obligations of states and less on how non-state actors ought to behave.'<sup>86</sup>

Political commentator Moisés Naím observed a decrease of power among traditional actors since the nineteenth century with a culmination point after the Cold War.<sup>87</sup> Instead, Naím observed so-called micro-powers emerging: benefitting from ongoing availability of transportation and communication means, 'small, unknown, or once-negligible actors that have found ways to undermine, fence in, or thwart the mega-players, the large bureaucratic organizations that previously controlled their fields.'<sup>88</sup> Fragmentation of power occurred in numerous fields, including international relations.<sup>89</sup>

Writing in 2015, but without mentioning a timeframe, a similar tendency was observed by Aydinli, who described a transfer of power from states to non-states in which states will eventually lose their predominance within contemporary international relations: a 'shift in the power of polities [...] from statehood to nonstatehood, or from the predominance of the state as the primary pillar to which international relations has been both practically and conceptually

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84 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3; Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 53; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 57.

85 Cf. Jonathan Powell, *Talking to terrorists. How to end armed conflicts* (London: Vintage, 2014), 15-41.

86 Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 432.

87 Naím, *The end of power*, 5-15. Also see: Prantl & Goh, "Rethinking strategy and statecraft," 443-4; Hew Strachan, *The direction of war. Contemporary strategy in historical perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 42-3.

88 *Ibid.*, 51. Also see: Ghassan Charbel, "We live in an age when small armies make large changes," transl. Middle East Media Research Institute, *Al-Hayat*, November 12, 2014; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, xi-xii.

89 *Ibid.*, 97. Also see: Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 82.

bound, to the rising importance and centrality of nonstate actors and transnational relations.<sup>90</sup> Aydinli added that '[n]ot only are the numbers and types of actors proliferating beyond states, but, with these new actors' increasing involvement in transnational politics, most of the principal traditional concepts and patterns of relations can no longer be counted on as building blocks for scholarly enquiry or speculation.'<sup>91</sup>

The findings of Naím and Aydinli are reminiscent of IR researcher Hedley Bull's new mediaevalism. Originally writing during the Cold War, Bull explored alternative paths to world order, starting from the great powers' 'managerial functions in international society.'<sup>92</sup> One of the alternatives Bull foresaw was new mediaevalism, 'a return to the mediaeval model [...]: a system of overlapping authority and multiple loyalty.'<sup>93</sup> At the time of writing, Bull observed no indications leading to a new mediaevalism, such as the transfer of power from states to regional entities, disintegration of states, violence by organizations other than the state, rise of transnational organizations, or technological unification.<sup>94</sup>

Inspired by Bull, IR researcher Seyom Brown did observe indicators in post-Cold War international relations though: 'a highly interactive and interdependent, yet decentralized, system of many kinds of actors, large and small, state and non-state.'<sup>95</sup> Brown recognized this was partly because of domestic reluctance to commit to maintaining international order in the United States, international relations' sole superpower since the end of the Cold War.<sup>96</sup> It had led to a 'relative rise in power of the non-state actors'<sup>97</sup> away from nation-states, particularly in the Middle East during the 2000s and 2010s.<sup>98</sup> While the KRI had benefitted from the American-led intervention in Iraq in 2003, IS, in particular, benefitted from the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq in 2011, allowing IS' predecessors to create an actual power base

90 Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics," 424. Also see: Michael Gunter, "The foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurds," *Journal of South Asia and Middle Eastern Studies* xx:3 (1997), 1; Naím, *The end of power*, 51.

91 *Ibid.*, 425.

92 Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society. A study of order in World Politics* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 221. Also see: Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 167, 311-2.

93 *Ibid.*, 245. Also see: Seyom Brown, "Purposes and pitfalls of war by proxy. A systemic analysis," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27:2 (2016), 245. Acknowledging Bull's Western-centric approach, this study maintains the term new mediaevalism as an indication of an environment.

94 *Ibid.*, 254-66. Also see: Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 939.

95 Brown, "Purposes and pitfalls," 244.

96 *Ibid.*, 243. Also see: Jo Bekkevold, "No, the world is not multipolar. The idea of emerging power centers is popular but wrong and could lead to serious policy mistakes," *Foreign Policy*, September 23, 2023.

97 *Ibid.*, 244.

98 *Ibid.*, 255.

in Iraq's Nineveh governate.<sup>99</sup> Brown worried especially about non-state actors increasingly gaining fighting capacity.<sup>100</sup>

The fighting capacity of IS and the Kurds in Iraq and Syria led to their battlefield successes in 2014.<sup>101</sup> Editor-in-chief of London-based *Al Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper Ghassan Charbel agreed, observing in 2014 that actors with 'small armies had taken over control in Iraq and Syria'<sup>102</sup> and caused a new dynamic in which regional state actors seemed to feel – or did feel – threatened by these ANSAs or the effects they might have.<sup>103</sup>

The potential to use violence creates leverage for ANSAs compared to non-state actors without such capacity.<sup>104</sup> In a zero-sum situation, the increasing influence of ANSAs implies state actors' power loss. By their mere presence, ANSAs challenge the idea that '[n]on-state actors can only flourish within a relatively peaceful and stable international system, with an underlying consensus about the rules of international interaction and the legitimacy of the state units.'<sup>105</sup> Specifically, within the Middle East, 'the capacity of central governments [...] and their monopoly on violence and territorial control was damaged by the rise of armed insurgent groups.'<sup>106</sup>

### 1.2.2.2 ANSA presence

IR researcher Ulrich Schneckener claimed that 'ANSAs can be seen as classical spoilers or trouble-makers for state-building and peacebuilding efforts, meaning the strengthening, reform or reconstruction of state structures and institutions. They have hardly any interest in consolidated statehood since this would inevitably challenge their position.'<sup>107</sup> However, one could argue that

99 Fishman, *The master plan*, 143-4; Kiras, "Key concepts," 302; Stephen Renner, "Air power in the Battle of Mosul," in *Air power in the age of primacy. Air power since the Cold War*, Phil Haun et al. (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 259. Also see: Abdullah al-Ghadhawi, "'Revenge for the two sheikhs'. ISIS renews itself in the Syrian desert," *New Lines Institute*, August 8, 2022.

100 Brown, "Purposes and pitfalls," 245-6.

101 Michael Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds. Geostrategic concerns for the U.S. and Turkey," *Middle East Policy* 22:1 (2015), 102. Also see: Simon & Weinstein, "Iraq as it is."

102 Charbel, "We live in an age."

103 For example: Henri Barkey, "What's behind Turkey's u-turn on the Islamic State?" *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2015; Jonathan Eyal & Elizabeth Quintana, "Editor's notes," in *Inherently unresolved. Regional politics and the counter-ISIS campaign*, Jonathan Eyal & Elizabeth Quintana (eds.) (London: RUSI, 2015), v; "Oil sales obstacles likely to undermine Kurdish ambitions to declare independence from Iraq in one-year outlook," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, August 14, 2014.

104 Cf. Jeffrey Mazo, "The pope's divisions," *Survival* 57:4 (2015), 203.

105 Daphné Josselin & William Wallace, "Non-state actors in IR. A framework," in *Non-state actors in IR*, Daphné Josselin & William Wallace (eds.) (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 4.

106 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Foreign policy in the Middle East," in *The foreign policies of Middle East states*, 2nd ed., Raymond Hinnebusch & Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.) (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2014), 26.

107 Ulrich Schneckener, "Fragile statehood, armed non-state actors and security governance," in *Private Actors and Security Governance*, Alan Bryden & Marina Caparini (eds.) (Berlin: Berlin Lit-Verlag, 2006), 35.

IS and the KRI pursued ‘consolidated statehood,’ which concerned a position within a territory and towards the external world. As such, these ANSAs pursued foreign policies.<sup>108</sup> Foreign policies meant these ANSAs had regional relevance. Analysts had to include the ANSAs in political analyses and policy recommendations concerning the Middle East. Although sometimes argued differently<sup>109</sup>, IS and the KRI acted independently because they pursued their interests.<sup>110</sup> In doing so, they sometimes worked in alliances or operated as proxies.<sup>111</sup>

IS and the KRI were two relatively new regional actors that starred in a conflict that gained global attention in 2014.<sup>112</sup> Arguably, in 2014, both had the potential to remain.<sup>113</sup> IS researchers Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan claimed ‘[t]he army of terror [IS] will be with us indefinitely.’<sup>114</sup> IS researcher Daniel Milton argued that IS was ‘[a] group that was able to construct such a comprehensive approach to fighting and governance,’ thus ‘unlikely to wither away absent sustained and targeted efforts to continue to undermine its organizational structure.’<sup>115</sup> While forced back between 2015 and 2017, from the late 2010s onwards, analysts concluded that IS might return<sup>116</sup>, ‘remain’<sup>117</sup>, or already ‘is back.’<sup>118</sup> IS reemerged in Syria at the end of 2019, when it increased its attacks there, including using sleeper cells and later benefitting from removing Russian forces since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>119</sup> Iraq remained IS’ main area of operations in 2022. Since then, IS became less active there. Iraq no longer was its main area of operations.<sup>120</sup> Authorities and militias in Iraq seemed capable of containing IS.<sup>121</sup> Despite ongoing

108 Gunter, “The foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurds,” 1. Also see: Brown, “Purposes and pitfalls,” 244-5.

109 Charles Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State” (Doha: *Brookings*, 2014), 20.

110 Gunter, “The foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurds,” 1. Also see: Lionel Beehner, “How proxy wars work. And what that means for ending the conflict in Syria,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 12, 2015; Barbara Elias, “Local partners are not proxies. The case for rethinking proxy war,” *Irregular Warfare Initiative*, April 20, 2023.

111 Cf. Elias, “Local partners are not proxies”; Idean Salehyan, “The delegation of war to rebel organizations,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54:493 (2010), 494.

112 Gunter, “The Kurds in the changing political map,” 78.

113 Cf. Christian Caryl, “The world’s next country,” *Foreign Policy*, January 21, 2015; Stephen Walt, “What should we do if the Islamic State wins? Live with it,” *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2015.

114 Michael Weiss & Hassan Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the army of terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), 242.

115 Milton, “Structure of a state,” v. Cf. James Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” in *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed., David Jordan *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 357; James Kiras, “The historical practice of irregular warfare,” in *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed., David Jordan *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 322.

116 Omar Ashour, *How ISIS fights. Military tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 66; Jennifer Cafarella *et al.*, “ISIS’s second comeback. Assessing the next ISIS insurgency” (Washington D.C.: *Institute for the Study of War*, 2019); Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 252; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 5, 240; Hassan Hassan, “Out of the desert. ISIS’s strategy for a long war,” *Middle East Institute*, September 6, 2018.

117 Fishman, *The master plan*, 259. Cf. John Lynn, *Battle. A history of combat and culture* (Cambridge: Westview, 2004), 357.

118 Bernard-Henri Levy, “ISIS stages a comeback in Iraq,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 2022.

119 Ghadhawi, “Revenge for the two sheikhs.”

120 Kamaran Palani, “The low likelihood of ISIS resurgence in Iraq.” (The Hague: *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 2024), 2.

121 Ghadhawi, “Revenge for the two sheikhs.”

tensions with Iraqi leaders, the KRI, since the conflict with IS, remained involved in fighting IS with the help of Western partners.

### 1.2.2.3 Labeling

Some scholars argued that ANSAs ‘are more unpredictable and volatile’ than state actors.<sup>122</sup> ANSAs appeared as irrational, unpredictable, and cruel actors.<sup>123</sup> In particular, IS was labeled as such<sup>124</sup>, illustrated by remarks like ‘ISIS’s reign of terror’<sup>125</sup> and suggestive book titles such as *ISIS. The state of terror*<sup>126</sup>, or *ISIS. Inside the army of terror*.<sup>127</sup> Beyond the cruelties that IS committed, IS also built strategic alliances and conducted complex military operations.<sup>128</sup> IS applied terror as a tactic within a larger insurgency also involving conventional warfare against superior military strength.<sup>129</sup>

Applying brutal tactics does not exclude a rational strategic decision-making process.<sup>130</sup> IS’ violence ‘was largely sanctioned and controlled at every level (when and where possible)’<sup>131</sup>, indicating an actual decision-making process: ‘ISIS beheadings of captured Western hostages in 2014 served a variety of organizational purposes, including expanding the conflict by provoking the West to respond with airstrikes; elevating the stature of the group from a perceived minor to a major threat; and horrifying a variety of audiences and bolstering the morale of others.’<sup>132</sup> On the other hand, as argued by IS researcher Craig Noyes, IS’ ‘decision-making is opportunistic, adaptive, and dependent upon its leaderships’ shifting propensity to implement its ideology.

122 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3. Also see: Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 341-2.

123 Cf. Beatrice de Graaf, “Terrorists as monsters. The unmanageable other from the French Revolution to the Islamic State.” *Perspectives on Politics* 19:2 (2021), 692. Also see: Coggins, “Rebel diplomacy,” 105.

124 Chigudu, “Sectarianism and the ideology of the Islamic State,” 5,148.

125 Sami Moubayed, *Under the black flag. An exclusive insight into the inner workings of ISIS* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), xii.

126 Stern & Berger, *ISIS*.

127 Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*.

128 Haroro Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader. Milestone texts of the Islamic State movement* (London: Hurst, 2020), 7, 37, 125; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 7; Milton, “Structure of a state,” 1; Craig Noyes, “Pragmatic takfris. Organizational prioritization along Islamic State’s ideological threshold,” *Small Wars Journal*, July 26, 2016. Also see: Jacob Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma. Managing violent covert organizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 19-20.

129 Cf. Luttwak, *Strategy*, 153. For example: “Ruining and destroying enemy possessions,” *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi. Also see: Audrey Kurth Cronin, “ISIS is not a terrorist group. Why counterterrorism won’t stop the latest jihadist threat,” *Foreign Affairs* 94:2 (2015), 87-98.

130 Cronin, “ISIS is not a terrorist group,” 92; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 27, 37, 91; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 7, 51; Jenkins, “ISIS’s calculated barbarity.” Also see: Pravda Parakkal, “Islamic State burns Jordanian hostage alive in retaliation for airstrikes,” *Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, February 4, 2015. For example: “A message from Sotloff,” *Dabiq* 4 (1435H|2014), 47-51; John Cantlie, “Hard talk. The real story behind my videos,” *Dabiq* 4 (1435H|2014), 52-5; “The burning of the murtadd pilot,” *Dabiq* 7 (1436H |2015), 6-7.

131 Craig Whiteside *et al.*, “The ISIS files – The Islamic State’s department of soldiers” (Washington D.C.: *George Washington University Program on Extremism*, 2021), 5.

132 Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 361-2.

[...] Islamic State's actions depend primarily on the ideological prioritization of a topic and decisions' opportunity costs vis-à-vis the organization's strength.<sup>133</sup> While unsanctioned violence occurred, making violence occasionally 'reactionary and vengeful, not purposeful'<sup>134</sup>, understanding ANSAs' strategic decision-making potentially enables international relations practitioners' options to engage with ANSAs in order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.<sup>135</sup>

### 1.3 Research question

The main research question of this study is:

*How to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during three key events in their mutual conflict in 2014?*

Although not mentioned explicitly in the research question above, this study addresses the research question from an IR perspective. Implicitly, the research question acknowledges that there might be other ways to explain ANSA strategic decision-making, beyond the IR approach of this study. Avoiding semantic debate, the research question is kept as straightforward as possible.

The Arab Uprisings undermined governments' authority and caused turmoil in the Middle East. New non-state entities emerged, and two fierce rivals benefitted most from that situation: IS and the Kurds.<sup>136</sup> IS forced ISF to withdraw from northern Iraq in early June 2014. IS forces and the KRI's *peshmerga*-militia filled the void that ISF had left behind. IS took control over Mosul; the KRI took control over Kirkuk, including its surrounding areas and parts of the countryside near Mosul.<sup>137</sup> After capturing Mosul in June 2014, IS' main thrust seemed to advance towards Iraq's capital, Baghdad. On August 1, 2014, IS attacked the KRI, though.<sup>138</sup> While already fighting Shia-dominated ISF, the Sunni militant organization IS unexpectedly advanced towards the KRI's capital, Erbil, and the vicinity of Mount Sinjar. With foreign

133 Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris."

134 Fishman, *The master plan*, 109.

135 Coggins, "Rebel diplomacy," 98.

136 Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 102; Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 65,78. Cf. Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS. A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 20; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 1. For the Arab Uprisings, see: Jasmine Gani, "From discourse to practice. Orientalism, Western policy and the Arab uprisings," *International Affairs* 98:1 (2022), 45-65. Gunter included both Iraqi and Syrian Kurds as benefitting from the new situation.

137 Gareth Stansfield, "The Islamic State, the Kurdistan Region and the future of Iraq. Assessing UK policy options," *International Affairs* 90:6 (2014), 1,334. Also see: Sirwan Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan. The Peshmerga before, during, and after ISIS," in *Iraqi Kurdistan Region. A path forward*, Sasha Toperich *et al.* (eds.) (Washington, D.C.: *Center for Transatlantic Relations*, 2017), 23. *Peshmerga* (those who face death) is the common name for the Iraqi Kurdish militia.

138 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,337.

military support, the KRI could withstand and eventually push back IS. The KRI later sent *peshmerga* to help relieve the IS-besieged Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani in October 2014. Against an ultimately overwhelming force, IS continued to besiege Kobani<sup>139</sup>, until Syrian Kurdish forces liberated the town on January 25, 2015.

IS and the KRI not only challenged states, but they behaved as states. Both controlled a territory and exercised a monopoly of violence. They joined alliances, collected taxes, and conducted warfare as part of what seemed a foreign policy.<sup>140</sup> Both took strategic decisions as states would. Much literature on these ANSAs considered their strategies as given<sup>141</sup>, without considering how they made their decisions. This qualitative study describes and explains how IS and the KRI conducted strategic decision-making in northern Iraq in 2014.

This study addresses the central question during three key events during 2014 that involved both IS and the KRI: (1) filling the power vacuum after ISF had left northern Iraq in June 2014; (2) the battle for the KRI in August 2014; and, (3) the siege of Kobani in October 2014-January 2015.<sup>142</sup> The first key event concerns the strategic decisions of both ISIS – IS' predecessor – and the KRI to fill the power vacuum in northern Iraq after ISF had withdrawn from the area in June 2014. Although skirmishes occurred between ISIS and the KRI, they were not entirely in conflict with each other then. That changed with the second key event. In August 2014, IS took the strategic decision to advance into the KRI, and the KRI took the strategic decision to defend its territory, which it did successfully. The third key event happened after the KRI was able to withstand the threat of IS when the KRI took the strategic decision to support besieged Syrian Kurdish fighters in the Syrian town of Kobani in October 2014. Earlier, IS had taken the strategic decision to attack Kobani. When the odds turned against IS, it decided to continue the attack.

This study identifies three key events due to their impact on the IS and the KRI conflict. Within the conflict, these events were the main theatres of combat.<sup>143</sup> Within international relations, the key events triggered strategic decisions by other actors, usually aimed against IS

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139 Kyle Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, October 19, 2018.

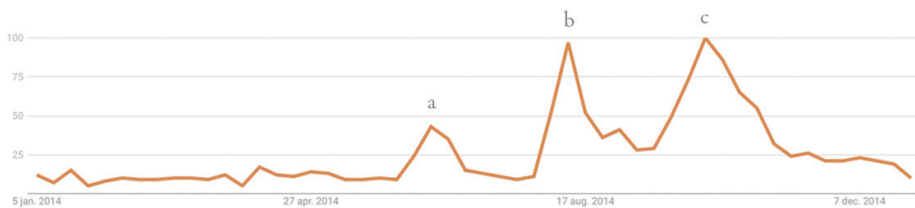
140 Florea, "Rebel governance," 1,007-8.

141 For example: Bahney & Johnston, "Who runs the Islamic State group?"; Carmon *et al.*, "Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi"; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 28, 233.

142 Ali Qaraman, "The representation of Kurds in the Islamic State's media: 'Dabiq' magazine as an example," transl. Shkow Sherzad (Suleimaniyah: *Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center*, 2018), 11; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 1. Qaraman included key events 2 and 3. Sadoon focused on event 2.

143 Cf. Carl von Clausewitz, *On war*, transl. Michael Howard & Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976 [1834]), 566-73; David Jordan, "Concepts and characteristics of air and space warfare," in *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed., David Jordan *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 231-43. Also see: Sara Mustafa, "Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum. Political parties, opportunity and timing," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 48:5 (2021), 891.

or in support of the KRI.<sup>144</sup> Global internet searches indicated the three events, as illustrated in graph 1.1. The graph shows Google internet searches for the combination of the terms ‘ISIS’ and ‘Kurds’ in percentages of the maximum attention during 2014.<sup>145</sup> It shows three peaks. Peak ‘a’ covers June 15-21, 2014, corresponding with the vacuum filling in northern Iraq by IS and the KRI; peak ‘b’ covers August 10-16, 2014, corresponding with the battle for the KRI; peak ‘c’ covers October 5-11, 2014, corresponding with the start of the siege of Kobani, which was ‘of critical importance in the conflict.’<sup>146</sup>



**Graph 1.1:** global internet searches for the combination of ‘ISIS’ and ‘Kurds’ during 2014. Peak ‘a’ covers June 15-21, 2014, peak ‘b’ covers August 10-16, 2014, and peak ‘c’ October 5-11, 2014.<sup>147</sup>

This study analyzes strategic decision-making regarding the three key events based on literature research using primary and secondary sources with additional interviews. The study emphasizes IS’ strategic decision-making, applying a structured, focused comparison method<sup>148</sup> and addressing the KRI’s strategic decision-making. In that perspective, the study is descriptive and explanatory: the analyst must first identify strategic decision-making to explain strategic decision-making. Therefore, it is essential first to address which strategic decisions IS and the KRI took before and during the three key events in 2014. As this study aims to contribute to the knowledge of strategic decision-making among ANSAs in a Middle Eastern context by applying different analytical paradigms, the study addresses different sub-questions for each model. The following section deals with these sub-questions.

144 For example: “About us. The global coalition to defeat IS,” *United States Department of State*, accessed November 26, 2022; Patrick Cammaert *et al.*, “Rapport,” *Commissie van onderzoek NLA-programma in Syrië*, December 2022, 23; David Hudson, “President Obama makes a statement on the crisis in Iraq,” *The White House – President Barack Obama*, August 7, 2014; “Resolution 2169,” *United Nations Security Council*, July 30, 2014.

145 Google Trends, accessed February 8, 2020.

146 Cengiz Gunes, “The IS Factor. The Kurds as a vanguard in the war on the caliphate,” in *Kurdistan. An invisible nation*, Stefano Torelli (ed.) (Milan: ISPI, 2016), 78; Mari Toivanen, *The Kobane generation. Kurdish diaspora mobilizing in France* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021), 3-5.

147 Google Trends.

148 George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 67-72.

The strategic decisions within international relations triggered by the key events indicate that these events did not occur in a vacuum; other regional and global actors besides IS and the KRI were involved.<sup>149</sup> Examples included the Iraqi and Syrian states, other ANSAs, the United States, Turkey, and Iran. When applicable, the study refers to external actors. The focus of this study remains on IS and the KRI, realizing that the paradigms applied for the analyses concern simplifications of reality.<sup>150</sup>

### 1.3.1 Sub-questions: four paradigms

Three mainstream conceptual models – or paradigms – for analyzing strategic decision-making provide the analytical frameworks in this study. The first model is the rational actor paradigm, which assumes actors behave as calculating, unitary entities. The second model is the organizational behavior paradigm, which assumes bureaucratic routines and standard operating procedures lead to strategic decisions. The third model concerns the governmental politics paradigm, which assumes power games occur among individual decision-makers.<sup>151</sup> These paradigms focus on different actors and factors, therefore asking other questions, which this section addresses below.

The paradigms seem to complement one another.<sup>152</sup> The complementing paradigms suggest that a merger has more explanatory power than the separate paradigms.<sup>153</sup> While combining the paradigms is an interesting avenue, this study applies complexity theory as a fourth analytical framework. Complexity theory acknowledges conflicts' multi-causal and multi-directional dynamics to provide explanations<sup>154</sup> and implicitly incorporates relevant elements of the other paradigms. The following sections address the sub-questions that belong to each of the paradigms. Chapter 3 later elaborates on the paradigms and the sub-questions for operationalizing.

#### 1.3.1.1 Rational actor paradigm

Applying the rational actor paradigm – assuming strategic decision-making as the result of cost-benefit calculations by unitary actors – involves the sub-questions below:

1. What are the objective (or perceived) circumstances that IS and the KRI conceive as threats and opportunities during each key event?
2. What are IS' and the KRI's goals during each key event?

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149 Cf. Cammaert *et al.*, "Rapport," 23; Hudson, "President Obama"; "Resolution 2169."

150 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 8.

151 *Ibid.*

152 *Ibid.*, 392.

153 Tanter, "International system and foreign policy approaches," 12.

154 Cf. Kiras, "Key concepts," 307.

3. What are the objective (or perceived) options for addressing this issue?
4. What are the objective (or perceived) strategic costs and benefits for each option?
5. What are IS' and the KRI's best choices given these conditions?<sup>155</sup>

### ***1.3.1.2 Organizational behavior paradigm***

Applying the organizational behavior paradigm – assuming strategic decision-making as the outcome of bureaucratic processes of the relevant sub-organizations and focusing on standard operating procedures (SOPs) – involves the sub-questions below:

1. Of what organizations (and organizational components) do IS and the KRI consist during the key events?
2. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations' existing SOPs create in producing information about international conditions, threats, and opportunities during the key events?
3. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations' existing SOPs create in generating the menu of options for action during the key events?
4. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations' existing SOPs establish for implementing whatever is chosen during the key events?<sup>156</sup>

### ***1.3.1.3 Governmental politics paradigm***

Applying the governmental politics paradigm – assuming strategic decision-making as the outcome of crucial individuals bargaining to satisfy their interests – involves the sub-questions below:

1. Who plays? That is, whose views and values count in shaping the choice and action of IS and the KRI during the key events?
2. What factors shape each player's (a) perceptions; (b) preferred course of action; and thus (c) the player's stand on the issue?
3. What factors account for each player's impact on the choice and action?
4. What is the "action channel"? That is, the established process for aggregating competing perceptions, preferences, and stands of players in making decisions and taking action?<sup>157</sup>

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155 Cf. Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 389-90.

156 Cf. *Ibid.*, 390.

157 Cf. *Ibid.*, 390.

### 1.3.1.4 Complexity theory

This study addresses merging the abovementioned paradigms.<sup>158</sup> Existing research indicated that elements of different paradigms together provide better explanations and recognized multi-layered and multi-directional processes.<sup>159</sup> Although complexity theory emphasizes each case as unique in time, space, and context, these elements offer some form of structure and lead to the following sub-questions:

1. What time-specific actors and factors are relevant for IS' and the KRI's strategic decision-making during the key events?
2. What space-specific actors and factors are relevant?
3. What context-specific actors and factors are relevant?
4. Which multi-layered and multi-directional processes/links affect the outcome?

Complexity theory in this study is based on the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm. As such, complexity theory resembles constructivism and historical institutionalism, with their focus on perceptions, turning points, and pathways. Yet, complexity theory adopts a more eclectic, multidisciplinary, and self-reflective approach, beyond these phenomena.

Contrary to much quantitative research, qualitative research often does not explain the methodology used<sup>160</sup>; many analysts and policymakers 'think about problems of foreign and military policy in terms of largely implicit conceptual models.'<sup>161</sup> To test whether the paradigms described above apply to Middle Eastern ANSAs, this study uses them rigorously. The findings might lead to adjustments or additions to the paradigms.<sup>162</sup>

### 1.3.2 Claim to originality: apply and merge paradigms

The added value of this study concerns understanding how IS and the KRI made their strategic decisions within the context of their mutual conflict by applying and merging the abovementioned IR paradigms. Existing literature typically considered ANSAs' strategies as given, discussing what

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158 Cf. *Ibid.*, 392. For contrary views see: Guilhot, "The Kuhnian of reason," 6, 16.

159 Raymond Hinnebusch & Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Foreign policy making in the Middle East. Complex realism," in *International relations of the Middle East*, 4th ed., Louise Fawcett (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 258.

160 Michael Kenney, "Learning from the 'dark side.' Identifying, accessing and interviewing illicit non-state actors," in *Conducting terrorism field research. A guide*, Adam Dolnik (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 28.

161 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 3. Original in italics.

162 Cf. *Ibid.*, 7. Also see: Black, *Geopolitics*, 272; Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 78.

the strategies were<sup>163</sup> but hardly considering how they were decided on. Contrary to the rational actor paradigm, analysts hardly applied the organizational behavior and governmental politics paradigms to ANSAs in a Middle Eastern context<sup>164</sup> or to a conflict between two ANSAs.

The conflict between IS and the KRI was dynamic, with different stages of violence: skirmishes while sharing ISF as an adversary during taking over power in northern Iraq; conventional or regular type combat in combination with asymmetric tactics during the battle for the KRI; and proxy-type siege warfare during the siege of Kobanî. The different types of warfare that IS and the KRI conducted during 2014 indicated the complexity of these ANSAs.<sup>165</sup> Another dynamic concerned the dichotomy between existential wars of necessity versus non-existential wars of choice. The dichotomy indicates to what extent an actor is willing to commit. Whereas the KRI fought a war of necessity when IS attacked the KRI and a war of choice in Kobanî, the filling of the vacuum seemed somewhat in between; IS fought a war of necessity when it filled the vacuum and seemed to fight wars of choice when it attacked the KRI and Kobanî.<sup>166</sup> As wars of necessity are existential, the wars of choice are interesting from a strategic decision-making perspective: why risk people and resources in conflict, especially with an uncertain outcome against a peer or near-peer rival, as was the case between IS and the KRI.<sup>167</sup>

Asymmetries exist in every conflict.<sup>168</sup> That includes conflicts between ANSAs. Whereas IS was primarily religiously inspired, the KRI was predominantly nationalist inspired.<sup>169</sup> Other asymmetries might concern power, interests at stake, or technologies available.<sup>170</sup> Within IR, many studies involving ANSAs focus on asymmetric conflicts between states and ANSAs.<sup>171</sup> Still, ANSAs remain underexposed in academic research. In particular, this study aims to contribute to a ‘more systematic and analytically oriented study of violent groups in Iraq.’<sup>172</sup> A better scientific understanding of ANSAs’ strategic decision-making contributes to better practices regarding ANSAs in general.<sup>173</sup> Yet, this study’s external validity remains limited to the two cases under study. IS and the KRI benefitted from developments and opportunities within a specific context.

163 Cf. Bahney & Johnston, “Who runs the Islamic State group?”; Carmon *et al.*, “Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 28, 233.

164 For example: Beatrice de Graaf & Ahmet Yayla, “The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance. The Islamic State police” (Washington D.C.: *George Washington University Program on Extremism*, 2021).

165 Cf. Heuser, *War*, 25.

166 Cf. Luttwak, *Strategy*, 72-3. Also see: Stephen Biddle, “The determinants of nonstate military methods,” *The Pacific Review* 31:6 (2018), 725, 734; Heuser, *War*, 65, 263; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 6.

167 For example: Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,334-7. Also see: Fuad Hussein & Falah Bakir, “Iraq’s crisis and the KRG,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 11, 2014.

168 Haun, “Air power in the age of primacy,” 1; Speller, “Introduction,” 8-9; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 22.

169 Cf. Fukuyama, *Identity*, 74-5.

170 Cf. Haun, “Air power in the age of primacy,” 15-6. Also see: Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 358-65.

171 For example: Freedman, *Command*, 464.

172 Bakker, *Terrorism and counterterrorism studies*, 200.

173 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3.

## 1.4 Methodology

This study conducts a structured, focused comparison method.<sup>174</sup> The focus is IS' strategic decision-making, but the study also addresses the KRI's. The study bases analysis of the strategic decision-making leading to and during the key events on literature research, using primary and secondary sources with additional interviews.

Awareness of paradigms<sup>175</sup> next to a careful research design in advance and a well-documented methodological outlay should avoid the pitfall of not explaining the methodology.<sup>176</sup> This study is descriptive and explanatory. The descriptive part adds to a lack of knowledge regarding the conflict between IS and the KRI, hopefully enabling future explanatory research.<sup>177</sup> This paragraph on research methodology concerns designing research procedures that allow empirical observations that represent the key concepts.<sup>178</sup> Applying the paradigms that Allison observed to this descriptive framework will lead to the study's explanatory (or 'evaluative'<sup>179</sup>) part.

Important here is what constitutes a paradigm. Allison and Zelikow defined a paradigm as 'a systematic statement of the basic assumptions, concepts, and propositions employed by a school of analysis.'<sup>180</sup> Although paradigms are '[w]eaker than a satisfactory theoretical model'<sup>181</sup>, they improve previously used, implicit models.<sup>182</sup> However, paradigms 'have no explanatory or predictive power; they are neither testable nor falsifiable since no expectations or predictions follow directly from them.'<sup>183</sup> The lack of falsification implies operationalizing the three paradigms mentioned above is impossible. Each concerns a framework describing a general way of thinking, not a theory with independent and dependent variables. Valuable paradigms do contribute to developing sound theories, though.<sup>184</sup> Some authors described paradigms as summaries of a specific school of thought.<sup>185</sup> Referring to the study of IR, 'paradigms [...] meant that there was no need to feel sorry about the state of a discipline marred by fragmentation,

174 Cf. George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 67-72.

175 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 4.

176 Kenney, "Learning from the 'dark side,'" 28.

177 Cf. Earl Babbie, *The practice of social research* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1998), 91-2.

178 *Ibid.*, 139.

179 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 3n†.

180 *Ibid.*, 23n20, 114-115. Also see: Pijl, *Wereldorde en machtspolitiek*, 258.

181 *Ibid.*, 23.

182 David Welch, "The organizational process and bureaucratic politics paradigms. Retrospect and prospect," *International Security* 17:2 (1992), 115.

183 Brian Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack et al. (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 86.

184 Welch, "The organizational process," 116.

185 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 24.

but that there was no need either to relinquish pretensions to scientific rigour.<sup>186</sup> Academic disputes exist on whether paradigms consist subsequently<sup>187</sup> or simultaneously.<sup>188</sup>

Focusing on the paradigms themselves, this study conducts a congruence analysis, in which ‘the researcher uses the insights gained in the case study for the debate on the relevance of theoretical approaches in the scientific discourse.’<sup>189</sup> The case studies ‘provide empirical evidence for the explanatory relevance or relative strength of one theoretical approach in comparison to other theoretical approaches.’<sup>190</sup> Social scientists Joachim Blatter and Markus Haverland argued that a congruence analysis can be used either ‘as munitions in the struggle for hegemony between competing theories,’ or ‘as arguments for the adequacy and fruitfulness of new or marginalized theories or new combinations of theories.’<sup>191</sup> Whereas other researchers assumed successiveness of paradigms, arguing that, due to the different assumptions underlying the different models, there is ‘no rational ground for comparing paradigms’<sup>192</sup>, Allison and Zelikow argued that the paradigms they observed act complementary.<sup>193</sup> If that is correct, the paradigms can, or should, be combined into one larger model. Then, strictly speaking, congruence analysis does not apply, as the paradigms together constitute a single, larger model. Still, this study compares the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm, and complexity theory, acknowledging that the latter includes the other paradigms. Using complexity theory as a merger of the traditional IR paradigms forms the exploratory part of the study.

#### 1.4.1 Unit of analysis: strategic decision-making

The unit of analysis<sup>194</sup> in this study is strategic decision-making concerning foreign policy.<sup>195</sup> How that foreign policy was produced differs for each of the paradigms mentioned above. The rational actor paradigm views foreign policy as a choice made by a unitary actor<sup>196</sup>; the organizational behavior paradigm as the result of relevant organizations’ cultures, routines, and

186 Guilhot, “The Kuhning of reason,” 6.

187 *Ibid.*, 6.

188 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 392.

189 Joachim Blatter & Markus Haverland, *Designing case studies. Explanatory approaches in small-n research* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 31.

190 *Ibid.*, 144.

191 *Ibid.*, 197.

192 Guilhot, “The Kuhning of reason,” 6, 16.

193 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 392.

194 Babbie, *The practice of social research*, 93. Also see: Tyson Chatagnier *et al.*, “The decision calculus of terrorist leaders,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6:4-5 (2012), 125.

195 Cf. Hans Mouritzen, “Kenneth Waltz. A critical rationalist between international politics and foreign policy,” in *The future of international relations. Masters in the making?* Iver Neumann & Ole Wæver (eds.), 66-89 (London: Routledge, 1997).

196 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 24.

procedures<sup>197</sup>; and the governmental politics paradigm considers foreign policy as the outcome of bargaining among the key decision makers.<sup>198</sup> Complexity theory views foreign policy as the outcome of multiple interacting processes on different levels, including feedback loops.<sup>199</sup>

The data for the analyses are the actors' 'intentions, statements, and actions [...] directed toward the external world and the response of other actors to these intentions, statements and actions.'<sup>200</sup> Compared to most state actors, the challenge with most non-state actors is that data is not always available. States usually have some form of accountability that non-state actors lack.<sup>201</sup> Despite its inherent ideological hostility towards outsiders<sup>202</sup>, many different sources of information on IS are available, ranging from former members to captured documents, which are being translated into English and become known as open-source documents. Despite being considered a de facto state<sup>203</sup>, primary sources in English regarding the KRI's strategic decision-making concerning the conflict with IS are less available.

#### 1.4.2 Sources: focus on primary sources

This study explores primary, secondary, and tertiary sources to identify what happened, to map the relevant sub-organizations and decision-makers within IS and the KRI, and which strategic decisions IS and the KRI made.

##### 1.4.2.1 Documents

Content analysis<sup>204</sup> of primary sources avoids using secondary sources, which sometimes prove incorrect.<sup>205</sup> Scholars observed that non-state actors are more challenging to analyze than state actors, as most non-state actors are not obligated to make all key documents publicly available. Furthermore, non-state actors often change messages, tone, or both, depending on

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197 *Ibid.*, 164.

198 *Ibid.*, 294.

199 Cf. Bernard Burnes, "Complexity theories and organizational change," *International Journal of Management Reviews* 7:2 (2005), 74; David Byrne & Gill Callaghan, *Complexity theory and the social sciences. The state of the art* (London: Routledge, 2014), 22, 62, 128-49; John Holland, *Complexity. A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3; Deborah Stone, *Policy paradox. The art of political decision making* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 97.

200 Gerner, "The evolution of the study of foreign policy," 18.

201 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 492, 502-3.

202 Cf. Michael Knights, "Conducting field research on terrorism in Iraq," in *Conducting terrorism field research. A guide*, Adam Dolnik (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 119.

203 For example: Kamaran Palani *et al.* "De facto states engagement with parent states. Kurdistan's engagement with the Iraqi Government," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48:4 (2021), 770-1n1-2; "Kurdish peshmerga. Divided from within," *Harvard Politics*, September 5, 2015; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 1-2.

204 Qaraman, "The representation of Kurds," 11.

205 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 5.

their audience, creating inconsistencies in external statements.<sup>206</sup> Usually, non-state actors have less presence in media than state actors. Although non-state actors increasingly seek attention via (social) media, ANSAs' 'very functioning depends on secrecy.'<sup>207</sup>

IS proved different, though. It quite capably managed its presence in social media, using shocking images to address an audience of young people.<sup>208</sup> Following the example of other ANSAs, including *al-Qaeda* in the Arabian Peninsula's online *Inspire* magazine, IS started publishing the *IS Reports*. Later followed the *Dabiq* magazine, used for propaganda and recruitment and to spread messages of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>209</sup> *IS Reports* and *Dabiq* are part of IS' asymmetric strategy in fighting opponents that are more capable militarily<sup>210</sup>: '*Dabiq* is a core tool for all sorts of Islamic State communications.'<sup>211</sup> As such, *Dabiq* is an essential primary source for IS' intentions, capabilities, and activities in this research. This study uses other sources to verify IS' propaganda tools – including *Dabiq* – as the propaganda merely indicates what IS wanted to show.<sup>212</sup> IS' primary opponent, the KRI, official organizations within the KRI, and many key individuals have official social media outlets that serve as primary sources<sup>213</sup>, which need verification, too.

*IS Reports* and *Dabiq* primarily provide insight into IS' external communication.<sup>214</sup> Therefore, in addition to IS' *Dabiq* magazines, this study uses captured internal documents that are publicly available for analyzing IS' internal communications.<sup>215</sup> Next to the *ISIS Files* project of George Washington University and the New York Times<sup>216</sup>, websites with translated IS documents by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI)<sup>217</sup>, Kyle Orton<sup>218</sup>, and

206 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 362.

207 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 503. Cf. Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 6, 11, 19; Hegghammer, "Resistance is futile," 48, 49-51.

208 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 362.

209 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 2; Haroro Ingram, "Islamic State's English-language magazines, 2014-2017. Trends & implications for CT-CVE strategic communications" (The Hague: *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 2018), 11-21. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 71; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 154.

210 Ingram, "Islamic State's English-language magazines, 2014-2017," 3-4.

211 Fishman, *The master plan*, 230.

212 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 15.

213 Examples include: "About Kurdistan Democratic Party," *Kurdistan Democratic Party*, accessed April 27, 2022; "Kurdistan Regional Government," *Kurdistan Regional Government*, accessed April 27, 2022; "Masoud Barzani," *Masoud Barzani*, accessed April 27, 2022; "Patriotic Union of Kurdistan," *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan*, accessed April 27, 2022.

214 Ingram, "Islamic State's English-language magazines, 2014-2017," 1. For example: "Reflections on the final crusade," *Dabiq* 4 (1435H|2014), 44. Also see: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 27; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 5.

215 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 8. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 183; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 23.

216 "Project overview," *The ISIS Files*, accessed April 27, 2022.

217 "About," *Middle East Media Research Institute*, accessed November 6, 2022.

218 Kyle Orton, "About," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, accessed November 6, 2022.

Aymenn al-Tamimi<sup>219</sup> are of great value. MEMRI, Orton, and Tamimi frequently provide comments on the translated documents. In such cases, this study refers separately to both the primary source and to the comments by the researcher. Although many internal IS documents are available, the collection is likely incomplete, and many copies still need translation.<sup>220</sup>

The challenge with all primary sources is verifying authenticity.<sup>221</sup> Transparency is needed to enable replication, where the data was acquired<sup>222</sup>, and triangulation with other relevant sources might prove beneficial.<sup>223</sup> Such relevant sources include other primary sources, like interviews with (former) members of the ANSAs – elaborated on below – or other documents that the ANSA in question already made public, such as propaganda materials. Secondary and tertiary sources might also prove relevant. These include articles and books on (similar) ANSAs and observing the actual behavior of identified sub-organizations. Another relevant factor concerning IS is the extreme violence in IS' primary source material. For a sound analysis, it is necessary to approach the documents as objectively as possible.<sup>224</sup> However, this does not mean the harm done and violence applied is overlooked or unrecognized.

#### **1.4.2.2 Field research**

Field research is 'a matter of going where the action is and simply watching and listening.'<sup>225</sup> Field research enables a high level of verification of the findings. In line with this argument, it offers a way to conduct research beyond politically motivated messages or the often-biased perspective of authorities. These sources also provide the researcher with more in-depth knowledge than journalist reports. The possibility of asking follow-up questions might reveal new avenues for research. The field research might help the researcher understand the subject better by offering the context in which actors operate.<sup>226</sup> In sum, it 'is essential in verifying "circular" truths, debunking myths and information, and unlocking new perspectives into the specific research issue.'<sup>227</sup>

219 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Home," *Aymenn Jawad*, accessed November 6, 2022.

220 Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 83. Also see: Michael Morell and Bill Harlow, *The great war of our time. The CIA's fight against terrorism from al Qa'ida to ISIS* (New York: Twelve, 2015), 316.

221 Ewen MacAskill *et al.*, "Intelligence agents study cache of leaked Isis documents," *The Guardian*, March 10, 2016; Milton, "Structure of a state," 3n3, 5.

222 George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 106.

223 Milton, "Structure of a state," 4.

224 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 7.

225 Babbie, *The practice of social research*, 290.

226 Adam Dolnik, "Introduction. The need for field research on terrorism," in *Conducting terrorism field research. A guide*, Adam Dolnik (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 2-5.

227 Magnus Ranstorp, "Research challenges involved in field study on terrorism in the Middle East," in *Conducting terrorism field research. A guide*, Adam Dolnik (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 48. Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 88-9.

The methodology in this research borrows from what some scholars identified as high-risk ethnography (HRE). As its name implies, HRE focuses on potentially dangerous environments, which makes classical ethnographic approaches obsolete. HRE is ‘the art of the possible where local conditions dictate which type of research can be conducted where, when, how, and by whom. A constant security assessment of the immediate environment necessitates great flexibility and the ability to handle stressful situations, but also to spot potential openings for new sources of social science data in an ever changing environment.’<sup>228</sup> The field research in this study consists of a limited number of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. Third parties appointed the interviewees and the interlocutors, typically by coincidence. From that perspective, these interviewees and interlocutors resulted from opportunity sampling, which limits the validity of the interviews. Future research can obtain higher levels of validity by conducting more randomly conducted interviews with a target population. That requires a safe environment open for academic research, which Iraq has not always been.

Other critical notes on interviews as primary sources are needed. Most people interviewed for this study were Arab- or Kurdish-speaking and the author relied on interpreters. These interpreters applied their interpretations to what was being said. Sometimes, the interpreters affected the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. To some extent, due to the involvement of interpreters, these interviews count as secondary sources. Next to the participation of interpreters, a single interview is hardly enough to acquire the information needed for the research, especially when the topics concern sensitive issues such as politics and security. Despite these reservations, the interviews did offer interesting insights, in particular regular contacts offered beneficial information once a trusted relationship was established. For establishing a trusted relationship, the conversations were as informal as possible. The author took notes and asked whether to use them in the study.

Conducting field research requires pragmatism. Field research is a delicate balance between scientific transparency, ethics, and security concerns. Nobody should experience harm for being involved in field research, not the respondent, interviewer, or people facilitating an interview. The researcher has to respect security concerns from a practical and ethical point of view. Ignoring academic standards risks field research being rejected as a severe academic discipline. The researcher can overcome this dilemma by describing the methodology in as detailed manner as possible. To keep research as secure as possible, the researcher should scrutinize any publication scientifically and security-wise.

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228 Michael Taarnby, “Professionalizing high-risk field research in academia,” in *Conducting terrorism field research. A guide*, Adam Dolnik (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 207.

Although there certainly are ways to deal with the challenges of conducting field research, the discipline might not comply with the principles for ethical research as presented in the “European code of conduct for research integrity.”<sup>229</sup> One possible way of dealing with this challenge is that researchers should recognize and explicitly mention the strengths and weaknesses of their field research. As such, researchers can recognize field research’s added value.

One of the dilemmas regarding the interviews in this study was whether or not to sign letters of consent. For security reasons, and sometimes requested by the interviewees, within this study, respondents signed no letters of consent for the interviews. Respondents not signing letters of consent was assessed as acceptable as the number of interviews and informal conversations in this study is somewhat limited, and they serve mainly as illustrations. Nevertheless, this is recognized as a weakness within this study’s research design and methodology to obtain honesty in communication and reliability in performing research. A similar challenge occurred as recording or taking notes was not allowed for some interviews for security reasons. The author wrote down notes as soon as permitted, recognizing that discrepancies would occur. Those notes did not reference the interviewee’s identities in order not to compromise security, in line with the researcher’s duty of care. When third parties chose interviewees, this was also referred to, acknowledging that the interviewee potentially took place involuntarily and could harm the study’s impartiality.

IS-related interviews, in particular, show the main complexities of HRE field research. Researchers can overcome the dilemmas between science and security in field research by combining the two into a pragmatic *Realwissenschaft*. Secondary and tertiary sources need to provide the necessary context. These secondary and tertiary sources are as essential as are primary sources. Multi-source research should connect science and security in an ongoing dialogue.

### 1.4.2.3 Literature

Much has been written on the study of IR, IS and the KRI, and it is impossible to name every relevant book or article. Nevertheless, some books and articles are of significant importance to this study. Allison and Zelikow’s *Essence of decision*<sup>230</sup> is essential for providing the paradigms of analyzing a conflict between two ANSAs. A valuable addition to this framework is offered by complexity theory, described by David Byrne and Gill Callaghan in their book *Complexity theory and the social sciences*.<sup>231</sup> Concerning IS, Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle’s *The origins*

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229 “European code of conduct for research integrity,” Strasbourg: *European Science Foundation*, 2011; “European code of conduct for research integrity, revised ed.,” Strasbourg: *European Science Foundation*, 2017.

230 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*.

231 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory and the social sciences*.

of *ISIS*<sup>232</sup> proved very useful. Adopting an objective approach towards IS, the authors applied complexity theory to IS. Furthermore, Fawaz Gerges' *ISIS*<sup>233</sup> stands out. A helpful introduction to the politics of the KRI is Mahir Aziz's *The Kurds of Iraq*.<sup>234</sup> Next to these books and articles, many other secondary and tertiary sources have been used, all mentioned in the bibliography.

### 1.4.3 Method: structured, focused comparison

This study applies a structured, focused comparison method defined by political scientists Alexander George and Andrew Bennett as:

'simple and straightforward. The method is "structured" in that the researcher writes general questions that reflect the research objective and that these questions are asked of each case under study to guide and standardize data collection, thereby making systematic comparison and cumulation of the findings of the cases possible. The method is "focused" in that it deals only with certain aspects of the historical cases examined.'<sup>235</sup>

In this study, the strategic decisions of IS and the KRI during three key events in 2014 form the cases for explaining how the actors came to their strategic decisions. The key events involve IS and the KRI, but in different circumstances, with other organizational elements, and sometimes with different decision-makers.

The foreign policy paradigms provide standardized questions that allow a structured comparison based on the existing literature.<sup>236</sup> Due to this study's exploratory and sensitizing character, it is disciplined configurative: established foreign policy paradigms aim to explain the cases, with the additional purpose of testing analytical approaches and the heuristic purpose of exploring new analytical approaches to ANSAs.<sup>237</sup> The established paradigms concern the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm; the new approach concerns complexity theory.<sup>238</sup>

232 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*.

233 Gerges, *ISIS*.

234 Mahir Aziz, *The Kurds of Iraq: Ethnonationalism and national identity in Iraqi Kurdistan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

235 George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 67. Also see: Lees, "We are all comparativists now," 1104n13.

236 *Ibid.*, 69-70.

237 *Ibid.*, 74-6.

238 Cf. Orsini *et al.*, "Forum. Complex systems and international governance," 1,009.

#### 1.4.4 Language: (translated) English

This study's choice of words, names, and time indication is not intended as a political statement. This study uses words and names commonly used in English language academic literature and media outlets to enhance readability. Consequentially, inconsistencies occurred. Examples of such inconsistencies include referring to the leader of *al-Qaeda* (the base) by his actual name, including infix, as bin Laden, whereas referring to the leader of IS occurs by his *kunya* (pseudonym, alias, or *nom de guerre*)<sup>239</sup> and without the infix, as Baghdadi. Another example concerned the name of Ayn al-Arab/Kobani: Ayn al-Arab is the Arabic name for the Kobani city in Kurdish. This study uses the name Kobani, which is applied in most English-language media outlets and journals. IS used Kobani and Ayn al-Arab to indicate that it had renamed the town 'Ayn al-Islām.<sup>240</sup> As for language, indications for dates and time used in this study are – whenever possible – Westernized to enhance readability, fully realizing that this does not do right to all actors studied.<sup>241</sup> Years according to the Islamic calendar are indicated with the abbreviation H, for *Hijra* (the migration of the prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 of the Gregorian calendar). Thus, the Islamic year 1435H corresponds to 2013-2014 and 2014 corresponds to 1435H-1436H.

#### 1.4.5 Positionality

As for any study, the author's background proves relevant, potentially influencing interpretations of the analytical paradigms and the cases. The analyst needs to be aware of potential biases.<sup>242</sup> Complexity theory assumes that the analyst observes, interprets, and influences the studied environment.<sup>243</sup> This section discusses how elements of the author's positionality may have influenced research and data collection and how the author dealt with this. Overall, while acknowledging that the author of this study has missed peculiarities that he is unaware of at the time of writing, the elements of self-identification mentioned below need consideration. Awareness of the authors' positionality in the study helps readers assess the study's validity. Future research will prove how these elements influenced this study and to what extent the conclusions remain valid.

239 Vera Mironova & Karam Alhamad, "The names of jihad. A guide to ISIS' noms de guerre," *Foreign Affairs*, July 14, 2017. Also see: Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 27.

240 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5 (1436H|2014), 15.

241 Cf. Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 130-1.

242 Cf. Graham Allison, "Conceptual models and the Cuban missile crisis," *The American Political Science Review* 63:3 (1969), 689; Cindy Otis, *True or false. A CIA analyst's guide to spotting fake news* (Dreamscape media, 2020), audiobook.

243 For example: Gani. "From discourse to practice," 46-7.

The author's non-religious, Western European background is relevant to this study. Furthermore, the author does not speak Arabic or Kurdish, which makes him rely on sources written in or translated into Dutch, English, French, or German. The author did have some situational awareness and situational understanding due to his political science study and military background. The author had worked as a United Nations military observer in the Middle East in 2011-2012, before regularly traveling to Iraq as an academic researcher on politically motivated conflicts in 2013-2017. As an academic researcher, the author experienced much cooperation and friendliness from local contacts – both Arabs and Kurds – and support seemed to increase when acknowledging ignorance from an unbiased but critical posture. In 2017, the author moved into a diplomatic position in Iraq, restricting the author from continuing field research to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

The author recognizes being privileged, as he was born and raised in a secure and prosperous country. As such, he has never been a victim of armed conflict and only experienced armed conflict from a relatively safe distance.

## **1.5 Outline of the study**

Using the research design outlined in this chapter, chapter 2 conceptualizes ANSAs and strategic decision-making. Chapter 3 explores how to analyze these concepts using four analytical frameworks. Based on these analytical frameworks, chapter 4 further introduces the context and actors of the case studies. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 chronologically apply the analytical frameworks to the three critical events in the conflict between IS and the KRI in 2014. Finally, chapter 8 considers the conclusions of the previous chapters, reflects on findings and methodology, and suggests avenues for future research.



## Chapter 2

# Conceptualization<sup>244</sup>

**T**he previous chapter introduced the research question of this study – that is, how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during their 2014 conflict – and why this question is relevant. However, to be able to answer this question, the study needs to address critical concepts to clarify what this study is about. Therefore, this chapter answers what do the concepts of ANSA and strategic decision-making constitute? Defining these concepts narrows down the essence of this study, that is, explaining strategic decision-making by ANSAs IS and the KRI. Chapter 4 further introduces IS and the KRI.

This chapter indicates that ANSAs concern actors in IR that have not been recognized as states by existing states and are willing and able to conduct violence to obtain their strategic goals. Strategic decision-making concerns an actor's choices on ways and means to achieve foreign policy ends.<sup>245</sup> An actor might accomplish those ends by strategic decisions that intentionally seem sub-optimal or counter-productive to outsmart adversaries.<sup>246</sup> This study observes that ANSAs pursue specific policy goals – operating as strategic entities<sup>247</sup> – and possess the ability to make strategic decisions, as well as the capacity and willingness to implement them, if necessary, by violence. So, like states, ANSAs can turn to instruments of power to achieve foreign policy goals.

### 2.1 ANSA

The three elements of the concept – armed, (non-) state, and actor – need elaboration to define what an ANSA is. The sections below address these concepts sequentially, recognizing

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244 An early draft of this chapter appeared as: Wietse van den Berge, "Analyzing Middle Eastern armed non-state actors' foreign policy," *Global Security Studies* 7:3 (2016), 13-31.

245 Gerner, "The evolution of the study of foreign policy," 18.

246 Luttwak, *Strategy*, 3-5. Cf. Donald Robertson, *How to think like a Roman emperor. The Stoic philosophy of Marcus Aurelius* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2019), 39-40.

247 John Warden, "The enemy as a system," *Airpower Journal* 9:1 (1995), 45.

that being armed is a category of non-states, which in itself is a category of actors in IR. One section addresses the alleged difference between states and non-states as actors in IR, starting with what an actor is within IR. The critical fact that some non-state actors are armed further complicates the categorization between states and non-state actors.

### 2.1.1 Actor in IR: decision-making capacity

Without applying the term actor, strategist John Warden used the term strategic entity, which is ‘anything that can function on its own and is free and able to make decisions as to where it will go and what it will do.’<sup>248</sup> Warden’s definition seems in line with the typology of actorhood by Aydinli: ‘(1) some reference to having a decision-making and policy-making system or ability (2) and some reference to having the capacity for implementing the decisions or policies made.’<sup>249</sup>

In their inventory of non-state actors mentioned in the journal *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Baumann and Stengel adopted a typology of actors within IR based on territorial scope and legal status, developed by political scientists Philipp Genschel and Bernhard Zangl. According to Genschel and Zangl, territorial scope refers to whether the actor operates within or beyond the state’s borders; legal status indicates whether the actor performs in the private or public sphere. The territorial scope and legal status then lead to four categories: state actors, private actors, international actors, and transnational actors.<sup>250</sup>

In practice, the typology suggested by Genschel and Zangl proves problematic as categories overlap or cases do not fit either type. IS and the KRI started within a state, but lacking statehood, it seems flawed to label them private actors along with corporations and associations. When IS and the KRI eventually expanded their activities beyond state borders and behaved like states by conducting foreign policies<sup>251</sup>, the public-private dichotomy remained troublesome: were they international actors, like supra-national entities, or transnational actors, like non-governmental organizations, then?<sup>252</sup> By 2014, IS claimed Iraq and Syria as its area of operations while rejecting the existing border between the countries<sup>253</sup>, and the KRI sent *peshmerga* fighters to the Syrian town of Kobani.<sup>254</sup> In 2014, both IS and the KRI had regional relevance. Analysts had to include

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248 *Ibid.*, 45.

249 Aydinli, “Assessing violent nonstate actorhood in global politics,” 427.

250 Genschel & Zangl, “L’État et l’exercice de l’autorité politique,” 512-5.

251 Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate warfare. The military methods of guerillas, warlords, and militias* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 2-3; Gunter, “The foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurds,” 1.

252 Genschel & Zangl, “L’État et l’exercice de l’autorité politique,” 514.

253 For example: “ISIS celebrates takeover of Nineveh province, says the ‘Sykes-Picot borders’ have been removed,” *ISIS Twitter*, June 10, 2014, transl. unknown.

254 For example: “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 5, 15; Mariam Karouny & Omer Berberoglu, “Heavy fighting in Kobani after Peshmerga join battle,” *Huffington Post*, November 2, 2014.

them in political analyses and policy recommendations concerning the region. Although sometimes argued differently<sup>255</sup>, IS and the KRI acted independently because they pursued their interests.<sup>256</sup> In doing so, they sometimes worked in alliances or operated as proxies.<sup>257</sup>

Operating beyond the state and pursuing foreign policies made IS and the KRI enter the realm of international relations and IR. Adopting Aydinli's criteria of being capable of decision-making and actual implementation made IS and the KRI actors within international relations. Differences exist in IR between state actors and non-state actors, though. The following section addresses this difference.

### 2.1.2 (Non-) state actors in IR: recognition

States are legal entities within IR<sup>258</sup>, which are 'mutually exclusive and together exhaustive of political space'<sup>259</sup> based on four criteria: (1) containing a permanent population; (2) controlling a defined territory; (3) having a government; and (4) maintaining relations with other states.<sup>260</sup> However, this does not translate into non-states being non-legal entities in IR. Whether an actor in IR is a state or a non-state actor remains highly contested. It appears that (external) behavior towards (other) states is more important than internal constellation<sup>261</sup>: '[s]tate leaders have a legitimacy that sub-state leaders and groups do not.'<sup>262</sup> The difference between states and non-state actors is primarily that the former possess some form of recognition, which the latter do not have.<sup>263</sup> The dichotomy seems problematic as some non-state actors – such as IS and the KRI – challenge states' monopolies of violence.<sup>264</sup> Violence is particularly problematic when it moves beyond policing into the realm of war.

255 Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 20.

256 Gunter, "The foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurds," 1.

257 Cf. Salehyan, "The delegation of war," 494.

258 Freedman, *The future of war*, 28.

259 Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 5.

260 "Convention on rights and duties of states adopted by the seventh international conference of American states. Montevideo, December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1933," *League of Nations*, 1936, 25. Also see: Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, 11; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 16.

261 Florea, "Rebel governance," 1005; Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 122.

262 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 359.

263 Pfeifer *et al.*, "The politics of recognition," 2. Also see: Coggins, "Rebel diplomacy," 98.

264 Biddle, "The determinants of nonstate military methods," 716; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 18; Milton, *Structure of a state*, 1; Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 430-4; Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 346. For example: Beatrice de Graaf & Saskia Pothoven, "De Islamitische inlichtingenstaat. De Stasi als leermeester?" *Militaire Spectator* 187:9 (2018), 461-4; Graaf & Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance," 14. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3, 61; Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 20-31; David Lonsdale, "Strategy defined," in *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed., David Jordan *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 43; Speller, "Introduction," 2.

Adopting strategist Carl von Clausewitz's view on politics' primacy, war occurs in a political context and is instrumental to a political goal.<sup>265</sup> Whether a state or a non-state actor sets that political goal is irrelevant to Clausewitz, although some scholars wrongfully believe that Clausewitz ruled out non-state actors.<sup>266</sup> However, war was – and sometimes still is – regarded as the realm of states, while non-state actors are or were expected to conduct irregular warfare. States also apply asymmetric or hybrid tactics, and non-state actors sometimes possess regular military forces. Usually, a lack of military capabilities forces non-state actors to use asymmetric tactics. The usage of different tactics suggests a continuum of various forms of violence that merge or split instead of stationary categories. In addition, (military) force does not have to be used to create or pursue an intended effect; a mere credible threat can convince a (potential) adversary to change behavior.

International affairs scholar Stephen Biddle suggested that due to the proliferation of new technologies, the lethal capabilities of both states and non-state actors increased, decreasing the relative difference in lethal power between the two types.<sup>267</sup> Developments in and availability of communications, information, logistics, and organization enable non-state actors to behave as states.<sup>268</sup> The increasingly emerging hybrid forms in between provoke debate on which actors constitute states and which non-states.<sup>269</sup> Another problem concerning the standard criteria used for statehood is that these criteria are Western-centric and leave out non-Western concepts.<sup>270</sup>

As well as discussions on what constitutes a state, criteria also differ among scholars on what constitutes a non-state actor. Foreign policy analysts Daphné Josselin and William Wallace

265 Clausewitz, *On war*, 605-10. Also see: Brian Cole, "Clausewitz's wondrous yet paradoxical trinity. The nature of war as a complex adaptive system," *Joint Force Quarterly* 96:1 (2020), 43; Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy. A history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90; Azar Gat, *The origins of military thought. From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 215; Haun, "Air power in the age of primacy," 1, 18; Thomas Hughes, "Deliberate Force. Ambivalent success," in *Air power in the age of primacy. Air warfare since the Cold War*, Phil Haun *et al.* (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 65; Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 358; Kiras, "The historical practice," 336; Lonsdale, "Strategy defined," 43; David Lonsdale, "The study and theory of strategy," in: *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed. David Jordan *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 21, 29; Speller, "Introduction," 3. For politics' primacy see: Bart Schuurman, "Clausewitz and the 'new wars' scholars," *Parameters* (Spring 2010), 90-1.

266 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 368. For example: John Keegan, *A history of warfare* (London: Pimlico, 1994), 5. Also see: T.G. Otte, "New paths to wisdom. Clausewitz – from practice to theory," in *The practice of strategy. A global history*, Jeremy Black (ed.), (Società Italiana di Storia Militare, 2024), 334; Strachan, "The elusive meaning and enduring relevance of Clausewitz," 125, 131.

267 Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, 297-300. Also see: Brian Jenkins, "International terrorism," in *The use of force*, 5th ed., Robert Art & Kenneth Waltz (eds.) (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 76; Naim, *The end of power*, 123.

268 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 11. Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 504; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 3-5.

269 Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, 6-10. Also see: Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 431.

270 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 17-21. Also see: Kiras, "Key concepts," 302; Kiras, "The historical practice," 333; Lawrence, *Zeven zuilen van wijsheid*, 93-99; Rabi', *Contemporary Arab thought*, 140-1; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 1-11; Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 348; Umunc, "A hope so transcendent," 189.

defined non-state actors based on three criteria as organizations ‘[1] largely or entirely autonomous from central government funding and control [...]; [2] operating as or participating in networks which extend across the boundaries of two or more states [...]; [3] acting in ways which affect political outcomes.’<sup>271</sup> Additionally, Aydinli observed that ‘shared interests’ and longing to be recognized by other actors are usually part of the academic concepts of non-state actors.<sup>272</sup> In line with recognition by other actors, the differences between states and non-states consist of different interests, formal (trade) relations, and involvement in supra-state institutions that states have and non-states have not.<sup>273</sup> Yet, independent scholar Mohammed Salih argued that IS ‘does not seek to coexist with the nation, carve its place within a nation-based global order, or expand the limits of national imagination to make it more inclusive. It simply seeks to dismantle and supplant the nation (-state) with its desired form of political community.’<sup>274</sup>

This study follows Aydinli’s characteristics of non-state actors: (1) possessing decision-making capability, (2) possessing means to implement these decisions, and (3) aspiring (some form of) statehood. During 2014, despite being non-state actors, IS and the KRI behaved as state actors, claiming a monopoly of violence within the territory they controlled<sup>275</sup> and raising taxes.<sup>276</sup> Eventually, IS proclaimed a state, and the KRI repeatedly suggested independence from Iraq.<sup>277</sup> However, claiming – even possessing – a monopoly of violence in a specific territory proved an ill criterion to decide which actor in IR is a state or a non-state actor. Yet, it seems relevant that a non-state actor is armed, thus able to challenge states and other ANSAs alike. The following section addresses the phenomenon of ANSAs.

### 2.1.3 ANSAs in IR: ability for violence

What separates ANSAs from other non-state actors is that ANSAs are ‘willing and able to use violence for pursuing their objectives.’<sup>278</sup> The ability to use violence implies that ANSAs must possess – or at least have access to – some fighting capacity. This study considers an ANSA

271 Josselin & Wallace, “Non-state actors in IR,” 3-4.

272 Aydinli, “Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics,” 426.

273 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 21.

274 Mohammed Salih, “The Islamic State’s visions of political community and statehood and their articulation vis-à-vis nationalism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2023), 16.

275 Hinnebusch, “Foreign policy in the Middle East,” 26.

276 Florea, “Rebel governance,” 1007-8; “The structure of khilafa,” *al-Furqan Media*, July 6, 2016, video.

277 Christopher Blanchard, “Kurds in Iraq hold controversial referendum on independence,” *Congressional Research Service*, October 3, 2017, 1.

278 Schneckener, “Fragile statehood,” 25. Also see: Tami Biddle, “Coercion theory. A basic introduction for practitioners,” *Texas National Security Review* 3:2 (2020), 31, 62-3; Clausewitz, *On war*, 605-10; Freedman, *Strategy*, 90; Gat, *The origins of military thought*, 215; Haun, “Air power in the age of primacy,” 1, 18; Lonsdale, “Strategy defined,” 43; David Lonsdale, “The practice of strategy,” in *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed. David Jordan *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 62; Lonsdale, “The study and theory of strategy,” 21; Pfeifer *et al.*, “The politics of recognition,” 7; Speller, “Introduction,” 3-4, 7-8.

armed when that actor can apply its fighting capacity to reach intended strategic effects, that is, ‘use [...] force and the threat of force for the ends of policy’<sup>279</sup>, which will be elaborated on in the next chapter, when discussing strategy.

Within academic literature, both the terms armed non-state actor<sup>280</sup> and violent non-state actor<sup>281</sup> are in use, referring to the same phenomenon. However, this study applies armed, as it refers to a usually objectively observable capability that is or might be applied. In contrast, violent refers to subjective behavior or intent. It depends on the observer whether an action is qualified as violent; this poses a normative issue better suited as a political or legal question. In addition, (military) force does not have to be used to create or pursue an intended effect; a mere credible threat can convince a (potential) adversary to change behavior<sup>282</sup>, creating analytical discrepancies on whether a specific threat is violent. Furthermore, an analytical challenge emerges when a violent non-state actor changes strategy, for example, by stopping violence and joining established political processes; the actor is no longer violent but still can be and could switch back. By using the term ANSA, the categorization remains unless or until the ANSA gives up its fighting capabilities.

Contemporary IR is polyarchic in character, in which – apart from the states – thousands of non-state actors possess the fighting capacity to compel their strategic goals.<sup>283</sup> Some ANSAs have similar or better fighting capacities than some states have.<sup>284</sup> In his study on IS, security studies analyst Omar Ashour stated that ‘[i]t can no longer be taken for granted that the state monopolizes the means of violence. Thus, it cannot be assumed that ASA’s [armed state actors] are universally more capable of defeating armed non-state actors [ANSAs] on the battlefield.’<sup>285</sup> ANSA researcher Adrian Florea reached a similar conclusion in his study on separatist movements between 1946 and 2016: ‘[i]n the contemporary international environment, the Weberian state no longer holds a monopoly over the governance market (if it ever did)’<sup>286</sup>, adding that a multitude of different actors takes over.<sup>287</sup>

279 Colin Gray, *Modern strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17. Also see: Clausewitz, *On war*, 177.

280 For example: Aydinli, “Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics,” 424-44.

281 For example: Coggin, “Rebel diplomacy,” 98; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 37; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 7; Edward Last, *Strategic culture and violent non-state actors. A comparative study of Salafi-jihadist groups* (London: Routledge, 2021), 1-6; Schneckener, “Fragile statehood,” 23-40; Phil Williams, “Violent non-state actors and national and international security” (Zürich: *Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule*, 2008), 8-18.

282 Biddle, “Coercion theory,” 97; Freedman, *Strategy*, 158-9; Kiras, “Key concepts,” 304-8; Lonsdale, “Strategy defined,” 31, 62-3; Lonsdale, “The practice of strategy,” 62; Speller, “Introduction,” 7-11.

283 Brown, “Purposes and pitfalls of war by proxy,” 245-6.

284 Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, 6-10.

285 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 5.

286 Florea, “Rebel governance,” 1,026.

287 *Ibid.*, 1,026. Also see: Brown, “Purposes and pitfalls of war by proxy,” 247; Pfeifer *et al.*, “The politics of recognition,” 7.

As ANSAs get involved in international relations, military force is no longer the monopoly of state actors. ANSAs possess a terrible reputation: '[m]ost of these armed non-state actors share a common feature in that by using violent means they do not attach great importance to the distinction made by international law between combatants and non-combatants.'<sup>288</sup> Furthermore, 'most groups and organisations increasingly operate via transnational networks and transnational ties, thereby gaining new room for manoeuvre.'<sup>289</sup> ANSAs do so, aiming for recognition by a significant actor within international relations of a 'political cause, an identity, or the claim to represent a certain group.'<sup>290</sup> Schneckener and ANSA-researcher Claudia Hofmann combined the elements above and provided a valuable definition of ANSAs: 'distinctive organizations that are (i) willing and capable to use violence for pursuing their objectives and (ii) not integrated into formalized state institutions [...], (iii) possess a certain degree of autonomy with regard to politics, military operations, resources, and infrastructure.'<sup>291</sup>

ANSA researchers Stephen Powell and Adrian Florea defined ANSAs as 'anti-government or separatist rebels, ethnic militias, terrorist organisations, hybrid groups, or pro-government militias that have access to arms and employ violent or non-violent means to attain their strategic objectives.'<sup>292</sup> The definition provided by Powell and Florea contains a further categorization of ANSAs, which they did not elaborate on. Other scholars did. In line with international security scholar Phil Williams<sup>293</sup>, Aydinli stated that ANSAs are 'generally divided along the lines of: (1) insurgents, (2) other domestic militant groups, (3) warlords/urban gangs, (4) private militias/military companies, (5) terrorists and (6) criminal organizations.'<sup>294</sup> Schneckener used a slightly different typology, observing two more categories – clan chiefs and marauders – that partly overlap with Williams' and Aydinli's categories.<sup>295</sup> Using somewhat different characteristics, Ezrow added even more categories, including de facto states: 'a geographical entity, usually consisting of a particular ethnic group, which wishes to secede from the parent state that it is a part of and be recognized as a de jure state by the international community.'<sup>296</sup> The different categories compare along five dichotomies: (1) goals, that is, does the ANSA

288 Schneckener, "Fragile statehood," 28.

289 *Ibid.*, 28.

290 Pfeifer *et al.*, "The politics of recognition," 2.

291 Claudia Hofmann & Ulrich Schneckener, "Engaging non-state armed actors in state- and peace-building. Options and strategies," *International Review of the Red Cross* 93:883 (2011), 604. Also see: Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 9n12. According to the definition of Schneckener and Hofmann, the KRI could be regarded part of the formalized state institutions (via the Iraqi constitution), which it aimed to separate from.

292 Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 179. Original in italics. Also see: Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 436.

293 Williams, "Violent non-state actors," 8-18.

294 Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics," 426-7. Also see: Voller, "Rethinking armed groups and order," 854-6.

295 Schneckener, "Fragile statehood," 30.

296 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 97. Also see: Jackson, "Warlords," 148; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 2.

pursue change or status quo; (2) scope, that is, has the ANSA a territorial or non-territorial scope; (3) tactics, that is, does the ANSA apply physical or psychological tactics; (4) hierarchy, that is, is the ANSA tightly or loosely organized; and, (5) motivation, that is, does the ANSA pursue political or economic goals. Table 2.1 combines the typologies of ANSAs of Aydinli/Williams, Schneckener and Ezrow, indicating how the typologies differ along the dichotomies.

**Table 2.1:** Types of ANSAs and their characteristics according to Aydinli/Williams, Schneckener, and Ezrow.<sup>297</sup>

Aydinli/ Williams	Schneckener	Ezrow	Goal change   status quo	Scope territorial   non- territorial	Tactics physical   psychological	Hierarchy loose   medium   tight	Motivation political   economic
		<i>de facto state</i>	Both	Territorial	Both	Tight	Political
<i>insurgents</i>	<i>rebels, guerrillas</i>	<i>insurgency</i>	Change	Territorial	Physical	Medium	Political
<i>other domestic militant groups</i>	<i>militias, para- militaries</i>	<i>political organization with militant wing</i>	Both	Both	Both	Tight	Political
		<i>paramilitary</i>	Both	Both	Physical	Tight	Both
<i>warlords/ urban gangs</i>	<i>clan chiefs, big men</i>		Status quo	Territorial	Physical	Tight	Political
	<i>warlords</i>	<i>warlord</i>	Status quo	Both	Both	Medium	Economic
<i>terrorists</i>	<i>terrorists</i>	<i>terror organization</i>	Change	Non- territorial	Psychological	Medium	Political
		<i>terror network</i>	Both	Both	Psychological	Loose	Political
<i>criminal organizations</i>	<i>criminals, mafia, gangs</i>	<i>organized crime</i>	Status quo	Non- territorial	Psychological	Tight	Economic
		<i>gang</i>	Indifferent	Both	Physical	Medium	Economic
<i>private militias/ military companies</i>	<i>mercenaries, private military/ security companies</i>	<i>private security companies</i>	Indifferent	Territorial	Physical	Tight	Economic
	<i>marauders, 'sobels'</i>	<i>marauding rebels</i>	Indifferent	Non- territorial	Psychological	Loose	Economic

297 Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics," 426-7; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 85-6; Schneckener, "Fragile statehood," 30; Williams, "Violent non-state actors," 8-18. For an alternative categorization see: Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 7-11.

Categorization of the cases in this study proves challenging due to the enforced dichotomies. Depending on the argumentation, analysts labeled IS and the KRI in 2014 as different types of ANSAs: de facto states<sup>298</sup>, insurgents<sup>299</sup> or paramilitary, and perhaps even more. The KRI, formally, was part of the Iraqi state bureaucracy, while fighting the Iraqi state at the same time.<sup>300</sup> IS pragmatically changed between different categories, using criminal and terrorist tactics within a broader insurgency.<sup>301</sup>

All five dichotomies indicated above concern outcomes of strategic decision-making.<sup>302</sup> These outcomes might differ according to the situation, making categorizing ANSAs challenging. It also suggests static positions, whereas research indicates flexibility in strategic decision-making and consecutive behavior.<sup>303</sup> Remarkably, strategic decision-making has not been part of the categorization by Aydinli, Ezrow, Schneckener, or Williams.

## 2.2 Strategic decision-making

This study focuses on strategic decision-making. The following sections address the concept's three elements – strategy, decision, and decision-making – to define strategic decision-making. Addressing the concept starts with how strategy relates to policy, grand strategy, strategy, and operations and tactics, followed by a section that establishes the link between decisions and decision-making.

### 2.2.1 Strategy in IR: ends, ways, and means

Analysts heavily debated strategy, and the challenge starts with a lack of a commonly accepted definition of the term strategy.<sup>304</sup> Usually, a strategy involves objectives and allocating resources to meet these objectives.<sup>305</sup>

298 Hinnebusch, "Foreign policy in the Middle East," 26. Also see: Ludovico Carlino, "How Al-Qaeda and Islamic State differ in pursuit of common goal," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, March 23, 2015; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 123. Carlino applied the term 'quasi-state' to IS, whereas Leonard applied 'proto-state.'

299 Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris."

300 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 8, 8n10.

301 Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris."

302 Cf. Jenkins, "ISIS's calculated barbarity."

303 For example: Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 303. Also see: Gray, *Modern strategy*, 129-51; Last, *Strategic culture*, 6-11; "State building. The Islamic State's trajectory in Iraq," *Jane's Islamic Affairs*, August 8, 2014.

304 Jeremy Black, review of *The direction of war. Contemporary strategy in historical perspective*, by Hew Strachan, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37:3 (2014), 472.

305 For example: Barry Posen, *The sources of military doctrine. France, Britain, and Germany between the world wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 13.

### 2.2.1.1 Policy

Strategy's objectives follow from policy. Policy is the outcome when those politically responsible decide the goals for the actor, as well as how to achieve those goals.<sup>306</sup> Within an actor, the highest level of power is the policy level. Clausewitz stressed politics' primacy but acknowledged that the military's choices influence policy too. So, the 'relationship is not always straightforward or direct.'<sup>307</sup>

Taking a Western-centric<sup>308</sup> and state-centric view<sup>309</sup>, military historian Hew Strachan described policy as 'a statement of one government's intent.'<sup>310</sup> Strachan's view corresponds with Clausewitz's interpretation of policy: '[p]olicy, of course, is nothing in itself; it is simply the trustee for all these interests against other states [...] we can only treat policy as representative of all interests of the community.'<sup>311</sup> Other authors avoid a state-centric view, adopting a broad interpretation in which 'policy may refer to any objective for which war is waged.'<sup>312</sup> However, from the 1920s onwards, other instruments than war have increasingly become accepted as ways to achieve policy goals, such as diplomacy, economy<sup>313</sup>, and domestic policy<sup>314</sup>, leading to so-called foreign policy.

Foreign policy concerns 'the stuff of international relations'<sup>315</sup> and is described as the 'strategies used by governments to guide their actions in the international area.'<sup>316</sup> Alternative descriptions of foreign policy concern 'a set of guides to choices being made about people, places, and things beyond the boundaries of the state'<sup>317</sup>; the collection of implicit and explicit goals concerning challenges abroad, relations with other states, and the collection of strategies and tactics to accomplish these goals<sup>318</sup>; or, '[a] state's foreign policy role implies an identity and defines

306 Hew Strachan, "Strategy in theory; strategy in practice," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42:2 (2019), 187-8.

307 Lonsdale, "Strategy defined," 43; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 89. Also see: Black, "Strategic practice," 15; George Dimitriu, "Clausewitz and the politics of war. A contemporary theory," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43:5 (2020), 680; Beatrice Heuser, *The evolution of strategy. Thinking war from antiquity to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8-9.

308 Black, review of *The direction of war*, 473; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 9.

309 Strachan, *The direction of war*, 4.

310 *Ibid.*, 13.

311 Clausewitz, *On war*, 605-10.

312 Lonsdale, "The study and theory of strategy," 29. Also see: Keegan, *A history of warfare*, 5.

313 Hew Strachan, "Lessons from the last 'golden age'", in Russell Glenn, *New directions in strategic thinking 2.0* (Acton: ANU Press, 2018), 153-60; Strachan, "Strategy in theory," 172-5; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 32-8. Strachan linked the development of the term grand strategy to naval strategists Julian Corbett and, later, Alfred Thayer Mahan, with strategist Basil Liddell Hart continuing that development.

314 Strachan, *The direction of war*, 41.

315 Russett & Starr, *World politics*, 162.

316 Goldstein, *International relations*, 147.

317 Russett & Starr, *World politics*, 163.

318 Philip Everts, *Laat dat maar aan ons over! Democratie, buitenlands beleid en vrede* (Leiden: DSWO, 1996), 9.

orientations toward neighbors (friend or enemy), toward great powers (threat or patron), and toward the state system (revisionist or status quo).<sup>319</sup> These descriptions point out instrumental – thus rational – and state-centric approaches, reflecting (neo-) realist approaches towards foreign policy, in the next chapter categorized under the rational actor paradigm.

Broadening beyond the state to any actor operating within international relations would make a definition or description more appropriate for ANSAs. In that perspective, foreign policy analyst Deborah Gerner's definition of foreign policy is spot on: 'intentions, statements, and actions of an actor – often, but not always, a state – directed toward the external world.'<sup>320</sup> In this rather broad definition, the 'external world' for an ANSA means every person or entity that does not belong to the ANSA itself. The 'intentions, statements, and actions' shape foreign policy, either explicitly or implicitly. Explicit behavior includes statements and specific actions, like acts of violence or sanctions. Implicit behavior includes intentionally not doing something, indirect economic influence, and social pressure. ANSAs typically focus on political, military, and economic survival, using their foreign policy to gain the support of recognized states.<sup>321</sup> The different strategies available to achieve policy goals form what is known as grand strategy.

### 2.2.1.2 *Grand strategy*

Grand strategy translates the (foreign) policy goals into ways and means to achieve these goals.<sup>322</sup> The term grand strategy gradually came into use from the 1920s onwards, to describe all possible resources for achieving a political object, including diplomatic and economic resources. According to Strachan, in the 1920s, strategic scholars struggled to explain Germany's defeat in the First World War with Clausewitz's definition of strategy, which left out economic blockades and social unrest.<sup>323</sup> During the Second World War, the Allied grand strategy incorporated national mobilization, coalition diplomacy, and multi-front military campaigns into a single framework.<sup>324</sup> Grand strategy gained further prominence due to nuclear weapons proliferation during the Cold War, which left armed conflict a highly unattractive option. Instead, states aimed to prevent war<sup>325</sup>, making diplomacy and economy

319 Hinnebusch, "Foreign policy in the Middle East," 28.

320 Gerner, "The evolution of the study of foreign policy," 18. Also see: Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 2-3.

321 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 3.

322 Luttwak, *Strategy*, 89.

323 Strachan, *The direction of war*, 15. For an earlier historical example of combining coalition warfare with economic blockades and social unrest, see: Jurriën de Jong, et al., *Waterloo. 200 jaar strijd* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2015), 20.

324 Strachan, "Strategy in theory," 183.

325 Biddle, "Coercion theory," 98-104; Lawrence Freedman, "Introduction – The evolution of deterrence strategy and research," in *Netherlands annual review of military studies 2020. Deterrence in the 21st century – insights from theory and practice*, Frans Osinga & Tim Sweijs (eds.) (The Hague: Asser Press, 2021), 1; Lonsdale, "The practice of strategy," 64-5.

more important than military strategy.<sup>326</sup> Strachan observed an increasing control of politicians over the military after the Cold War: ‘the big change in war has been the overt readiness of the west to use it as an instrument of policy.’<sup>327</sup> Focusing on the United States after 2001, and observing that America’s allies abandoned grand strategy altogether, Strachan argued that ‘grand strategy [...] has assumed more open-ended and long-term objectives, concerned as much with domestic arguments about national strength and resilience, including health, education and the institutions of democracy.’<sup>328</sup>

The foreign policy-related grand strategy typically concerns the – usually combined applied, or overlapping – realms of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power, often abbreviated with the acronym DIME<sup>329</sup>, sometimes extended with the realms of finance, intelligence, law, and technology.<sup>330</sup> Still, ‘[i]f war is an instrument of policy, strategy is the tool that enables us to understand it and gives us our best chance of managing and directing it.’<sup>331</sup> Yet, the practice of strategy moved into the realm of politicians and the study of strategy to game theorists and mathematicians, instead of military professionals.<sup>332</sup> Strachan concluded in 2013 that ‘[t]oday strategy is too often employed simply as a synonym for policy’<sup>333</sup>, adding that ‘[b]y confusing strategy with policy, and by calling what were in reality political effects strategic effects, governments denied themselves the intellectual tool to manage war for political purposes, and so allowed themselves to project their daily political concerns back into strategy.’<sup>334</sup>

### 2.2.1.3 Strategy

IR researcher Colin Gray stated that ‘[Clausewitz] tells us that strategy is the use of tacit and explicit threats, as well as of actual battles and campaigns, to advance political purposes.

326 Hew Strachan, “Lessons from the last ‘golden age,’” 153-60; Strachan, “Strategy in theory,” 172-5; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 32-8.

327 Strachan, *The direction of war*, 22.

328 Strachan, “Strategy in theory,” 184.

329 “Joint Doctrine Note 1-18 – Strategy,” United States’ *Joint Chiefs of Staff*, April 25, 2018, ii-5-7. Also see: David Betz, “In search of a point. The blob at war,” *Military Strategy Magazine*, December 2020, 22-27; Black, “Strategic practice,” 16; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 86, 260.

330 Maria Constantinescu, “The national security strategy in the current environment. From DIME to a DIME-T approach,” Conference paper, 2021, 22-4; “Joint Doctrine Note 1-18,” ii-2; Konstantin Khomko, “A nation needs more than a DIME,” *Central Blue*, March 24, 2019; Phillips O’Brien, “There’s no such thing as a great power,” *Foreign Affairs* June 29, 2023; Cesar Rodriguez *et al.*, “Putting the ‘FIL’ into ‘DIME.’ Growing joint understanding of the instruments of power,” *JFQ* 97 (2020), 1,267-7. Also see: Freedman, *Strategy*, 238; Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-43.

331 Strachan, *The direction of war*, 23.

332 Hew Strachan, “Lessons from the last ‘golden age,’” 153-60; Strachan, “Strategy in theory,” 172-5; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 32-8.

333 Strachan, *The direction of war*, 11.

334 *Ibid.*, 21.

Moreover, the strategy at issue may not be military strategy; instead it may be grand strategy that uses “engagements”, meaning all of the relevant instruments of power as threat or in action, for the objectives of statecraft.<sup>335</sup> The difference between grand strategy and strategy is fuzzy; according to historian John Gaddis, it is a matter of scale.<sup>336</sup> ‘Precisely because strategy is a pragmatic business it lacks the clarity and purity which strategic theory so often seeks.’<sup>337</sup>

As grand strategy concerns different instruments to achieve policy goals, the title of this section might – or, should – as well have been written in plural, as different strategies exist. This study focuses on military strategy, and to a lesser extent diplomatic strategy, as a means of foreign policy, while acknowledging that other strategies, such as economic strategy, might be as relevant and occasionally overlap with other strategies.

The different realms historically dealt with variables, or dimensions, that influence strategic decision-making. Historians Beatrice Heuser and Isabelle Duyvesteyn observed through the ages the importance of the dimensions of ‘geography, the population and material resources, as well as allies, and decision-making processes.’<sup>338</sup> Gray observed seventeen dimensions that influence strategy.<sup>339</sup> Without elaborating on the separate strategic dimensions, this study uses Gray’s typology as a reference and a tool for comparing applied paradigms. Still, the dimensions are dynamic, as they emerge or disappear, or change themselves<sup>340</sup>, and are interconnected<sup>341</sup>, causing strategy to be dynamic.<sup>342</sup> Gaddis described strategy as linking unlimited aspirations to necessarily limited capabilities. Gaddis pointed out that a balance between aspirations and capabilities eventually emerges.<sup>343</sup> In line with Gaddis, Freedman argued that strategy ‘is fluid

335 Gray, *Modern strategy*, 17.

336 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 33. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 208-11.

337 Strachan, “Strategy in theory,” 187.

338 Beatrice Heuser & Isabelle Duyvesteyn, “Grand patterns of strategy. Old and new,” in *The practice of strategy. A global history*, Jeremy Black (ed.), (Società Italiana di Storia Militare, 2024), 20. Also see: Black, *Geopolitics*, 272; Heuser, *The evolution of strategy*, 17-20

339 Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44. Also see: Michael Howard, “The forgotten dimensions of strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 57:5 (1979), 976-8. Gray’s dimension concern: people, society, culture, politics, ethics, economics and logistics, organization, military administration, information and intelligence, strategic theory and doctrine, technology, military operations, command, geography, friction and chance and uncertainty, adversary, and time. When applicable, this study follows Gray’s terminology.

340 Heuser & Duyvesteyn, “Grand patterns of strategy,” 27. Also see: Otte, “New paths to wisdom,” 347.

341 Heuser, *The evolution of strategy*, 18. Also see: Jack Snyder, “Anarchy and culture. Insights from the anthropology of war,” *International Organization* 56:1 (2002), 31-6.

342 Heuser & Duyvesteyn, “Grand patterns of strategy,” 36. Also see: Jeremy Black, *Military strategy. A global history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); Freedman, *Strategy*, 238; Heuser, *The evolution of strategy*, 17. Robert Kaplan, *De wraak van de geografie. Wat de wereldkaart ons voorspelt over komende conflicten en het gevecht tegen het onvermijdelijke*, transl. Margreet de Boer (Houten: Het spectrum, 2012), 42-5; John Warden, “Smart strategy, smart airpower,” in *Airpower reborn. The strategic concepts of John Warden and John Boyd*, John Olsen (ed.) (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015), 108.

343 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 32.

and flexible, governed by the starting point and not the end point.<sup>344</sup> Taking such a pragmatic approach, Freedman stated that strategy ‘is the art of creating power.’<sup>345</sup> This definition – or description – is insufficient, as it does not include maintaining power once established.

Clausewitz referred to strategy – what would now be military strategy – as ‘the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war.’<sup>346</sup> Later, Gray adapted Clausewitz’s definition into ‘the use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy’<sup>347</sup>, a condensed version of the definition used by Ashour: ‘the long-term organisation, distribution, planning, and application of all combat and non-combat resources to serve and achieve the ultimate objective(s) of the entity(ies) discussed, whether state or nonstate.’<sup>348</sup> Other definitions of military strategy concern ‘the conduct and consequences of human relations in the context of actual or possible armed conflict’<sup>349</sup> or ‘the process that converts military power into policy effect.’<sup>350</sup> According to Strachan, ‘[military] [s]trategy is about war and its conduct’<sup>351</sup>, enabling states to use force to achieve policy goals. As such, Strachan argues, military strategy relates to but is distinct from policy, politics, and diplomacy.<sup>352</sup>

Diplomacy – in IR sometimes labeled para-, proto-<sup>353</sup>, or rebel diplomacy<sup>354</sup> for non-state actors – is the central method to implement foreign policy, typically linking the other instruments. Diplomacy serves bilateral or multi-lateral conflict management, communication, and negotiation, all in line with the actor’s foreign policy objectives.<sup>355</sup> Intertwined with diplomacy’s communication element, the ‘informational instrument is about creating, exploiting, and disrupting knowledge.’<sup>356</sup> Diplomacy’s communication includes an actor’s strategic narrative. The economic instrument aims to increase or decrease other actors’ prosperity and sustainability by influencing trade and finance.<sup>357</sup> Economic interdependence

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344 Freedman, *Strategy*, xi.

345 *Ibid.*, xii, 607.

346 Clausewitz, *On war*, 177.

347 Gray, *Modern strategy*, 17.

348 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 18.

349 Luttwak, *Strategy*, 2. Original in italics.

350 Lonsdale, “Strategy defined,” 40.

351 Strachan, *The direction of war*, 42.

352 *Ibid.*, 42-3.

353 Mustafa, “Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum,” 901n51; Stéphane Paquin, “Paradiplomacy,” in *Global diplomacy. An introduction to theory and practice*, Thierry Balzacq *et al.* (eds.), transl. William Snow (Paris: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 49-52; Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 342-3; Sadoon, “The Islamic State and the independence referendum,” 3.

354 Coggins, “Rebel diplomacy,” 106.

355 Russett & Starr, *World politics*, 138-44. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 213-4.

356 “Joint Doctrine Note 1-18,” ii-6. Also see: Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 11.

357 *Ibid.*, ii-6; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 102-9; Russett & Starr, *World politics*, 144-51. Also see: Heuser, *War*, 13.

might prevent conflict but might also raise tensions.<sup>358</sup> The military strategy links politics to violent activities, including war.<sup>359</sup>

#### 2.2.1.4 *Operations and tactics*

Military strategy's effect occurs at the operational and eventually at the tactical level. The operational level 'encompasses a sequence of tactical actions and modi operandi with a unifying objective, in a series of interrelated operations/battles/combat theatres with the aim of achieving an advantage in a campaign and getting closer to a strategic victory.'<sup>360</sup> The operational level links military strategy to tactics, which 'refer to the art and science of utilization and organization of force on the battlefield during engagements with the opposing side(s) or in close proximity to it/them; with the aim of translating combat skills to a position of advantage or an outright battle victory.'<sup>361</sup>

Similar reciprocal relationships exist between strategy and the operational level and tactics. The relationship between the command levels indicates which level decides and influences the underlying levels.<sup>362</sup>

#### 2.2.1.5 *Reflections*

In general, strategy depends on scale, space, and time. Scale applies to the levels that conduct a strategy, ranging from individuals to large organizations, usually categorized as the tactical and operational levels, respectively, while between levels in practice, different strategies can exist and dynamic influencing takes place. Space is the point where expectations and possibilities link up; time is the period the actor conducts the strategy.<sup>363</sup> Within this study, grand strategy refers to connecting ways and means – DIME – for foreign policy ends. As the case studies concern conflict, the military instrument is likely to be a prominent element of grand strategy, though, without ruling out the other instruments. When and how an actor applies them is a matter of choice.

358 Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 85-7.

359 Lonsdale, "The study and theory of strategy," 35; Russett & Starr, *World politics*, 144-51. Also see: Lawrence Freedman, "Kyiv and Moscow are fighting two different wars. What the war in Ukraine has revealed about contemporary conflict," *Foreign Affairs*, February 17, 2023; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 138.

360 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 17. Also see: Lonsdale, "Strategy defined," 44-6.

361 *Ibid.*, 17. Also see: Lonsdale, "Strategy defined," 44-6.

362 Lonsdale, "Strategy defined," 40-5. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 87-167.

363 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 32, 253-4, 307; Speller, "Introduction," 13. Also see: Heuser, *The evolution of strategy*, 4.

As such, this study applies a broader, looser view of strategy than the Western-centric and state-centric view of Strachan, as the cases studied here are neither Western nor concern state actors. This study, thus, is more in line with Black's view – state-centric nevertheless –, when he criticized Strachan and indicated the overlap with foreign policy:

‘there is need for a total view of strategy, encompassing domestic and international issues, in order to make the best sense of war-preparation and war-making. [...] strategies emerge in part as the product of coalitions of interest, both domestic and international. The terms by which these coalitions are formed and re-formed become important to the process by which strategies are advanced, debated and reformulated. Indeed, the ability to keep such coalitions going is a key element of strategic activity and a central link between war-making and domestic policies and politics. The changes in this relationship are a crucial dynamic component in the strategic equation.’<sup>364</sup>

### 2.2.2 Decision-making in IR: choices

A decision presupposes ‘a decider and a choice among alternatives with reference to some goal.’<sup>365</sup> The decider requires some authority to do so. That authority follows from the decider's position within the command structure: lower levels act according to instructions or goals from higher levels up to the policy level. Decision-making is about making choices.

Theoretically, three factors affect decision outcomes: (1) the occasion in which an actor made a choice, (2) the individual making a choice, and (3) the organizational environment in which the individual operates.<sup>366</sup> These factors imply rational behavior: ‘consistent, value-maximizing choice within specified constraints’<sup>367</sup>, rationality being ‘the strategic pursuit of stable and ordered preferences.’<sup>368</sup>

Not only are the terms rational and rationality heavily debated among scholars, but a significant concern is which criteria indicate rational behavior.<sup>369</sup> People act according to various potential psychological motivators<sup>370</sup>: they sometimes deceive others – or themselves, for that matter

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364 Black, review of *The direction of war*, 475.

365 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 16.

366 Patrick Haney, “Structure and process in the analysis of foreign policy crises,” in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 101.

367 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 18. Also see: Ripley, “Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics,” 87.

368 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 59.

369 For example: John Mearsheimer *et al.*, “Thinking like a state. What makes foreign policy rational?” *Foreign Affairs* 103:1 (2024), 173-9; Robertson, *How to think like a Roman emperor*, 37-44; Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Why smart leaders to stupid things. Is foreign policy rational?” *Foreign Affairs* 102:6 (2023), 154-60.

370 Lloyd Etheredge, “The case of the unreturned cafeteria trays” (Washington D.C.: *American Political Science Association*, 1976); Lisa Legault, “Self-determination theory,” in *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual*

– by proclaiming one thing but acting differently<sup>371</sup>; they might act in ways that others see as irrational while making perfect sense to the individuals involved.<sup>372</sup> Here, ideology might be important, ‘a set of beliefs or ideas that are elaborate, coherent, and integrated and that its adherents put forward to justify the *raison d’être* of their group, organization, or community.’<sup>373</sup> Sometimes, people behave like they expect others expecting them to act<sup>374</sup> – reflecting cultural predispositions<sup>375</sup> – or they behave unconsciously.<sup>376</sup> People usually cannot oversee all possible consequences of their actions, do not acquire a full information position, might have conflicting goals, and might sometimes reach a goal by accident.<sup>377</sup> Since social media, personalized search results on the internet – sometimes including propaganda or fake news – obscure individuals’ views and thus influence rational choice.<sup>378</sup> At best, individuals can satisfy instead of maximize, acknowledging their limited possibilities but hoping to succeed.<sup>379</sup> Thus, decision-making does not necessarily follow a rational process.<sup>380</sup> Additionally, former hostage-negotiator Chris Voss argued that ‘while we may use logic to reason ourselves toward a decision, the actual decision *making* is governed by emotion.’<sup>381</sup> While these ideological and psychological restraints occur at the individual level, these occur at the strategic level too, influencing strategic decision-making.

### 2.2.3 Strategic decision-making in IR: obtaining/holding power

Combining strategy and decision-making into strategic decision-making leads to choices on how, when, and where to apply the relevant instruments of power. However, unlike the term ANSA, strategic decision-making is not merely the sum of the individual elements. Regarding foreign policy ends, the powerplay is primarily – though not exclusively – aimed at other actors in international relations using the DIME instruments. Yet, Clausewitz discerned that reason,

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*Differences*, Virgil Zeigler-Hill & Todd Shackelford (eds.) (Online: Springer Link, 2020); Abram Maslow, *Motivation and personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 35-51.

- 371 Carol Barner-Barry & Robert Rosenwein, *Psychological perspectives on politics* (Prospect Heights: Waveland, 1985), 45-57; Richard LaPiere, “Attitudes vs actions,” *International Journal of Epidemiology* 39:1 (2010), 7-11.
- 372 David Rosenhan, “On being sane in insane places,” *Science* 179:1 (1973), 250-8.
- 373 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 8. Italics added.
- 374 Harold Lasswell, *Power and personality* (New York: W. W. N. & Company, 1948), 15; Lucian Pye, “Introduction. The elusive concept of culture and the vivid reality of personality,” *Political Psychology* 18:2 (1997), 241-54.
- 375 Pye, “The elusive concept of culture,” 253.
- 376 Barner-Barry & Rosenwein, *Psychological perspectives*, 238. Also see: Daniel Kahneman *et al.*, *Noise. A flaw in human judgement* (2021), audiobook.
- 377 Herbert Simon, “Rationality in political behavior,” *Political Psychology* 16:1 (1995), 45-6.
- 378 Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 67.
- 379 Rod Aya, “The third man. Or, agency in history. Or, rationality in revolution,” *History and Theory* 40:4 (2001), 145-6; Robert Cialdini, *Influence. The psychology of persuasion* (2021), audiobook.
- 380 Jerel Rosati, “A cognitive approach to the study of foreign policy,” in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 50; Stone, *Policy paradox*, 233-5.
- 381 Chris Voss & Tahl Raz, *Never split the difference. Negotiation as if your life depended on it* (New York: Harper Business, 2016), 122. Italics in original.

emotion, and chance interact unpredictably.<sup>382</sup> That interaction makes it challenging, if not impossible, to execute plans as intended.<sup>383</sup>

While traditional views on strategic decision-making focused on geography as the decisive factor<sup>384</sup>, modern ideas on strategic decision-making recognize a ‘need to consider each event in terms of cultural perspectives and collective and individual drives, as well as structural factors.’<sup>385</sup> The occasion, individuals involved, and organizational environment influence the context in which strategic decision-making occurs.<sup>386</sup> Most important, and continuing on Clausewitz’s ideas<sup>387</sup>, strategic studies analyst Edward Luttwak observed that ‘the entire realm of strategy is pervaded by a paradoxical logic very different from the “linear” logic by which we live in all other spheres of life,’ and that

‘[w]ithin the sphere of strategy [...], where human relations are conditioned by armed conflict actual or possible, another and quite different logic is at work and routinely violates ordinary linear logic *by inducing the coming together and reversal of opposites*. Therefore it tends to reward paradoxical conduct while defeating straightforwardly logical action, yielding results that are ironical or even lethally damaging.’<sup>388</sup>

Luttwak argued that rational decisions in other realms, in strategic decision-making might prove sub-optimal, if not counter-productive. The reason is that opponents might anticipate the decisions. Instead, actors – state and non-state alike – chose sub-optimal courses of action to surprise adversaries and limit their action perspective. The action-reaction relationships mentioned by Luttwak make analyzing and predicting strategic decision-making challenging, if not impossible, and perhaps more of an art than a science.<sup>389</sup> The relationships also suggest that complexity theory, which assumes context-specific multi-level, multi-directional interactions,

382 Cole, “Clausewitz’s wondrous yet paradoxical trinity,” 43; Heather Venable, “The result is never final. Operation Iraqi Freedom. The greater thirty years war, 1990-,” in *Air power in the age of primacy. Air power since the Cold War*, Phil Haun et al. (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 122-9. Also see: Betz, “In search of a point.”

383 Clausewitz, *On war*, 119-21; Gray, *Modern strategy*, 41; Michael Handel, *Masters of war. Classical strategic thought*, 3rd revised ed. (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 237-45; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 8-13; Peter Paret, “Clausewitz,” in *Makers of modern strategy*, Michael Handel (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 203; Barry Watts, “Clausewitzian friction and future war” (Washington, D.C.: *McNair*, 1996), 9. Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 4; Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 354.

384 Clausewitz, *On war*, 348-51; Kaplan, *De wraak van de geografie*, 42-5; Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 510-2. Also see: Freedman, *Strategy*, 238; Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, viii-ix; Warden, “Smart strategy, smart airpower,” 101-33; Warden, “The enemy as a system,” 40-55. For example: Abu Musab al Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership, date unknown, transl. United States Department of Defense. The letter’s authenticity is disputed among scholars.

385 Black, *Geopolitics*, 272.

386 Haney, “Structure and process,” 101. Also see: Black, “Strategic practice,” 13-4.

387 Luttwak, *Strategy*, xii.

388 *Ibid.*, 2. Italics in original.

389 *Ibid.*, 3-5, 20-31, 87. Also see: Frans Osinga, “On Boyd, Bin Laden, and fourth generation warfare as string theory,” in *On new wars*, John Olsen (ed.) (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies, 2007), 170.

as elaborated in the next chapter, is better suitable for analyzing strategic decision-making than the static, traditional IR paradigms.

## 2.3 Conclusion

This chapter conceptualized ANSAs and strategic decision-making. In IR, ANSAs concern actors that have not been recognized as states by existing states, but which are willing and able to conduct violence to obtain strategic goals. Strategic decision-making is about a decider, who chooses ways and means to achieve foreign policy ends.<sup>390</sup> The actor might achieve the ends by strategic decisions that intentionally seem sub-optimal or counter-productive to outsmart adversaries.<sup>391</sup> This study argues that ANSAs pursue specific policy goals – operating as strategic entities<sup>392</sup> – and possess the ability to make strategic decisions and the capacity and willingness to implement these strategic decisions, if necessary, by violence. So, like states, ANSAs can turn to DIME instruments of power to achieve foreign policy goals. By 2014, that had happened in several cases in the Middle East, including IS and the KRI. Still, IR typically remained state-centric, and categorizing ANSAs proved problematic, making analyzing ANSAs a challenging enterprise. The next chapter addresses how analysts can analyze ANSAs and their strategic decision-making.

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390 Gerner, “The evolution of the study of foreign policy,” 18.

391 Luttwak, *Strategy*, 3-5.

392 Warden, “The enemy as a system,” 45.



## Chapter 3

# Analyzing strategic decision-making

**T**o answer how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during their 2014 conflict, the previous chapter conceptualized ANSA and strategic decision-making. The next step is to introduce how to analyze these concepts. Chapter 3 introduces three established foreign policy paradigms and one alternative paradigm, discusses the state of the art of each in analyzing ANSAs' strategic decision-making, and criticizes and operationalizes the paradigms. The chapter answers how do foreign policy paradigms explain strategic decision-making? This question provides insight into how the study can answer the central research question. In other words, which analytical frameworks exist within IR that might explain strategic decisions taken by IS and the KRI?

The overview of established IR paradigms in this chapter indicates that these paradigms are appropriate for analyzing strategic decision-making by ANSAs. Therefore, it appears theoretically unjustified to express doubts about whether existing geopolitical theories remain valid<sup>393</sup>, whether the traditional paradigms for analyzing foreign policy still suffice<sup>394</sup>, or to establish a new paradigm to explain the geopolitical consequences of IS' and the KRI's rise.<sup>395</sup> Yet, the chapter observes a tendency for the paradigms to incorporate elements of the other paradigms. Complexity theory, as a fourth paradigm, merges these elements. The chapter explores complexity theory as an alternative paradigm.

### 3.1 Analyzing ANSAs' strategic decision-making

Existing IR paradigms struggled to explain the turmoil in the Middle East since 2011.<sup>396</sup> Some scholars argued that 'states are very different from non-states – and we cannot make the

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393 Black, *Geopolitics*, 243-4.

394 Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 78.

395 Cf. *Ibid.*, 78. Also see: Black, *Geopolitics*, 243; Stansfield, "The unravelling of the post-First World War state system?" 259-82.

396 Freedman, *The future of war*, xv.

assumption that they operate according to the same logic and constraints.<sup>397</sup> Others claim they do.<sup>398</sup> Baumann and Stengel thus wondered: '[s]ince there do not seem to be theoretical reasons for not taking on NSAs, the question then is: are there inherent methodological problems that stand in the way of analysing NSAs from an FPA perspective?'<sup>399</sup> Baumann and Stengel did not find methodological objections other than practicalities, such as a lack of available information, as most ANSAs operate clandestinely.<sup>400</sup> Following Baumann and Stengel, that ANSAs are not a distinctive category of actors within IR methodologically, this chapter explores how ANSAs' strategic decision-making can be analyzed using existing analytical frameworks within IR.

Despite scholars realizing that ANSAs are the historical continuity and states the anomaly<sup>401</sup>, since IR fully developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and different perspectives evolved within IR<sup>402</sup>, nation-states were and remained IR's focus.<sup>403</sup> Research in the 1960s and 1970s disputed IR's state-centric approach and whether states were unitary actors<sup>404</sup>, causing a rupture between traditionalist IR and the more progressive foreign policy analysis.<sup>405</sup> IR remained state-centric and focused on interactions within a balance-of-power system; foreign policy analysis incorporated internal processes into strategic decision-making<sup>406</sup>, recognizing that non-state actors exist within – and beyond – the state that exercise influence and hold power.<sup>407</sup> One study contributing significantly to the rupture between IR and foreign policy analysis while simultaneously applying both approaches was Allison's 1971 *Essence of decision*. It is considered one of the most influential studies in foreign policy analysis.<sup>408</sup> Next to the

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397 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 21.

398 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 7.

399 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 502.

400 *Ibid.*, 503; Hegghammer, "Resistance is futile," 48, 49-51; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 4, 63. For example: Abu Abdullah al-Masri, "Principles in the administration of the Islamic State," *Islamic State* [1435H]2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, December 7, 2015; Christoph Reuter, "The terror strategist. Secret files reveal the structure of Islamic State," *Der Spiegel*, April 18, 2015.

401 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 490; Seyom Brown, *New forces in IR* (Washington D.C.: Brookings, 1974), 171. Also see: Bremmer, "The technopolar moment"; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3.

402 Goldstein, *International relations*, 6-10. Also see: Wæver, "Figures of international thought," 7-15.

403 Brown, *New forces in IR*, 124. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 36; Goldstein, *International relations*, 6-10; Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 21; Henry Kissinger, *Wereldorde*, transl. Huub Stegeman (Amsterdam: Spectrum, 2015), 13-7, 34-42.

404 Joseph Nye & Robert Keohane, "Transnational relations and IR. A conclusion," in *Transnational relations and IR*, Joseph Nye & Robert Keohane (eds.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 371, 393. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 39-84; Russett & Starr, *World politics*, 13-6.

405 Darwich, "Foreign policy analysis," 5; Jonathan Paquin, "Foreign policy analysis," in *The SAGE handbook of political science*, Dirk Berg-Schlosser et al. (eds.), (London: SAGE, 2020), 1,218; Tanter, "International system," 7. Also see: Brown, *New forces in IR*, 123-81; Vendulka Kubáľková, "What constructivism?" in *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East*, Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 30; Nye & Keohane, "Transnational relations and IR," 377.

406 Tanter, "International system," 7. Also see: Paquin, "Foreign policy analysis," 1,214.

407 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 16; Fukuyama, *Identity*, 3; Little & Smith, "Introduction," 6.

408 Blatter & Haverland, *Designing case studies*, 3; Don Munton, "The three puzzles. Essence of decision and the missile crisis," in *The Cuban missile crisis. A critical reappraisal*, Len Scott & Gerald Hughes (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2015), 142.

dominant state-centric rational actor paradigm, Allison observed two alternative foreign policy paradigms: one emphasizing procedures and cultures, the other emphasizing bargaining processes among individual decision-makers.<sup>409</sup> Allison applied all three paradigms to a case study for comparison and concluded that the paradigms complement one another. That suggests they are positioned simultaneously, not successive.<sup>410</sup>

Allison claimed that the paradigms apply not only to states but to other actors as well.<sup>411</sup> Allison regarded the paradigms as ‘systematic statement[s] of the basic assumptions, concepts, and propositions employed by a school of analysis’<sup>412</sup>, recognizing they are ‘[w]eaker than a satisfactory theoretical model,’<sup>413</sup> but an improvement compared to the previously employed implicit models.<sup>414</sup> While theories can logically explain past events and suggest similar events in the future<sup>415</sup>, paradigms ‘have no explanatory or predictive power; they are neither testable nor falsifiable, since no expectations or predictions follow directly from them.’<sup>416</sup> Nevertheless, valuable paradigms contribute to developing sound theories<sup>417</sup>, and some authors described the paradigms as summaries of specific schools of thought.<sup>418</sup>

Allison observed that foreign policy is typically studied using what he labeled as the rational actor paradigm. This analytical model assumes events to result from the intentional behavior of actors within IR, typically nation-states<sup>419</sup>, fitting the dominant approach that views decision-making as a rational process.<sup>420</sup> The rational actor paradigm was unable to explain all strategic decisions, though.<sup>421</sup> Therefore, analysts developed alternatives. Allison observed two, which he labeled the organizational behavior paradigm<sup>422</sup> and the governmental politics paradigm.<sup>423</sup> These two analytical models emphasize the institutional contexts in which foreign policy occurs.<sup>424</sup> The organizational behavior paradigm recognizes that different

409 Allison, “Conceptual models,” 690; Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 2-7, 23. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 39-84; Goldstein, *International relations*, 149-59.

410 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 392. Also see: Guilhot, “The Kuhning of reason,” 6, 18.

411 *Ibid.*, 7.

412 *Ibid.*, 114-5. Also see: Samuel Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1996), 29-30.

413 *Ibid.*, 23. Also see: Pijl, *Wereldorde en machtspolitiek*, 258.

414 Welch, “The organizational process,” 115.

415 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 21.

416 Ripley, “Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics,” 86.

417 Welch, “The organizational process,” 116.

418 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 24.

419 *Ibid.*, 23.

420 Stone, *Policy paradox*, 232.

421 For example: Barbara Tuchman, *The march of folly* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 4; Yarhi-Milo, “Why smart leaders to stupid things,” 154-60. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, xi.

422 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 143. Also see: Allison, *Essence of decision*. Initially, the paradigm was called the ‘organizational processes model.’

423 *Ibid.*, 255.

424 Tanter, “International system and foreign policy approaches,” 7-10. Also see: Kubálková, “What constructivism?” 25-30.

organizational entities exist within actors, each with its procedures and cultures, which lead to strategic decisions. The governmental politics paradigm considers strategic decision-making as the outcome of bargaining processes among critical decision-makers.<sup>425</sup> The paragraphs below discuss the three paradigms observed by Allison, encompassing a literature review, a state-of-the-art, an overview of criticism, and operationalization. As suggested by Allison and acknowledged by research, combinations of external and internal factors guide actors' strategic decision-making.<sup>426</sup> Therefore, merging the three paradigms might prove beneficial.<sup>427</sup> Complexity theory implicitly incorporates elements of the three paradigms.<sup>428</sup> This study presents complexity theory as a fourth, alternative paradigm and an avenue for future research on strategic decision-making in general and ANSAs' strategic decision-making in particular.

### 3.2 Rational actor paradigm

Although usually traced back to the classical world<sup>429</sup>, an IR perspective focusing on power and security matured during the 1930s and 1940s. This perspective was the traditional, state-centric approach, assuming that states pursue national interests – relative to other states – within a quasi-anarchic environment<sup>430</sup>, known as realism. Realism was never a single theory, merely a 'variety of models for thinking about the world,'<sup>431</sup> which 'will offer some insight into state behavior, they [realists] do not offer any explanatory perspectives on leadership style or domestic factors that could influence decision-making.'<sup>432</sup> Additionally, 'adherents of the realist paradigm usually do not consider nonstate entities as important actors in major world events because they do not believe that nonstate actors wield sufficient power to affect global disputes.'<sup>433</sup>

Later, neo-realism incorporated elements of domestic politics, perception, and human limitations into the realist model<sup>434</sup>, but maintained that 'systemic interdependence is low [...], that states can be seen as unitary actors, [and] that non-state-actors are relatively

425 Allison, "Conceptual models and the Cuban missile crisis," 690.

426 Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, "Foreign policy making," 239.

427 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 11-2n1, 392.

428 Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, "Foreign policy making," 239. Cf. Mark Lynch, "The end of the Middle East. How an old map distorts a new reality," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2022, 61.

429 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 42-3; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 26. For example: Thucydides, *De Peloponnesische oorlog*.

430 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 11-5; Little & Smith, "Introduction," 3. Also see: Haun, "Air power in the age of primacy," 1.

431 Emma Ashford, "In praise of lesser evils. Can realism repair foreign policy?" *Foreign Affairs* 100:5 (2022), 211-8. Also see: Ewan Stein, "Historical sociology and Middle East international relations," in *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East*, Shahrām Akbarzadeh (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 47-8.

432 Shahrām Akbarzadeh, "The blurred line between state identity and realpolitik," in *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East*, Shahrām Akbarzadeh (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 7.

433 Mishali-Ram, "Powerful actors make a difference," 57.

434 Akbarzadeh, "The blurred line," 7-8; Ashford, "In praise of lesser evils"; Juneau *et al.*, "Neoclassical realism," 8-11; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 11; Stein, "Historical sociology," 47-8. Neo-realism is also indicated as structural realism.

insignificant.<sup>435</sup> Neo-realism assumes an objective reality that does not depend on observers' perceptions but that those same observers will only understand by using 'conceptual/theoretical lenses.'<sup>436</sup> Analysts usually described reality in dichotomies such as 'domestic-international, order-anarchy, peace-war, internal-external, agent-structure, realism-idealism.'<sup>437</sup> That reality also implies that factors belonging to different levels of analysis might be applied to provide sufficient explanations.<sup>438</sup> Neo-realist studies incorporated states' interactions with non-state actors<sup>439</sup> but remained state-centric, nevertheless.

Whereas realism and neo-realism assumed cost-benefit decision-making leading to strategic decision-making, this could not explain all decisions. Some decisions seemed contrary to material self-interest. Feelings of dignity or resentment, following from identity or ideology, seemed to provide better explanations.<sup>440</sup> Yet, 'realism does not address behavior that is based on ideologically driven agendas because it sees behavior driven by self-interest.'<sup>441</sup> A state-centric constructivist interpretation of the politics of power and security thus evolved along that line of reasoning, assuming that collective identity intentionally is socially constructed and that states use identity to maintain or increase their power.<sup>442</sup> Despite these developments, the state-centric and unitary essence of the rational actor paradigm approaches in IR<sup>443</sup> remained intact.

The rational actor paradigm from (neo-) realism not only adopted the so-called metaphysical realism, the assumption that only one objective reality exists.<sup>444</sup> The rational actor paradigm also adopted realism's assumption that this reality is an anarchic environment, and actors deal with it using plausible cost-benefit calculations.<sup>445</sup> This 'consistent, value-maximizing

435 Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 66.

436 *Ibid.*, 70-1.

437 Spike Peterson, "The politics of identity and gendered nationalism," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack et al. (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 169.

438 Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 74-5.

439 Stein, "Historical sociology," 47.

440 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 7-24. Fukuyama used *al-Qaeda* leader Osama bin Laden as an example.

441 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 15.

442 Akbarzadeh, "The blurred line," 8; George Dimitriu & Beatrice de Graaf, "Fighting the war at home. Strategic narratives, elite responsiveness, and the Dutch mission in Afghanistan, 2006-2010," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12:1 (2016), 5; Jonathan Eyal, "Introduction. ISIS – borne of the Middle East's unresolved problems," in *Inherently unresolved. Regional politics and the counter-ISIS campaign*, Jonathan Eyal & Elizabeth Quintana (eds.) (London: RUSI, 2015), 3; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 14-5; Fukuyama, *Identity*, xiii; Raymond Hinnebusch, "The politics of identity in Middle East international relations," in *International relations of the Middle East*, 4th ed., Louise Fawcett (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 163; Kubálková, "What constructivism?" 29-33; Peterson, "The politics of identity," 168, 176-7, 184. Also see: Michel Foucault, *Discipline, toezicht en straf. De geboorte van de gevangenis*, transl. Vertalerscollectief (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1989), 412-3.

443 Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 66. Cf. Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 27; Welch, "The organizational process," 114.

444 *Ibid.*, 70-1.

445 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 27; Guilhot, "The Kuhning of reason," 15; Mintz & DeRouen,

choice within specified constraints' can be described as rationality.<sup>446</sup> Such rational decision-making happens along four consecutive steps: (1) specify the goals; (2) decide which alternatives could achieve these goals; (3) evaluate these alternatives; and (4) choose the most efficient alternative.<sup>447</sup>

The rational actor paradigm's rationality suggests the actor is a-political. The decision-maker – personifying the actor – chooses whatever is the best option for the actor and does not consider any internal political considerations.<sup>448</sup> Because perceived threats and opportunities are the input for these calculations, its proponents claimed that the rational actor paradigm is a valid way to view security issues<sup>449</sup>, assuming the primary concern of nation-states – critical actors in IR, according to the paradigm's proponents – was and remains 'military and territorial security.'<sup>450</sup> The rational actor paradigm held pretty well when applied to different cases and is 'comparatively well-developed, and whose advantages in clarity, parsimony, and operationalization are obvious.'<sup>451</sup> The paradigm is considered most appropriate in analyzing 'long-term policy trends'<sup>452</sup> and strategic issues<sup>453</sup> if there is consensus on requirements and a direct link between decisions and actions.<sup>454</sup>

### 3.2.1 State-of-the-art: identity added

Analysts typically conduct IR in a rational actor paradigm approach.<sup>455</sup> Still, Middle Eastern politics researcher David Romano remarked in 2015 that '[a]nalyses in the neo-classical realist tradition have yet to be applied to sub-state actors.'<sup>456</sup> Despite discussions among methods that

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*Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 6; Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 70-1.

446 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 18; Chatagnier *et al.*, "The decision calculus," 126.

447 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 24; Jonathan Bendor & Thomas Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's models," *The American Political Science Review* 86:2 (1992), 305.

448 Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," 87.

449 Guilhot, "The Kuhning of reason," 20.

450 John Rothgeb, "The changing international context for foreign policy," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 37. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 11.

451 Welch, "The organizational process," 138.

452 Crockatt, *The fifty years war*, 162.

453 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 8.

454 Graham Allison & Morton Halperin, "Bureaucratic politics. A paradigm and some policy implications," in *Theory and policy in international relations*, Raymond Tanter & Richard Ullman, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 58; Joe Hagan, "Domestic political explanations in the analysis of foreign policy," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 121; Bruce Moon, "The state in foreign and domestic policy," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 188-9.

455 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 4; Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 343n5.

456 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 346.

embraced the rational actor paradigm<sup>457</sup> or looked for alternatives<sup>458</sup>, only a little had changed in the paradigm. IR scholar Ryuta Ito, in 2023, recognized the realist phenomenon of hubris or overconfidence as the psychological element of self-deception by decision-makers.<sup>459</sup> As such, Ito added to a growing awareness of psychological factors in IR.<sup>460</sup> Relevant to this study is that Ito's study illustrated opportunities to connect the rational actor paradigm to psychological elements that are important in the governmental politics paradigm. Yet, Ito's study remained state-centric.

In her 2017 study on ANSAs, Ezrow concluded that 'realism can update itself to the 21st century. It can apply a revised version of the logic that it applies to states.'<sup>461</sup> Such a revised version might include special attention to identity, as illustrated by Hinnebusch's 2014 reflection on states in the Middle East: '[w]hile realism assumes the congruence of national identity and the state (thus nation-states), and hence imagines states as cohesive units whose policymakers pursue the "national interest," in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region no such national interest can be assumed.'<sup>462</sup> This lack of national identity might create opportunities for ANSAs that can provide some form of identity.<sup>463</sup>

IR scholar Mohammed Ayooob in 2019 suggested the concept of subaltern realism. Ayooob explored Middle Eastern power dynamics by incorporating unsuccessful attempts to construct stable Arab states from former Western protectorates. These power dynamics led to fragile states that occasionally failed and created power vacuums that benefitted other actors.<sup>464</sup> As such, Ayooob explained the context in which ANSAs emerged and added identity politics to the rational actor paradigm. Similarly, political scientist Edward Last concluded in 2021 that *al-Qaeda* and its affiliate AQIM had distinctive strategic cultures due to specific local circumstances and different strategic objectives, despite sharing a jihadi-salafist ideology<sup>465</sup>,

457 For example: Huntington, *The clash of civilizations*, 43-6, 125-30. Also see: Lamis Andoni, "ISIS and the 'clash of civilizations,'" *Middle East Monitor*, September 16, 2014; Sam Chandler, "Islamism and the 'clash of civilizations,'" *Blogs don't burn*, January 20, 2020; Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in international relations. Power, politics and ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16-7; Gilles Kepel, *Fitna. Oorlog in het hart van de islam*, transl. Frans de Haan (Amsterdam: Contact, 2005), 174; Robert Wright, "The clash of civilizations that isn't," *The New Yorker*, February 15, 2015.

458 For example: Ted Gurr, *Why men rebel*, 40th anniversary ed. (Boulder: Paradigm, 2011), 319-38. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 57-8; Fukuyama, *Identity*, 77, 84-5.

459 Ryuta Ito, "Hubris balancing. Classical realism, self-deception and Putin's war against Ukraine," *International Affairs* 99:5 (2023), 2,038-44.

460 *Ibid.*, 2,055.

461 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 22.

462 Hinnebusch, "Foreign policy in the Middle East," 9.

463 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 56.

464 Ayooob, "Subaltern realism," 59-67. Also see: Jackson, "Warlords," 148.

465 Last, *Strategic culture*, 221-2. Also see: Black, "Strategic practice," 14; Gray, *Modern strategy*, 129-51; Beatrice Heuser & Jeannie Johnson, "Introduction. National styles and strategic culture," in *Insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. National styles and strategic cultures*, Beatrice Heuser & Eitan Shamir (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 10-7; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 14-5. For an alternative view on strategic culture,

which suggests that strategic culture – potentially influencing strategic decision-making – is relevant for understanding other ANSAs as well.

Rational actor paradigm analysis concerning IS and the KRI is widely available, for example, an anonymous 2014 paper on whether the KRI pursued a foreign policy. The paper concluded that the KRI, as ‘de jure a non-state’<sup>466</sup>, had a foreign policy based on economic ties and foreign representations abroad.<sup>467</sup> It observed foreign policy without having many official documents available. Instead, the analysis relied on generic statements via the Internet and secondary sources. The paper mentioned the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a *pars pro toto* for the KRI, implicitly regarding the KRI as a unitary, rational actor. Other analyses adopted similar rational actor paradigm approaches.<sup>468</sup> However, actors do not always conduct strategy rationally<sup>469</sup>, and in explaining how and why they made strategic decisions, ‘academic scholars [...] tend to assume an orderly and more rational policymaking process than is justified.’<sup>470</sup> Kurdish political rights activist Yoosef Abbaszadah in 2015 applied a constructivist approach to the KRI’s decision to support Syrian Kurds who were besieged in Kobani, concluding that a shared Kurdish identity was essential.<sup>471</sup> Like Ayoob, Abbaszadah contributed to developing the rational actor paradigm by adding identity, which – together with the addition of strategic culture – acknowledged the paradigm’s main shortcomings, as addressed below.

### 3.2.2 Critical reflections: simplification

The state-of-the-art approaches to the rational actor paradigm indicate that the basic paradigm is too simple. While the paradigm held pretty well despite the lack of a bureaucratic dynamic, it does not explain how internal structure impacts outcomes.<sup>472</sup> Moreover, the paradigm leaves out uncertainty and ‘strategic interactions,’<sup>473</sup> paradoxically as if foreign policy exists within a vacuum. Furthermore, the paradigm ignores non-state actors and cannot explain the establishment of non-state actors, their motivation and impact<sup>474</sup>, or actors’ counter-productive

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see: Strachan, *The direction of war*, 7.

466 “Iraqi-Kurdistan. Does the Kurdistan Regional Government have a foreign policy?” (Hamburg: *GRIN Verlag*, 2014), 13.

467 *Ibid.*, 14.

468 For example: Gunes, “The IS Factor,” 71-90; Mustafa Mahmoud, “Islamic State attacks two energy plants in north Iraq, kills five,” *Reuters*, July 31, 2016; Greg Shapland, “Iraqi Kurds’ aim of statehood stays out of reach,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, June 15, 2015.

469 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 64.

470 George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 98.

471 Yoosef Abbaszadah, “KRG’s military help to Kobane from international relations perspective,” *Rûdaw*, January 28, 2015.

472 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 17; Welch, “The organizational process,” 138.

473 Welch, “The organizational process,” 119. Also see: Bendor & Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s models,” 302, 305; Clausewitz, *On war*, 78; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 42.

474 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 13.

behavior.<sup>475</sup> Still, within the four decision-making steps, the actor might consider the strategic implications of the different foreign policy options, including their effects on (possible) partnerships. Another criticism involved the paradigm's personifying to the government level, including the basic assumption that people behave rationally, which is heavily disputed.<sup>476</sup> The rational actor paradigm assumes reliable information is available to weigh alternatives and calculate an optimal outcome. Data in the field of foreign policy is almost always blurred, though.<sup>477</sup> This blur includes differences among actors on what constitutes rational behavior, an issue the paradigm ignores. A Western-based cost-benefit calculation might not hold in the Middle East.<sup>478</sup>

Somewhat paradoxically, given that it concerns the rational actor paradigm, Allison and Zelikow argued that the paradigm 'yield[s] two intuitively evident but powerful propositions.'<sup>479</sup> These propositions involve either an increase or a decrease in the perceived costs of the alternative. Whereas an increase in perceived costs will probably lead to not choosing that option, a decrease makes it likely that the specific option is preferred. What to do in case of a third possible outcome – neither an increase nor a decrease – Allison and Zelikow did not mention. In their literature review on strategy and rational choice, Allison and Zelikow concluded that states fight when they perceive war as beneficial.<sup>480</sup> Actors base that calculation on '(1) information (on the basis of which he [the adversary] acts), and (2) interdependence (my best choice depending on his choice).'<sup>481</sup> Other studies have offered more guidance on an actor's threats and opportunities.<sup>482</sup>

Also heavily contested is the rational actor paradigm's metaphysical realism. Philosophers doubt whether a single reality exists. Perhaps more realities exist. Nevertheless, even if all individuals perceive entities differently, according to metaphysical realism, then that is reality. In theory, reality might not be observable by anyone but still be there. This notion is essential as it offers a framework of objectively observable facts that form the basis of hypothesis testing.<sup>483</sup> However, each individual can have a distinctive interpretation of reality. Other fields of study applied this notion by adopting a broad definition of rationality, assuming rational behavior

475 For example: Tuchman, *The march of folly*, 4.

476 Dan Ariely, *Predictably irrational. The hidden forces that shape our decisions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 243-4; Daniel Kahneman, *Ons feilbare denken*, transl. Peter van Huizen & Jonas de Vries (Amsterdam: Business Contact, 2011), 413. Also see: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 24.

477 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 26. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 211.

478 *Ibid.*, 144-5. Also see: Said, *Orientalism*.

479 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 25. Also see: Giulia Calabretta *et al.*, "The interplay between intuition and rationality in strategic decision making. A paradox perspective," *Organization Studies* 38:3-4 (2017), 365-9.

480 *Ibid.*, 25, 46. Also see: Keegan, *A history of warfare*, 59.

481 *Ibid.*, 41.

482 For example: Paul Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the great powers* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), xxiv.

483 John Searle, *The construction of social reality* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 149-97.

not to be explicit cost versus benefit calculations but generally acting in a calculated way. In their perception, actors seek the most efficient way to achieve specific goals.<sup>484</sup> Actors do so by comparing risks versus gains. That methodology does not include weighing factors, basically treating all comparisons equally.<sup>485</sup> Also, the methodology overlooks that opportunities handled wrongly, might turn into disadvantages.<sup>486</sup>

When applying the rational actor paradigm to ANSAs, the analyst needs to consider that the paradigm not only might be too simple but also needs to consider what is reality and what is rational according to the actor analyzed. These issues are essential when operationalizing the rational actor paradigm.

### 3.2.3 Operationalizing: cost-benefit

Although operationalization of a paradigm, strictly speaking, is not possible – as it concerns a framework describing a general way of thinking and not a theory with independent and dependent variables – Allison and Zelikow nevertheless formulated general questions as guidance belonging to the rational actor paradigm:

1. ‘What are the objective (or perceived) circumstances that the [actor] conceives as threats and opportunities [...]?’
2. What are the [actor’s] goals [...]?’
3. What are the objective (or perceived) options for addressing this issue?’
4. What are the objective (or perceived) strategic costs and benefits for each option?’
5. What is the [actor’s] best choice given these conditions [...]?’<sup>487</sup>

The questions above incorporate the actor’s perceptions of rationality and reality. They suggest a rational decision-making process.<sup>488</sup> The first question includes external actors and factors in the analysis, thus addressing uncertainty and ‘strategic interactions.’<sup>489</sup> For the third question, three general options reflect the possible choices for actors when confronted with any challenge in IR: ‘do nothing, attack with their own forces, entirely delegate conflict to

484 Karl-Dieter Opp, *Theories of political protest and social movements. A multidisciplinary introduction, critique, and synthesis* (London: Routledge, 2009), 3.

485 Stone, *Policy paradox*, 236-7, 245.

486 Robertson, *How to think like a Roman emperor*, 39-40.

487 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 389-90. Also see: Bendor & Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s models,” 305; Stone, *Policy paradox*, 8, 233.

488 *Ibid.*, 7, 53-4. Also see: Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma*, 20-1.

489 Bendor & Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s models,” 302, 305; Welch, “The organizational process,” 119. Also see: Boonyarat Phadermrod *et al.*, “Importance-performance analysis based SWOT analysis,” *International Journal of Information Management* 44 (2019), 195.

a rebel organization.<sup>490</sup> A fourth option concerns a combination of either. The remainder of this study refers to these options as hold, attack, delegate, or any combination, respectively. Comparing the cost-benefit analysis of each option leads to the outcome of the decision-making process, at which point the analyst needs to be aware of any bias – in particular, hindsight bias or cultural bias – to avoid wrong assumptions.<sup>491</sup>

### 3.2.4 Reflections

The core of the rational actor paradigm has remained intact despite much criticism as being too simple and occasional additions such as identity or strategic culture. These additions overlapped with the organizational behavior and governmental politics paradigms. Explicit and structural application of the rational actor paradigm to IS' and the KRI's strategic decision-making is lacking. However, the paradigm does seem appropriate, as the implicit application of the paradigm to both IS and the KRI indicated.

## 3.3 Organizational behavior paradigm

Whereas the rational actor paradigm assumes an anarchic environment, the organizational behavior paradigm assumes some form of authority that should be able to solve disputes among internal actors and provide security in controlled territory.<sup>492</sup> The organizational behavior paradigm recognizes that an actor's security 'is primarily a matter of negotiation among executive agencies.'<sup>493</sup> Analysts must include these agencies because they produce incentives, constraints, and behavior.<sup>494</sup> Conversely, the macro-level also influences the meso-level: '[g]lobal factors have affected violent non-state actors' organizational structure, strategy, coherence and longevity'<sup>495</sup>, both causing and facilitating ANSAs.<sup>496</sup> The organizational behavior paradigm assumes actors to be a conglomerate of different sub-units relevant to a specific field instead of regarding actors as unitary organizations.

490 Salehyan, "The delegation of war," 503. Also see: Chatagnier *et al.*, "The decision calculus," 129; Yao-Li Chuang, *et al.*, "Local alliances and rivalries shape near-repeat terror activity of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and insurgents," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116:42 (2019), 20,902; Kenneth Pollack, "Fight or flight. America's choice in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 95:2 (2016); Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 437-9; Posen, *The sources of military doctrine*, 14; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 114-5; "State building."

491 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 19-20, 25.

492 Cf. Ezrow, *Global politics*, 15.

493 Perlmutter, *The military and politics in modern times*, 5.

494 Haney, "Structure and process," 101, 112. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 260.

495 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 41.

496 *Ibid.*, 41n1, 44-53. For example: Gurr, *Why men rebel*, 322-6; Naím, *The end of power*, 54-65; Rapaport, "The four waves of modern terrorism," 52-6.

All sub-units create methods to cope with their specific complexity and uncertainty<sup>497</sup> and will act according to their interests, procedures, and cultures, thus affecting strategic decision-making.<sup>498</sup> Allison and Zelikow observed that within the organizational behavior paradigm ‘organizational behavior constrain [-s] “rationality.”’<sup>499</sup> Instead, standard operating procedures (SOPs) guide the decision-makers towards the course of action and not ‘optimal choice.’<sup>500</sup> The SOPs are the organization’s solution to deal efficiently with frequently recurring challenges based on experiences. Adaptations occur incrementally, and exceptional challenges are ‘attached to the least objectionable solution or else the process breaks down.’<sup>501</sup> According to the organizational behavior paradigm, the process exists of input, which leads through specific sub-actors and their respective SOPs to output, that is, a strategic decision.

The organizational behavior paradigm seems an attractive analytical model to analyze ANSAs’ strategic decision-making, which the rational actor paradigm could not always explain. Analysts considered the organizational behavior and governmental politics paradigms more appropriate when the precise settings and organizational or domestic interests predominate.<sup>502</sup>

### 3.3.1 State-of-the-art: no SOPs

Critics questioned the utility of Allison’s organizational and bureaucratic models<sup>503</sup>, while other researchers had already observed a lack in the models’ development.<sup>504</sup> What is essential for this study is that such models are increasingly applied to ANSAs, realizing that they face the same organizational challenges as governmental bureaucracies.<sup>505</sup> Shapiro, in 2013, used an organizational approach towards terrorist organizations and observed that such groups apply managerial tools similar to that of other, more mainstream organizations.<sup>506</sup> Terrorism researcher Audrey Kurth Cronin pointed out in 2009 that disagreement within terrorist

497 Barner-Barry & Rosenwein, *Psychological perspectives*, 242-3; Charles Lindblom, “The science of muddling through,” *Public Administration Review* 19:2 (1959), 79-88; Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 73-5. Also see: Cialdini, *Influence*; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 39.

498 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 14; Barner-Barry & Rosenwein, *Psychological perspectives*, 253; Gerner, “The evolution of the study of foreign policy,” 23; Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 71. Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 510.

499 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 156. For example: Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 200.

500 *Ibid.*, 156.

501 Ripley, “Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics,” 87; Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma*, 18.

502 Allison & Halperin, “Bureaucratic politics,” 58.

503 Munton, “The three puzzles,” 142.

504 Paul ‘t Hart & Uri Rosenthal, “Reappraising bureaucratic politics,” *Mershon International Studies Review* 42:2 (1998), 236-7.

505 Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 365.

506 Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma*, 2-4. Also see: Jeremy Black, *Rethinking military history* (London: Routledge, 2004), 122; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 9.

groups can lead to spoiler groups or splinter groups<sup>507</sup>, which significantly affect strategic decision-making. Other research confirmed these internal bureaucratic processes.

Political scientists Daniel Carpenter and George Krause in 2015 introduced the idea of transactional authority: within bureaucracies ‘authority is intrinsically shared among the principal(s) and agent. This means that even if the principal employs a formal mechanism at their disposal to control bureaucratic behavior, this can be offset by agency action.’<sup>508</sup> Political scientists John Brehm and Scott Gates in 2015 reached similar conclusions exploring ‘dynamic, *dyadic* exchanges between people as the essence of bureaucracy.’<sup>509</sup> Choosing this approach – focusing on organizations and individuals acting within them – brought both Carpenter and Krause, as well as Brehm and Gates into bureaucratic politics and indicated that organizations do not have either top-down or bottom-up relationships but dynamic relationships that create interdependence and complexity.

Research in 2022 by political scientist Carmen Ho showed that within organizations, bureaucrats tend to take initiatives that benefit the public welfare, not relying solely on political decision-making.<sup>510</sup> Yet, Stephen Biddle in 2021 emphasized the importance of an actor’s internal politics to explain its war-making decisions.<sup>511</sup> The findings of Ho and Biddle contradict the assumption that internal entities solely operate according to SOPs and indicate that these internal processes are much more complicated. Recognizing that Western organizations provided input for the organizational behavior paradigm and bureaucratic politics led IR researcher Zhang Qingmin in 2015 to conclude that because of ‘differences in historical, cultural, and political environments, [...] rigidity should be avoided when applying Western models of FPA.’<sup>512</sup> Qingmin here touched on comparativist scholarship in IR, emphasizing the structure of governing mechanisms for unit-level action.<sup>513</sup> In particular, the field of historical institutionalism has focused on so-called pathways, the effects of early institutional design on long-term decision-making<sup>514</sup>, and

507 Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How terrorism ends. Understanding the decline and demise of terrorist campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 67-70. Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 2, 498. Perlmutter, *The military and politics in modern times*, 5.

508 Daniel Carpenter & George Krause, “Transactional authority and bureaucratic politics,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25 (2015), 18.

509 John Brehm & Scott Gates, “Bureaucratic politics arising from, not defined by, a principal-agency dyad,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25 (2015), 456. Italics in original. Also see: Sharon Gilad *et al.*, “Bureaucratic politics and the translation of movement agendas,” *Governance* 32 (2018), 382.

510 Carmen Ho, “Benevolent policies. Bureaucratic politics and the international dimensions of social policy expansion,” *American Political Science Review* 116:2 (2022), 626.

511 Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, 7. Also see: Biddle, “The determinants of nonstate military methods,” 716.

512 Zhang Qingmin, “Bureaucratic politics and Chinese foreign policy-making,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* (2015), 456. Also see: Wei Ye, “Fragmented soft power. Bureaucratic politics and China’s foreign aid in education to Africa,” *Journal of Contemporary China* (2022), 5-6.

513 Lees, “We are all comparativists now,” 1,104.

514 Hofmann & Yeo, “Historical institutionalism and institutional design,” 306-9; Tangney, “Path contingency,” 37-54.

path contingencies, ‘the mechanism by which institutional legacies and antecedent conditions affect the relative likelihoods of alternative potential governance reforms.’<sup>515</sup> Relevant to the organizational behavior paradigm is that different research confirms the existence of dyadic interactions within organizations and that context matters.

Also relevant to this study is Fukuyama’s 2018 observation that societal changes occurred in the Middle Eastern context of the 2010s, ignited by economic and technological developments, which initiated transformation from a community of villages to a predominantly urban society. Additionally, (social) media presented alternative ways of life that were different from – sometimes contrary to – traditional, local lifestyles. As applied by IS with its interpretation of jihadi-salafism, politicalized religion dealt with the resulting confusion that occurred with the shift and offered guidance on achieving goals. The nationalist account lacked similar guidance but seemed to rely on a zero-sum approach to territory or socio-economic position.<sup>516</sup>

Studies on IS and the KRI increasingly indicated multi-level, multi-directional internal and external interactions. Noyes’ 2016 study “Pragmatic takfiris” suggested considering IS ‘a complex organization influenced by myriad variables that span culture, structure, and agency,’ which should be approached as an ‘adaptive organization – rooted in ideological principles while simultaneously invested in its bureaucratic survival – [...] to understand its actions and better anticipate its decision-making.’<sup>517</sup>

Terrorism researchers Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Thomas Joscelyn in 2022 focused on the phenomenon of strategic learning. They observed ‘a strategic and tactical dynamism,’<sup>518</sup> following the ‘dynamic nature of jihadist groups, including IS.’<sup>519</sup> ‘[S]tates, rival organizations and technology’<sup>520</sup> and ‘environmental pressures, new opportunities, intragroup disputes, and other factors’<sup>521</sup> triggered this dynamic. Ashour reached a similar conclusion in 2021: ‘IS innovated tactics, adapted its operations and alternated between conventional, guerilla and terrorism strategies in mixed terrains (urban, suburban and rural).’<sup>522</sup> Strategic studies scholar Ahmed Hashim argued in 2018 that IS ‘innovated in the fields of ideology, organization, warfighting, and strategies of state-formation.’<sup>523</sup> The inconsistencies in the names of IS

515 Tangney, “Path contingency,” 41.

516 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 64-73, 89. Also see: Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 43-4, 87; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 210.

517 Noyes, “Pragmatic takfiris.”

518 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 380.

519 *Ibid.*, 396.

520 *Ibid.*, 17. Also see: Thomas Hammes, *The sling and the stone. On war in the 21st century* (Saint Paul: Zenith Press, 2006), 288.

521 *Ibid.*, 380.

522 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 23. Also see: Stanley McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams. New rules of engagement for a complex world* (London: Penguin Random House, 2015), 26.

523 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 7, 237.

bureaucratic entities that terrorism researchers Haroro Ingram *et al.* pointed out in 2020 indicate some hierarchy but also ‘structural flux and legion of local peculiarities within an organization.’<sup>524</sup> Ingram *et al.* stated that IS benefitted from ‘a mix of top-down and bottom-up factors, which ISIS sought to leverage with the strategic opportunism that is a recurring theme throughout its history.’<sup>525</sup> In times of prosperity, it allowed IS to transform to conventional tactics, returning to guerilla and terrorism tactics in times of adversity.<sup>526</sup> The transformation fits in a general pattern within conflicts where actors fighting more vigorous opponents tend to apply asymmetric or hybrid tactics simply because they have no other choice if they want to continue the struggle.<sup>527</sup> However, such dynamics require adaptive strategic decision-making ‘to empowered subordinates, forming executive teams, closely united around a common understanding of the mission.’<sup>528</sup>

Studies on the KRI emphasize its internal fragmentation. The International Crisis Group indicated in 2015 that the intra-Kurdish rivalry between the *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Democratic Party; KDP) and the *Yekêtiya Nîştîmaniya Kurdistan* (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan; PUK) remained, each party maintaining their own militia and security agencies<sup>529</sup>, thus significantly influencing the KRI’s strategic decision-making.

Overall, the organizational behavior paradigm has become more complex as organizations exchange knowledge and experiences internally and externally, thus adapting to changing circumstances and being able to make decisions both independently and for the actor as a whole. These findings reflect the main criticism of the organizational behavior paradigm.

### 3.3.2 Critical reflections: non-rational

Critics of the organizational behavior paradigm acknowledged that, in some cases, the SOPs might be enabling instead of restraining.<sup>530</sup> However, ‘[o]nce planning for operations follows set procedures it becomes dominated by the necessity to have all the right inputs, rather than focusing on the quality and timelines of the outputs.’<sup>531</sup> Implications of bureaucracies acting as almost independent entities can be enormous, if not disastrous. If a bureaucracy holds itself politically non-accountable, it might work independently.<sup>532</sup> From that perspective, international

524 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 247. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 112, 153-5.

525 *Ibid.*, 158-9.

526 *Ibid.*, 304.

527 Lonsdale, “Strategy defined,” 49; Speller, “Introduction,” 8-9; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 21.

528 Anthony King, quoted in: Freedman, *Command*, 494. Freedman cited King within the context of counterinsurgency.

529 “Arming Iraq’s Kurds. Fighting IS, inviting conflict” (Brussels: *International Crisis Group*, 2015), 5, 9 Also see: Shapland, “Iraqi Kurds’ aim of statehood stays out of reach.”

530 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 74-5.

531 Freedman, *Command*, 496.

532 Gerner, “The evolution of the study of foreign policy,” 23.

relations scholar Stephen Krasner labeled the ‘bureaucratic interpretation of foreign policy’ to be ‘misleading [...]; dangerous [...]; and compelling because it offers leaders an excuse for their failures and scholars an opportunity for innumerable reinterpretations and publications.’<sup>533</sup> Krasner seemed to shoot the messenger here, and it remains debatable as to what respect bureaucratic organizations either set the conditions for or undermine a rational decision-making process. A bureaucratic organization might not recognize the more significant policy challenge.<sup>534</sup>

Relatively simple organizational rules can still lead to complex behavior. Critics stressed restricting organizational behavior, but organizations, in some cases, enable.<sup>535</sup> On the other hand, even hierarchical organizations filled with procedures, such as the military, are capable of creative acts or deviation from the routines.<sup>536</sup> Another point of criticism is that the underlying assumption appears to be that the sub-actors within both models have conflicting goals.<sup>537</sup> Conflicts of interest do not necessarily have to be the case, especially within crises – when the survival of the actor as a whole is a key priority – most if not all, sub-actors might agree on the goals, though not on how to achieve these. According to one critic, the organizational behavior paradigm

‘does not operate at the moment of decision; rather, it explains deviations from ideal rationality at the moment of decision by highlighting the ways in which organizational routines constrain the formation of options, and it explains deviations from perfect instrumentality after decisions are made by revealing how routines affect implementation. Within those constraints, however, [...] [the organizational behavior paradigm] has nothing to say about the decisions themselves.’<sup>538</sup>

But why should the organizational behavior paradigm be regarded as irrational?<sup>539</sup> From a strategic point of view, the paradigm is also rational; it concerns an efficient way to deal with routine activities. Here, the sub-actor decides the most appropriate outcome in a cost-benefit analysis. The paradigm, therefore, might not apply well to incidents beyond routines. Historical cases have shown that some individuals act rationally by intentionally neglecting SOPs.<sup>540</sup> Historian Don Munton argued that historical evidence suggested that the rational actor paradigm provided better explanations for the Cuban missile crisis (1962). In contrast,

533 Steven Krasner, “Are Bureaucracies Important? (or Allison Wonderland),” *Foreign Policy* 7 (1972), 160.

534 Barner-Barry & Rosenwein, *Psychological perspectives*, 260-1; Gerner, “The evolution of the study of foreign policy,” 23; Ripley, “Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics,” 87.

535 Bendor & Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s models,” 309-13; Welch, “The organizational process,” 126.

536 For example: Ian Morris, *War! What is it good for? Conflict and the progress of civilization from primates to robots* (London: Profile, 2014), 3-5; Welch, “The organizational process,” 124, 126.

537 Bendor & Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s models,” 302.

538 Welch, “The organizational process,” 117.

539 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 156.

540 For example: Malcolm Gladwell, *What the dog saw. And other adventures* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009), 357; Morris, *War!*, 3-5; Welch, “The organizational process,” 124, 126.

the organizational behavior and governmental politics paradigms appeared incapable of delivering accurate answers. From this observation, Munton concluded that ‘[t]he utility of the organizational and bureaucratic models [...], has come into dispute.’<sup>541</sup>

Although Munton’s argument might be valid for the Cuban missile crisis – Allison’s case study in *Essence of decision* – the organizational behavior paradigm has proved its value in other cases by adding to or improving the rational actor paradigm. While most criticism seems normative, the comments that bureaucracies do not exclude complexity or rational behavior are essential to operationalizing the organizational behavior paradigm. Whereas the main line of thought of the paradigm remained intact – that is, sub-entities influencing strategic decision-making – focusing on SOPs appeared obsolete in recent studies, instead applying broader approaches. In particular, in the case of non-Western actors, the use of SOPs to explain strategic decision-making seems inappropriate when operationalizing the organizational behavior paradigm.

### 3.3.3 Operationalizing: procedures

Allison and Zelikow suggested general questions belonging to the organizational behavior paradigm:

1. ‘Of what organizations (and organizational components) does the [decision-making entity] consist [...]?’
2. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations’ existing SOPs create in producing *information* about international conditions, threats, and opportunities?’
3. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations’ existing SOPs create in generating the menu of *options* for action?’
4. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations’ existing SOPs establish for *implementing* whatever is chosen?’<sup>542</sup>

The suggested questions show an overlap with the rational actor paradigm-related questions. In particular, the second question adds internal dynamics to the rational actor paradigm question on threats and opportunities, and the third question adds internal restrictions to the options available. In general, since Allison and Zelikow presented their organizational behavior paradigm, the emphasis on – Western-style – SOPs has disappeared, as an inventory among state-of-the-art research involving the paradigm indicated. An organizational behavior paradigm that recognizes sub-unit idiosyncrasies might be open for cultures that use other means than SOPs. An alternative for SOPs might be the concept of doctrine, which translates

<sup>541</sup> Blatter & Haverland, *Designing case studies*, 3; Munton, “The three puzzles,” 142.

<sup>542</sup> Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 390. Italics in original.

strategy into two main questions based on best practices and lessons learned<sup>543</sup>: ‘*What* means shall be employed? and *How* shall they be employed?’<sup>544</sup> Doctrine offers a broader and more feasible approach to ways and means than strict SOPs.

### 3.3.4 Reflections

Research indicated that IS applied adaptive strategic decision-making, while similar research focusing on the KRI is lacking. The research mainly indicated that IS’ strategic decision-making was adaptive without indicating how that decision-making occurred. Bureaucratic organization and teamwork seem involved in modern-day strategic leadership<sup>545</sup>, but ultimately, the leader bears responsibility.<sup>546</sup> Strategic leadership and the individuals who make strategic decisions are the focus of the governmental politics paradigm, with its individual-level perspective.

## 3.4 Governmental politics paradigm

Lacking comprehensive explanations, some authors point out the effect that individuals and their behavior can have on strategic decisions, like declaring war or maintaining peace.<sup>547</sup> Historically, strategic leadership, either by politicians or military commanders, received much attention.<sup>548</sup> Yet, within IR, the impact of an individual’s quirks on strategic decision-making has long been neglected. Some scholars pointed out that by incorporating these idiosyncrasies, the governmental politics paradigm’s cognitive approach is a ‘useful corrective’ to the rational actor paradigm because individuals use their belief systems to grasp the complexity of foreign policy.<sup>549</sup> Here, macro- and meso-level developments influence the micro-level, thus affecting individual behavior. Therefore, some scholars regarded socio-economic class and economic interests as the actual actors in IR<sup>550</sup>: ‘[g]overnments may be in the hands of persons, groups or movements [...] but *states* as such are neither progressive nor reactionary. It is movement and forces that deserve such evaluative judgments.’<sup>551</sup> While acknowledging that global or

543 Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 348-50; Kiras, “The historical practice,” 322.

544 Posen, *The sources of military doctrine*, 13. Italics in original. Posen studied military doctrine in state contexts.

545 McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 57.

546 Freedman, *Command*, 494.

547 Rosati, “A cognitive approach,” 68.

548 For example: Clausewitz, *On war*, 100-12; Machiavelli, *De heerser*, 131-4. Also see: Gurr, *Why men rebel*, 357; John Keegan, *The face of battle* (London: Pimlico, 1991), 15-27; John Keegan, *The mask of command* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 2-3; Opp, *Theories of political protest and social movements*, 349-50; Petraeus & Roberts, *Conflict*, 4.

549 Rosati, “A cognitive approach,” 68.

550 Little & Smith, “Introduction,” 1-12; Bart Tromp, *De wetenschap der politiek. Verkenningen* (Leiden: DSWO Press, 1995), 412.

551 Immanuel Wallerstein, “The rise and future demise of the world capitalist system. Concepts for comparative analysis,” in *Perspectives on IR*, 2nd ed., Richard Little & Michael Smith (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1998), 317. Italics in original. For a contrary view see: Fukuyama, *Het einde van de geschiedenis*, 269-70.

supra-state level developments influence persons, groups or movements, the governmental politics paradigm focuses on the key leaders involved in strategic decision-making. In the case of crucial leaders, the micro-level influences the macro-level.

Within IR, the governmental politics paradigm assumes strategic decisions to be the negotiated result of contentious politics among the key individuals. All key individuals involved act according to their assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and experiences<sup>552</sup>, knowing the other frequent participators well.<sup>553</sup> The critical characteristic of contentious politics is that no participant controls the outcome.<sup>554</sup> People with similar preferences in similar situations can make different decisions due to distinctive interpretations of available information and what to do with that information.<sup>555</sup> Differences in interpretations might also depend on context, as illustrated by the so-called Miles's Law: '[w]here you stand depends on where you sit,'<sup>556</sup> indicating that the individual's interpretation of a position decides the individual's interests.

The rational actor paradigm typically neglected a cognitive approach within IR analysis, as decision-makers were supposed to act reasonably. As such, there was no urgency to investigate their perceptions and how these influenced the decision-making process: '[a] cognitive approach challenges much of Western thought and practices premised on the assumption of individual rationality,'<sup>557</sup> stressing that the decision-makers' perceptions of the environment will affect the choices taken. Yet, '[i]n order to describe foreign policy beliefs and images, it is important to determine the relevant policymakers involved in the formulation of policy.'<sup>558</sup> Compared to the rational actor paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm intends to be a more comprehensive approach that includes the limits of human decision-making capabilities.<sup>559</sup>

Contrary to the rational actor paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm assumes that multiple realities exist based on developments in natural and neurological sciences.<sup>560</sup> Additionally, some analysts argued that when individuals are studied, understanding the more extensive, macro-level environment in which the individuals behave affects findings on the individuals. The other way around is also valid. To understand a group, one needs to grasp the

552 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 255; Chatagnier *et al.*, "The decision calculus," 127; Gerner, "The evolution of the study of foreign policy," 24; Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 8.

553 Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," 88.

554 Welch, "The organizational process," 122.

555 Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 29.

556 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 307. Also see: Rufus Miles, "The origin and meaning of Miles' Law," *Public Administration Review* 38:5 (1978), 399; Welch, "The organizational process," 120.

557 Rosati, "A cognitive approach," 50.

558 *Ibid.*, 60.

559 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 8; Simon, "Rationality in political behavior," 45-6; Stone, *Policy paradox*, 233.

560 Searle, *The construction of social reality*, 149-97.

individuals making up the group.<sup>561</sup> Interpretations of reality and the creation of identities formed the basis of constructivism as a micro-level view of IR.<sup>562</sup>

### 3.4.1 State-of-the-art: psychological insights

Despite a history of several decades of research on individuals and their belief systems on IR, political scientist Stathis Kalyvas observed in his 2006 study of violence in civil war that ‘individuals are simply absent from current theories of civil wars.’<sup>563</sup> Yet, during the 1950s, researchers developed the social comparison theory, which argued that most people ‘define their identity by comparing themselves to others.’<sup>564</sup> Additionally, since the 1960s and 1970s, social movement theories have focused on political support and mobilization.<sup>565</sup> In particular, social movement scholar Ted Gurr’s relative deprivation theory seemed in line with social comparison theory. Gurr explained political mobilization by frustration on either or both the macro- and the micro-level due to an actual situation perceived to be lagging behind expectations.<sup>566</sup> That frustration can also apply to conflict: ‘[u]ltimately, irregular warfare has at its core a cause based on grievances.’<sup>567</sup> Continuing on relative deprivation theory, Gurr was also involved in the Minorities at risk project, which created a database on political violence towards populations without states.<sup>568</sup> While the number of ethnically motivated rebellions since 1990 decreased due to states’ assimilation of minorities<sup>569</sup>, that trend did not occur in the Middle East.<sup>570</sup> Fukuyama, in 2018, explained political mobilization by identity politics, which during the 2010s took the form of nationalism and politicized religion, as economic and technological developments caused significant societal changes and people searched for guidance. In particular, (formerly) repressed minorities were open to nationalism and politicized religion in search of dignity and sometimes in search of resentment.<sup>571</sup> Research suggested a link between identity and recognition, which needs further exploration.<sup>572</sup>

561 Martha Crenshaw, “The psychology of terrorism. An agenda for the 21st century,” *Political Psychology* 21:2 (2000), 405. Also see: Opp, *Theories of political protest*, 335.

562 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6-7; Hinnebusch, “The politics of identity,” 163.

563 Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 390.

564 Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 63.

565 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 105. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 71-84.

566 Gurr, *Why men rebel*, 322-6. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 57; Fukuyama, *Identity*, 77, 84-5.

567 Kiras, “Key concepts,” 306.

568 Barbara Harff & Ted Gurr, *Ethnic conflict in IR*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 2-5.

569 Gurr, “Ethnic warfare on the wane,” 53.

570 Cederman, “Blood for soil,” 62.

571 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 56-8, 64-71, 82. Also see: Kiras, “The historical practice,” 322-3; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 64; John Rawls, *A theory of justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 136-42.

572 Pfeifer *et al.*, “The politics of recognition,” 4.

Fukuyama's identity politics is reminiscent of the collective identity approach, one of four social movement theories that social movement scholar Karl-Dieter Opp in 2009 merged into one dynamic model of ongoing interaction between macro- and micro-levels to explain political mobilization. Based on their shared characteristic of rationality, Opp incorporated the collective identity approach, political opportunity structure, resource mobilization theory, and framing theory into the structural cognitive model. Opp argued that according to the collective identity approach, individuals wish to belong to a group, thus providing input from the micro-level to the macro-level. On the macro-level, the group acts based on possibilities according to the political opportunity structure and available capabilities according to the resource mobilization theory. Macro- to micro-level communication on macro-level decisions influences individuals, according to the framing theory.<sup>573</sup> The relevance of the structural cognitive model for strategic decision-making in IR is that it acknowledges that actors internally have to deal with ongoing multi-directional interactions between macro-level and micro-level.<sup>574</sup>

In line with 2023 research by political violence researcher Joakim Kreutz, who focused on ANSAs in southeast Asia and acknowledged suggestions by social movement literature that ANSAs often overlap with civil society movements and organizations<sup>575</sup>, such interactions include other governance too, aimed to create popular support.<sup>576</sup> Social movement theory contributes to understanding an actor's internal dynamics in IR. However, social movement theory does not explain strategic decision-making. Unlike the governmental politics paradigm, it focuses on general political mobilization instead of key decision-maker's belief systems.

Still, some overlap between the approaches seems to occur. Studying Turkish foreign policy, political scientist Rahime Süleymanoglu-Kürüm in 2021 found 'an extensive correlation between the sociology of elites and the policy-making process as the periods of change in the sociology of elites overlap with the periods of change in Turkish foreign policy.'<sup>577</sup> Foreign policy analyst Klaus Brummer, in 2017, recognized that the governmental politics paradigm had been applied mainly in American contexts. Brummer tested the model in the German context of consensual democracy when German politics had to decide whether or not to join the anti-piracy mission near Somalia. Brummer found that the two ministers involved agreed on the strategic decision

573 Opp, *Theories of political protest*, 127-303; Karl-Dieter Opp, "Rational choice theory and social movements," in *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*, volume 3, David A. Snow *et al.* (eds.) (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013), 1,054. Also see: Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 64.

574 Freedman, *Command*, 2, 430-1, 464-5, 498; Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 390-1.

575 Joakim Kreutz, "Violence and civil society in southeast Asia," in *Routledge handbook of civil and uncivil society in southeast Asia*, Eva Hansson & Meredith Weiss (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2023), 190-3, 198.

576 Cf. Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 389-90.

577 Rahime Süleymanoglu-Kürüm, "The sociology of diplomats and foreign policy sector. The role of cliques on the policy-making process," *Political Studies Review* 19:4 (2021), 569. Also see: Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 390-1.

but differed on the implementation of that decision.<sup>578</sup> IR researcher Feyyaz Çelik, in 2020, used the governmental politics paradigm to highlight the role of perception within decision-making.<sup>579</sup> Çelik's research aligns with Kirschener's 2015 finding that worries about future security extended intra-state wars. For adversaries to stop fighting, they need to trust their adversaries that they would no longer be a threat to future security. The level of trust relied on the perception of the adversary. The available information about those adversaries influences the perception of the adversary.<sup>580</sup> Kirschener's research seemed to acknowledge prospect theory, which provides some guidance as it proved that people prefer avoiding losses over pursuing gains.<sup>581</sup> Realizing that human behavior is not necessarily rational according to a cost-benefit calculation makes decision-making processes somewhat unpredictable. Psychologist Scott Atran's 2020 research on dedicated fighters in northern Iraq from 2014 onward, found that

[t]hroughout human history, many of the most effective revolutionaries, and violent extremists, have been "Devoted Actors" driven by faith in their group or values, rather than those striving to be optimal "Rational Actors" focusing on the most cost-effective way to achieve their most realizable goals – however, "bounded" by subjective judgments about payoffs based on limited information – or abnormal and deficient "irrational" actors. (This is not to deny that a complex configuration of disparate psychological, cultural, political and economic factors may be involved, in different ways at different times, in generating extreme political violence).<sup>582</sup>

Whether people behave rationally remains debated among psychologists, although Atran's findings agree that context is essential.<sup>583</sup> The context might also be necessary for identity. IS tried to securitize sectarian identities. However, Middle East researchers Fanar Haddad *et al.* in 2022 found that sectarian identity is not a given.<sup>584</sup> In general, theories, as mentioned above, might provide explanations, yet in individual cases, the theories do not necessarily have to be correct and need falsification. Illustrative is Atran's view on Middle Eastern strategic decision-making, in which 'normally the leader makes the decisions, but other interested actors

578 Klaus Brummer, "Governmental politics in consensus democracies," *Global Society* 31:2 (2017), 273-4, 290.

579 Feyyaz Çelik, "Foreign policy decision-making in operational overlap. The UK's policing assistance in Afghanistan through the EU and NATO," *European Security* 29:4 (2020), 458-60, 476.

580 Kirschner, *Trust and fear in civil wars*, 15.

581 Ariely, *Predictably irrational*, 243-4; Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 151; Kahneman, *Ons feilbare denken*, 287-8. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 85.

582 Scott Atran, "Measure of devotion to ISIS and other fighting groups," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35 (2020), 105. Also see: Ariely, *Predictably irrational*, 243-4; Fukuyama, *Identity*, 85; Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 151; Kahneman, *Ons feilbare denken*, 413.

583 John Doces & Amy Wolaver, "Are we all predictably irrational? An experimental analysis," *Political behavior* 43 (2021), 1,225. Also see: Ariely, *Predictably irrational*, 243-4.

584 Fanar Haddad *et al.*, "The politics of identity and sectarianism," in *The political science of the Middle East*, Marc Lynch *et al.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 199.

do try to influence him, such as presidential advisers, senior military and intelligence officers, key cabinet members, party *apparatchiki*, and foreign ministry officials. As the “bureaucratic politics” model argues [...], each of these actors may propose different policies shaped by their special roles and material interests.<sup>585</sup>

IR researcher Waleed Hazbun in 2015 argued that to understand Middle Eastern politics, ‘one needs to analyze the security interests and policies of state elites while also mapping the rival societal discourses of insecurity: how societal actors perceive threats and understand the security of their community.’<sup>586</sup>

Determining the relevant policymakers involved might prove a considerable challenge<sup>587</sup>, especially if the outline of the ANSA is not clear yet. Without explaining why, concerning IS, Hashim observed that ‘an understanding or analysis of the key personalities involved’ is often overlooked.<sup>588</sup> When applied, governmental politics paradigm studies tend to focus on the leader or group of leaders to keep research feasible. Examples of such studies include Osama bin Laden’s decision-making as the leader of *al-Qaeda* and Hassan Nasrallah as the leader of *Hezbollah*.<sup>589</sup> A more encompassing approach is Freedman’s 2022 study *Command*, which dealt with the relationships between political and military leaders during armed conflicts since the Second World War. Freedman concluded that decision-making primarily depended first on ‘the interests at stake,’ second ‘whether the decisions were being taken in a dictatorship or a democracy,’ third ‘the quality of command arrangements,’ and fourth ‘the characters and perspectives of individuals mattered.’<sup>590</sup>

The interests at stake reflect the rational actor paradigm, how the actor arranged bureaucracy and management reflects the organizational behavior paradigm and the personalities of decisionmakers involved reflect the governmental politics paradigm, respectively. Freedman further argued that regarding the second factor that he observed – dictatorship versus democracy –, ‘dictatorships, or indeed any excessively rigid command structure, will encourage sycophancy and tolerance of foolish schemes,’ adding that the advantage of democracies ‘lies in their ability to recognize [...] mistakes, learn, and adapt.’<sup>591</sup> Freedman appeared to apply a governmental politics paradigm approach<sup>592</sup> and implicitly touched upon so-called behavioralist scholarship in IR,

585 Atran, “Measure of devotion to ISIS,” 105. Italics in original.

586 Waleed Hazbun, “A history of insecurity. From the Arab Uprisings tot ISIS,” *Middle East Policy* xxii:3 (2015), 55. For example: Kepel, *Fitna*, 283.

587 Rosati, “A cognitive approach,” 60.

588 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 74.

589 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 87, 92, 170.

590 Freedman, *Command*, 493.

591 *Ibid.*, 12.

592 *Ibid.*, 12.

which focuses on the implications of leaders for unit-level action.<sup>593</sup> Still, Freedman implicitly applied so-called analytic eclecticism, which promotes a pragmatic approach to IR issues, beyond paradigms<sup>594</sup>, as he adopted elements of all three foreign policy paradigms. Such natural, implicit incorporation of all three paradigms leads to wondering whether analysts can merge them.

Overall, the governmental politics paradigm remained largely the same as described by Allison, with developments in psychology improving analysis and recent research indicating the paradigm is applicable beyond the American context. Despite these developments, the lack of change might indicate the paradigm is not used explicitly for its inherent complexity, which counts as its main point of criticism, as discussed below.

### 3.4.2 Critical reflections: complicated

Overall, the governmental politics paradigm is considered too complicated. The paradigm requires a lot of detailed information regarding a specific decision before it can draw any conclusion.<sup>595</sup> First of all, it is essential to map the critical players involved.<sup>596</sup> Then, for each of the key players, their idiosyncratic belief systems need to be developed to enable an explanation of their decision-making process. Critics of this model also underlined that it wrongly assumes the senior decision-maker to be merely a *primus inter pares*. Similarly, analysts criticized the constructivist interpretation for failing to explain why some identities prevail over others.<sup>597</sup>

Psychological research found that people cannot oversee all possible consequences of their actions, do not acquire a full information position, might have conflicting goals, and sometimes reach a goal by accident.<sup>598</sup> On the other hand, empirical evidence pointed out that decision-makers might share similar goals.<sup>599</sup> The level of rationality within this paradigm seems unclear, differing from

593 For example: Davis, "Better than a bet," 476-500.

594 Chernoff *et al.*, "Analytic eclecticism and International Relations," 384.

595 Bendor & Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's models," 301, 314; Rogier de Langhe, "Graham Allison's modellen voor de analyse van internationale betrekkingen. Een pluralistische kritiek," *Ethiek & Maatschappij*, 8:2 (2005), 67.

596 Rosati, "A cognitive approach," 60.

597 Juneau *et al.*, "Neoclassical realism," 9-10.

598 Aya, "The third man," 143-52; Barner-Barry & Rosenwein, *Psychological perspectives*, 238; Simon, "Rationality in political behavior," 45-61; Stone, *Policy paradox*, 233. Also see: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 210; Michael Dobbs, "Why we should still study the Cuban missile crisis" (Washington D.C.: *United States Institute of Peace*, 2008), 3; Bert Klandermans, "The social construction of protest and multiorganizational fields," in *Frontiers in social movement theory*, Aldon Morris & Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 77-103; Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," 88-9; Michael Schwarz & Shuva Paul, "Resource mobilization versus the mobilization of people. Why consensus movements cannot be instruments of social change," in *Frontiers in social movement theory*, Aldon Morris & Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 205-23; Jacqueline van Stekelenburg & Bert Klandermans, "The social psychology of protest," *Contemporary Sociology*, (2010), 3; Tuchman, *The march of folly*, 4; Welch, "The organizational process," 133.

599 Bendor & Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's models," 314. For example: Brummer, "Governmental politics in consensus democracies," 273-4, 290.

rational choice-like calculations to including non-rational elements as well.<sup>600</sup> Decisions might end up non-rational due to the political game behind them. Also, some positions might correlate with specific personality traits.<sup>601</sup> The governmental politics paradigm deals with such individual factors. However, it remains unclear whether it is the organization that molds the individual or whether it is the individual who shapes the organization.<sup>602</sup> Perhaps it is a reciprocal process. It illustrates that the paradigm lacks conceptual elaboration. Still, some scholars see perspective in an adapted version of the governmental politics paradigm.<sup>603</sup> Like the organizational behavior paradigm, analysts consider the governmental politics paradigm more appropriate when the settings are precise and organizational or domestic interests predominate.<sup>604</sup>

### 3.4.3 Operationalizing: perceptions

Allison and Zelikow suggested general questions belonging to the governmental politics paradigm:

1. *Who* plays? That is, whose views and values count in shaping the choice and action?
2. What *factors* shape each *player's* (a) perceptions; (b) preferred course of action; and thus (c) the player's stand on the issue?
3. What *factors* account for each *player's impact* on the choice and action?
4. What is the "*action channel*," that is, the established process for aggregating competing perceptions, preferences, and stands of players in making decisions and taking action?<sup>605</sup>

The challenge with the questions above is to avoid too much complication by making the group too considerable and going into too much detail. Therefore, using the governmental politics paradigm needs an inherent assumption of being incomplete. ANSAs pose a specific challenge, as most operate in obscurity, hiding their strategic decision-makers.

### 3.4.4 Reflections

Developments in psychological research provide interesting input for the governmental politics paradigm. The paradigm can easily become too complicated as psychological and historical analysis of each individual involved is necessary. In particular, with ANSAs, analysts do not know every key player. Within any organization, differences exist between those in power and

600 *Ibid.*, 304.

601 Welch, "The organizational process," 117-8, 131. For example: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 239-41; Morris, *War!*, 3-5. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 3-5, 20-31.

602 Langhe, "Graham Allison's modellen," 67.

603 Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," 88-9.

604 Allison & Halperin, "Bureaucratic politics," 58.

605 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 390. Italics in original.

those with influence; sometimes, the categories overlap completely, usually only partially. In case of overlap, interactions occur, creating complex systems. These complex systems are the focus of complexity theory, described below.

### 3.5 Complexity theory

The rational actor, organizational behavior, and governmental politics paradigms are typical reference points for starting foreign policy research.<sup>606</sup> Applying the paradigms to a single case makes analysts wonder whether they can merge them. Although Zelikow disagreed<sup>607</sup>, Allison suggested they can – perhaps should – be used together:

[the rational actor paradigm] fixes the broader context, the larger national patterns, and the shared images. Within this context, [...] [the organizational behavior paradigm] illuminates the organizational routines that produce the information, options, and action. [...] [the governmental politics paradigm] focuses in greater detail on the individuals who constitute a government and the politics and procedures by which their competing perceptions and preferences are combined. Each, in effect, serves as a search engine in the larger effort to identify all the significant causal factors that determine an outcome. The best analysts of foreign policy manage to weave strands from each of the three conceptual models into their explanations.<sup>608</sup>

Other authors agreed; [t]he interaction/organization model combines the reaction and organizational process explanations into a single model. Prior studies suggested that a combination may be more powerful as an explanatory device than either the international system or foreign policy approach taken separately.<sup>609</sup>

In his study on violence in civil wars, Kalyvas stated that ‘theories of civil war must incorporate a multilevel analysis, simultaneously accounting for the interaction between rival elites, elites and the population, and among individuals. Failing to do so will distort the analysis and miss the mechanisms that mediate between opportunities and constraints at the center and the periphery.’<sup>610</sup> Incorporating multi-level analysis seems in line with metaphysical realism’s suggestion to combine factors belonging to different levels of analysis to provide a

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606 Gerner, “The evolution of the study of foreign policy,” 23; Ripley, “Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics,” 86.

607 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 11-2n1.

608 *Ibid.*, 392.

609 Tanter, “International system and foreign policy approaches,” 12.

610 Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 391.

sufficient explanation.<sup>611</sup> Some scholars doubt whether it is possible.<sup>612</sup> If the paradigms are complementary, analysts can merge them into a single analytical model in which the different levels are interrelated.<sup>613</sup> Combining the paradigms into a single analytical model might be possible when adopting metaphysical realism and using the rational actor paradigm to focus on the macro-level, the organizational behavior paradigm on the meso-level, and the governmental politics paradigm on the micro-level. Then, a multi-level, multi-directional analytical model emerges, reminiscent of complexity theory.<sup>614</sup> Conflicts in multi-ethnic societies such as Iraq and Syria require adopting complexity, acknowledging that '[e]very strategic context is unique.'<sup>615</sup> Time, place, and context determine how an actor – either state or non-state – might decide. Uniqueness is the essence of complexity and complexity theory.<sup>616</sup>

Lacking encompassing explanations on strategic decision-making by the separate foreign policy paradigms, this paragraph explores complexity theory as a potential avenue, basically merging the traditional IR paradigms. Contemporary complexity refers to so-called complex systems, which share a characteristic known as emergence, roughly described as the aggregate that is more than just the sum of its parts.<sup>617</sup> Many authors on themes such as conflict have implicitly touched on (elements of) complexity theory.<sup>618</sup> Yet, '[e]ven though a spate of books, special issues, and articles have eloquently made the case for "embracing complexity" [...] international relations (IR) scholars have been slow to do so. The profession uses the vocabulary but either forgets the supporting reasoning or rejects it outright as a potential paradigm of IR.'<sup>619</sup> Yet, complexity scholars Amandine Orsini *et al.* emphasized that

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- 611 Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 74-5. Also see: Laura Neack *et al.* "Generational change in foreign policy analysis," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 11.
- 612 Guilhot, "The Kuhnian of reason," 6, 16. Also see: Charles Hermann, "Reflections on foreign policy theory building," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 74-5.
- 613 Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 76; Rosati, "A cognitive approach," 67. Also see: Dimitriu, "Clausewitz and the politics of war," 679-80.
- 614 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 35; Holland, *Complexity*, 2-6.
- 615 Lonsdale, "Strategy defined," 53. Also see: Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 358-9; Lonsdale, "The study and theory of strategy," 21-3.
- 616 Orsini *et al.*, "Forum. Complex systems and international governance," 1,031.
- 617 Holland, *Complexity*, 2-6, 49-51. Also see: Margaret Wheatley & Deborah Frieze, "Using emergence to take social innovation to scale," *The Berkana Institute* (2006), 3-4.
- 618 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 25, 35-7, 76, 116-21, 141, 206. For example: Clausewitz, *On war*, 80, 119-21. Also see: Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, nonlinearity, and the unpredictability of war," *International Security* 17:3 (1992-3), 75-7; Black, *Geopolitics*, 272; Cole, "Clausewitz's wondrous yet paradoxical trinity," 43; Freedman, *Command*, 4; Hammes, *The sling and the stone*, 283-4; Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 952; McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 70, 72; Lonsdale, "Strategy defined," 49-50; Lonsdale, "The study and theory of strategy," 26-30; Gary Machlis & Marcia McNutt, "Black swans, wicked problems and science during crises," *Oceanography* 24:3 (2011), 319; Orsini *et al.*, "Forum. Complex systems and international governance," 1013; Prantl & Goh, "Rethinking strategy and statecraft," 443-4; Horst Rittel & Melvin Webber, "Dilemmas in a general theory of planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 120-1; Watts, "Clausewitzian friction," 105-23.
- 619 Orsini *et al.*, "Forum. Complex systems and international governance," 1,009.

[t]here is no point in exploring complex empirical phenomena with a toolbox favoring actor-centered causality in an artificially confined environment only to satisfy methodological concerns. There is also no need to fully “convert” and apply postmodern complexity theory in situations in which actors are many but not infinite, where causality plays a role but is not unidirectional, and in which emergence is not only a system function.<sup>620</sup>

To understand complicated events, analysts should use different avenues.<sup>621</sup> Complexity theory adopts an approach that events are time, place, and case-specific.<sup>622</sup> Some scholars have argued that time and place become less relevant as factors in a developing world where communication and transportation possibilities increase.<sup>623</sup> However, potential adversaries might anticipate and use those same developments.<sup>624</sup> Complexity theory views a situation as the result of multiple complex, interacting processes on different levels – using feedback loops – leading to a particular outcome.<sup>625</sup> Still, relatively simple ‘order-generating rules’ constrain the systems.<sup>626</sup> These imply that ‘a very small difference in the value of initial specification of parameters – quantitative descriptions of the system’s state – can result in very different outcome states of the system across time.’<sup>627</sup>

Complexity theory provides ‘a framework for understanding which asserts the ontological position that much of the world and most of the social world consists of complex systems and if we want to understand it we have to understand it in those terms.’<sup>628</sup> Complexity theory, therefore, is more of a framework – a paradigm – than an actual theory<sup>629</sup>, resembling the abovementioned paradigms. Complexity theory here largely overlaps with analytic eclecticism, promoting pragmatism in IR, beyond paradigms.<sup>630</sup> That very pragmatism can lead to a lack of structure<sup>631</sup>, from which complexity theory and concepts associated with complexity can suffer too.<sup>632</sup> Another

620 *Ibid.*, 1,019.

621 Mouritzen, “Kenneth Waltz,” 74-5. Also see: Neack *et al.*, “Generational change in foreign policy analysis,” 11.

622 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 62, 128-49. Also see: Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 390-1; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 219; Orsini *et al.*, “Forum. Complex systems and international governance,” 1015-6. Cf. Richard Feynman, “The pleasure of finding things out,” in *The pleasure of finding things out. The best short works of Richard Feynman*, Jeffrey Robbins (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: Helix, 1999), 22. Byrne and Callaghan adopted a postmodern orientation to complexity theory.

623 David Alberts *et al.*, “Network centric warfare. Developing and leveraging information superiority” (Washington D.C.: *CAISR Cooperative Research Program*, 1999), 19.

624 Cf. Luttwak, *Strategy*, 2

625 Burnes, “Complexity theories and organizational change,” 74; Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 22, 62, 128-49; Holland, *Complexity*, 3; Stone, *Policy paradox*, 97. Also see: Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 390-1.

626 Burnes, “Complexity theories and organizational change,” 74.

627 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 19.

628 *Ibid.*, 8.

629 Burnes, “Complexity theories and organizational change,” 74, 85; Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity Theory*, 8; Orsini *et al.*, “Forum. Complex systems and international governance,” 1,010.

630 Chernoff *et al.*, “Analytic eclecticism and International Relations,” 384.

631 *Ibid.*, 390.

632 Osinga, “On Boyd,” 167.

academic field with which complexity overlaps is historical institutionalism, which also addresses feedback mechanisms. Focusing on institutional pathways or path contingencies<sup>633</sup>, historical institutionalism has a narrower view than complexity theory, though.

Complexity theory's interactions and feedback loops allow merging paradigms that reflect macro-, meso- and micro-levels. A fundamental assumption of complexity theory is that for complex (social) systems – including actors in IR – linear explanations with a single independent variable or a minimal number of independent variables are not sufficient to understand a reality that is complex too.<sup>634</sup> Instead, complexity theory seeks non-linear explanations, assuming 'changes in effects which are disproportionate to the changes in the causal element(s).'<sup>635</sup>

Within complexity theory, two subfields have emerged: studies of complex physical systems (CPS) and complex adaptive systems (CAS). CPS studies focus on 'geometric [...] arrays of elements, in which interactions typically depend only on effects propagated from its nearest neighbours'<sup>636</sup>, whereas CAS studies focus on elements – so-called agents – that are not fixed and show some form of agency in response to interactions with other systems. Agents adapt according to interactions with other agents and the environment, leading to diversity, emergence, and possible examination of alternative options before execution.<sup>637</sup> Studies of social systems – like actors in IR – concern CAS studies given human agency. As complexity theory is merely a framework, instead of a theory, it does not provide variables or structure. Analysts using complexity theory should realize that complexity is not a reality but a way to approach observations.<sup>638</sup>

Overall, '[t]here *are* causes for the events in a complex system, but there are so many causes and so many events linked to one another through so many direct and indirect paths that the outcome is *practically* unpredictable.'<sup>639</sup> Thus, decision-making is not only a top-down or bottom-up process but a dynamic in which strategic, operational, and tactical occurrences influence the other levels.<sup>640</sup>

633 For example: Hofmann & Yeo, "Historical institutionalism and institutional design," 306-32; Tangney, "Path contingency," 37-54.

634 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 19. Also see: Snyder, "Anarchy and culture," 9.

635 *Ibid.*, 18. Also see: Holland, *Complexity*, 4; Voss, *Never split the difference*, 114.

636 Holland, *Complexity*, 6.

637 *Ibid.*, 6-36, 44-6, 80.

638 Cf. Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 19.

639 McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 59. Italics in original. Also see: Beyerchen, "Clausewitz," 75-7; Clausewitz, *On war*, 80, 119-21; Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 35-7, 206; Hammes, *The sling and the stone*, 283-4; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 7; Watts, "Clausewitzian friction," 105-23; Venable, "The result is never final," 122-9. Cf. Freedman, *Command*, 4.

640 Speller, "Introduction," 13-4.

### 3.5.1 State-of-the-art: implicitly applied

Without explicitly referring to complexity or complexity theory, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations Mark Leonard observed in 2022 the emergence of network-like organizations in addition to – sometimes merging with – hierarchical organizations during the twenty-first century. The nodes of network-like organizations are in constant flux, thus blurring the differences between internal and external and domestic and external.<sup>641</sup> IR scholars Jochen Prantl and Evelyn Goh reached similar conclusions in their 2022 study of strategic diplomacy. Prantl and Goh stated that ‘contemporary international order is best understood as a complex adaptive system, with three key properties: interconnectedness, non-linearity and emergence.’<sup>642</sup> According to Orsini *et al.*, who in 2020 applied complexity to IR, complex systems in IR are characterized by self-organization, emergence, and adaptation. These characteristics cause non-linear behavior. Proper analysis thus requires a non-linear analytical approach.<sup>643</sup> Yet, these observations were nothing new. Political scientist Antoine Bousquet in 2008 observed an increase in adopting non-linear approaches to conflict since the 1970s.<sup>644</sup> During the 2000s, insurgencies used ‘decentralized networks to good effect against better-equipped forces.’<sup>645</sup> Former marine colonel Thomas Hammes, in 2008, labeled this fourth-generation warfare, which ‘uses all available networks – political, economic, social and military – to convince the enemy’s decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit.’<sup>646</sup> In systems like that, ‘power is defined by both profound concentration and by massive distribution,’ yet ‘the more power is spread to the periphery, the more powerful the core must become.’<sup>647</sup>

Kalyvas stated that ‘war is a transformative phenomenon, and civil war even more so. The advent of war transforms individual preferences, choices, behavior, and identities – and the main way in which civil war exercises its transformative function is through violence. In other words, there are several ways in which violence works as an independent variable.’<sup>648</sup> As conflict is a dynamic activity, ‘theories that assume actors and preferences to be frozen in their prewar

641 Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 95, 133-8.

642 Prantl & Goh, “Rethinking strategy and statecraft,” 450. For an alternative approach see: Walter Clemens, ‘Complexity theory as a tool for understanding and coping with ethnic conflict and development issues in post-Soviet Eurasia,’ *International Journal of Peace Studies* 7:2 (2002), 2-4.

643 Orsini *et al.*, “Forum. Complex systems and international governance,” 1,010-1, 1,033.

644 Antoine Bousquet, “Chaoplex warfare or the future of military organization,” *International Affairs* 84:5 (2008), 923-5. Bousquet used the term chaoplexity when referring to approaches that used chaos and/or complexity theory.

645 *Ibid.*, 929.

646 Thomas Hammes, “War evolves into the fourth generation,” in *Global insurgency and the future of armed conflict. Debating fourth generation warfare*, Aaron Karp *et al.* (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2008), 42. Also see: Osinga, “On Boyd,” 168-70.

647 Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 138.

648 Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 389.

manifestations, and rely on this assumption to explain various aspects of civil wars, such as their onset, duration, or termination, will be biased.<sup>649</sup>

Counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen, in 2010, suggested complexity theory to understand insurgent movements – at the time of writing, focusing on *al-Qaeda*.<sup>650</sup> Strategic studies scholar James Kiras – like Kilcullen from a counterinsurgency perspective – stated in 2016 that ‘[f]ew campaigns [...] involved monolithic insurgent groups, populations or governments. Petty jealousies, rivalries and struggles for predominance between competing factions shifting allegiances and indifference and incompetence between all three, as well as the practical difficulties of comprehending these, much less dealing directly with them, is the stuff of irregular warfare.’<sup>651</sup> Kiras continued that environments such as Iraq and Syria contain ‘seemingly brutal and indiscriminate violence,’ that ‘reflects the complex tapestry of motivations and uses of political violence at the organizational and local level between numerous competing groups.’<sup>652</sup> Many studies have tried to explain Middle Eastern ANSAs, implicitly using complexity theory by combining multiple variables into a single explanation, but without explicitly referring to complexity theory or explaining the analytical framework.<sup>653</sup> Kiras stressed that complexity applies to almost every irregular war.<sup>654</sup>

Many studies on IS shared not only their focus on external actors and factors concerning IS but also not choosing an integrated approach and focusing on one or a few explanations.<sup>655</sup> The lack of integration is remarkable, as the many and very different explanations suggest that reality is complex and does not allow simple explanations: ‘[f]rom a complexity point of view there really are no such things as variables which exist outside cases and have causal powers over cases.’<sup>656</sup> However, some studies reached promising conclusions regarding a ‘perfect storm’<sup>657</sup> and suggested that the situation is unique in both time and place, as well as context<sup>658</sup>, thus leaving room for a complexity theory approach, using an observed reality from which the analyst constructs a model providing the best possible explanation.<sup>659</sup>

649 *Ibid.*, 389.

650 David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 166.

651 Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 354.

652 *Ibid.*, 354. Also see: Black, *Military strategy*.

653 For example: Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, “Foreign policy making,” 258; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 11; Mason, “Strategic depth,” 96-108.

654 Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 354, 368-9.

655 For example: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 15, 22-3, 198; Richard Barrett, “The Islamic State” (New York: *Soufan Group*, 2014), 4-7, 58; Ghassan Charbel, “While the rest of the world is watching the world cup, we are watching the collapse of Iraq,” transl. Middle East Media Research Institute, *Al-Hayat*, June 13, 2014; David Gardner, “ISIS. Armed and Dangerous,” *Financial Times*, August 14, 2014; McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 19; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 6-7.

656 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 201.

657 Sarah Canna & Tom Rieger, “Multi-method assessment of ISIL in support of SOCCENT. Subject matter expert elicitation summary report (July-November 2014),” *SOCCENT*, January 2015, 10.

658 For example: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 9.

659 Cf. Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 62, 80-5, 128-53.

Political scientist Sara Mustafa, in a 2021 study, focused on timeliness for explaining the KRI's 2017 independence referendum. Mustafa observed that tensions with the Iraqi state and the attack by IS influenced different interacting layers within the KRI, which caused the KRI to announce the referendum in 2017.<sup>660</sup> Without explicitly referring to complexity theory, Mustafa applied various complexity theory factors, such as multi-level interactions, emergence, fluidity of borders, and timing<sup>661</sup>, indicating that such an approach leads to sound explanations. IR scholar Jasmine Gani conducted another study that applied complexity theory. Acknowledging that analysts influence the environment studied, Gani used a complexity approach to the Arab Uprisings and concluded in 2022 that Western academic institutions affected and eventually disrupted the protests. Yet, she observed that 'they have a chance to at least expand the parameters and options of effective foreign policy-making.'<sup>662</sup>

### 3.5.2 Critical reflections: no structure

As Gani's research indicated, it is important to notice is that a CAS consists of agents, which sometimes are complex systems themselves. Interaction takes place by a CAS as a whole with another CAS and its environment and its components, which might interact with other elements and their environments, often without a central executive. The interactions occur as input through detectors, usually senses, which are assigned some credit based on experience or knowledge. Interactions of different kinds happen continuously on different levels, where overlap with another CAS occurs. This overlap inherently means that boundaries – or borders, for that matter – are non-existent. Boundaries within complexity theory are mere instruments to describe systems and the activities of systems. Within a CAS occurs 'interpenetration, layering, and multi-directional causality.'<sup>663</sup> These processes make modeling complexity difficult, if not impossible unless the model is as complex as reality itself<sup>664</sup>, 'it is nevertheless necessary to try.'<sup>665</sup>

This empirical approach prevents confirmation bias, the risk of focusing on what fits the analyst's preconception, which is a likely risk using either one or more of the established IR paradigms.<sup>666</sup> Complexity theory, as such, describes reality the best it can, but given the nature of a CAS, it will be unable to predict the future accurately.<sup>667</sup>

660 Mustafa, "Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum," 891.

661 *Ibid.*, 895-904.

662 Gani, "From discourse to practice," 65.

663 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 30-5; Holland, *Complexity*, 4-5, 25-8.

664 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 65. For a contrary view see: Holland, *Complexity*, 9-12, 25, 89-90.

665 *Ibid.*, 37.

666 Cf. Freedman, *Command*, 478.

667 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 82; McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 72.

The nature of a CAS has consequences for analysts studying a CAS and for agents within a CAS. Neither the analysts nor the agents possess omnipotence, which limits their analysis and their actions, respectively, by so-called bounded rationality. For analysts, bounded rationality means they cannot conduct exhaustive searches. For individuals, bounded rationality implies they cannot oversee all possible consequences of their actions, do not acquire a full information position, might have conflicting goals, and might sometimes reach a goal by accident.<sup>668</sup> The concept of bounded rationality implies that reality exists. How agents view reality is a social construction, as agents cannot oversee everything. Therefore, any structure that describes a CAS is a metaphor, but a metaphor that describes a reality. Modeling complexity is capturing reality in a metaphor.<sup>669</sup> A nice metaphor was used by former air force commodore and strategic studies scholar Frans Osinga when he criticized fourth-generation warfare for its ‘jelly-like character; variable in shape and substance, and refusing to be nailed against the wall.’<sup>670</sup> The jelly-like character might be true for complexity theory in general. Yet, ‘[t]here is a reality within which all the entities operate, interpenetrate, and mutually and reflexively express causal powers.’<sup>671</sup>

For complex systems, the reality is time-, place-, and case-specific.<sup>672</sup> This implies that the cases in this study are unique, and analysts cannot extend their validity to other cases. It also means that operationalizing complexity theory, strictly speaking, is impossible as it concerns a paradigm and is tricky as no similar cases exist for reference. The solution to come as close to operationalization as possible is to abstract or zoom out, which the following section explores.

### 3.5.3 Operationalizing: uniqueness

Complex social systems do not constantly exercise power over time; social structures evolve, making these time-sensitive.<sup>673</sup> In reality, ‘identical situations rarely, if ever, recur.’<sup>674</sup> Time itself is socially constructed and relative, depending on the observation frame. Actors are future-orientated, anticipating potential futures that may never become reality.<sup>675</sup> ‘Recognizing that time is constructed out of and in relation to the real reflects the essence of complexity thinking.’<sup>676</sup> Similar observations apply to space: ‘not only is space socially constructed, but

668 Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 343.

669 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 30-4, 43, 52; Holland, *Complexity*, 4-5, 24-5, 69-70; Orsini *et al.*, “Forum. Complex systems and international governance,” 1,014; Simon, “Rationality in political behavior,” 45-6.

670 Osinga, “On Boyd,” 167.

671 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 45.

672 *Ibid.*, 62, 128-49.

673 *Ibid.*, 50.

674 Holland, *Complexity*, 82. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, xii.

675 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 142. Also see: Holland, *Complexity*, 86.

676 *Ibid.*, 145.

that in its turn the social is spatially constructed.<sup>677</sup> Space not only concerns geography but also social networks that interact. In both realms, boundaries are fluid as interactions take place.<sup>678</sup>

Acknowledging time-, space- and context-specific cases, complexity theory analysts work from collected data from reality to draw their conclusions from, not from agent-based simulations or hypotheses. As such, complexity theory views individuals as complex systems, possessing agency individually and collectively, simultaneously being an individual and a group member. Understanding such complex systems only works by recognizing and incorporating the role of reflexive human agents.<sup>679</sup> It is important to note that '[e]verything in the social world is the product of something done by human beings.'<sup>680</sup> Sometimes, causes in complex systems cause themselves, either directly or indirectly, for example battlefield momentum. And as everything in the social world results from human agency, this might also include things not done on purpose. A vital consequence of the idea that individuals cause everything in the social world is that researchers themselves influence that social world.<sup>681</sup>

For modeling a CAS, it is relevant to consider that (1) 'the behaviour of a CAS is always *generated* by the adaptive interactions of its components,' and that (2) 'the hierarchical structure characteristic of CAS is also generated – particular combinations of agents become agents at the next level up.'<sup>682</sup> Complexity theory views a situation as the result of multiple complex processes on different levels, leading to a particular outcome. It implies that the outcome is specific for this time and space and might evolve further.<sup>683</sup>

Acknowledging methodological restrictions, these elements do offer structure and lead to the following sub-questions:

1. What time-specific actors and factors are relevant for the actor's strategic decision-making?
2. What space-specific actors and factors are relevant?
3. What context-specific actors and factors are relevant?
4. Which multi-layered and multi-directional processes/links affect the outcome?

Applying complexity theory might present a promising avenue to merge (elements of) the established IR paradigms, mentioned earlier, and study the conflict between IS and the KRI

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677 *Ibid.*, 131.

678 *Ibid.*, 132-3. For example: Lynch, "The end of the Middle East," 61-3. Also see: Said, *Orientalism*.

679 *Ibid.*, 40-1, 180-1, 193, 249.

680 *Ibid.*, 50.

681 *Ibid.*, 65-6, 180-1, 252.

682 Holland, *Complexity*, 32. Italics in original.

683 *Ibid.*, 21. Also see: Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity Theory*, 128-49.

from a multi-directional, multi-layered, and multi-disciplinary perspective. Complexity theory has already been applied quite promisingly to study IS, focusing on both external and internal factors.<sup>684</sup> Usually, these studies occurred without explicitly elaborating on complexity theory itself and – in line with most complexity theory social studies – without including psychology in the analysis<sup>685</sup> or by applying another theory.<sup>686</sup>

Recent observations on IS' multi-level, multi-directional interactions suggest complexity. Occasionally, studies explicitly referred to complexity without mentioning complexity theory. However, they sometimes overlapped with other earlier-mentioned analytical approaches.<sup>687</sup> Several studies observed a link between complexity and technological developments, as 'new technologies have created an unprecedented proliferation of opportunities for small, historically disenfranchised actors to have a butterfly effect.'<sup>688</sup> Overall, armed conflict has become 'much more complex, with large and cumbersome armies.'<sup>689</sup> Additionally, '[i]n modern warfare, there is a complex interplay between political objectives and military options.'<sup>690</sup> Ingram *et al.* observed 'a mix of top-down and bottom-up factors, which ISIS sought to leverage with the strategic opportunism that is a recurring theme throughout its history'<sup>691</sup>, which required adaptive strategic decision-making.<sup>692</sup> Such observations recognize the need for an appropriate analytical framework.

### 3.5.4 Reflections

Complexity theory is nothing new. Many of Clausewitz's writings implicitly mention complexity as a phenomenon and form a rudimentary version of complexity theory. The paradoxes that Clausewitz, and later Luttwak, observed within the realm of strategy seem to acknowledge complexity theory as a well-suited approach to analyze strategic decision-making. Consisting of elements of the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm – and probably many other theories and paradigms – complexity theory might provide a suitable overall framework to analyze strategic decision-making.

684 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 21.

685 Cf. Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 214.

686 For example: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 22-5.

687 For example: *Ibid.*, 380; McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 60; Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris."

688 McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 62. Cf. Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 15; Hammes, *The sling and the stone*, 284; Naim, *The end of power*, 54-65.

689 Freedman, *Command*, 461. Cf. Keegan, *A history of warfare*, 386.

690 *Ibid.*, 513. For example: Fishman, *The master plan*, 112, 153-5.

691 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 158-9.

692 Cf. Freedman, *Command*, 494.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter started with the observation that no methodological objections exist to studying ANSAs from a foreign policy perspective.<sup>693</sup> The absence of methodological objections implies that the analyst can use the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm, whether the analysis concerns state actors or ANSAs, which creates opportunities for comparative research. The difference exists between the paradigms that ask different questions regarding a case. Analysts need to be aware of the opportunities and constraints of each paradigm, choosing the paradigm that best fits their needs or – preferably, as it offers a more complete explanation – use a combination of paradigms. While recent research in line with any of the paradigms tends to adopt elements from the other paradigms, the rational actor paradigm remains the dominant approach within IR, seemingly dominating the study of Middle Eastern ANSAs. The rational actor paradigm’s dominance implies that analysts attribute strategic decisions to the entire actor. At the same time, procedural or idiosyncratic explanations sometimes might be more appropriate and have proven their value. Despite being contested, the paradigms can be complementary, that is, part of a single analytical framework that, with its multi-layered and possible multi-directional processes, is similar to complexity theory.

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693 Baumann & Stengel, “Foreign policy analysis,” 503; Hegghammer, “Resistance is futile,” 48, 49-51; Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma*, 4, 63. For example: Masri, “Principles in the administration of the Islamic State”; Reuter, “The terror strategist.”

## Chapter 4

### Context and actors

**T**he previous chapter sketched different IR paradigms for analyzing ANSAs' strategic decision-making, each focusing on specific factors of the actors studied. This chapter introduces the ANSAs IS and the KRI according to the factors relevant for the different paradigms to provide the necessary background before applying the paradigms to specific cases. Chapter 4 answers to what extent particular factors – belonging to the different IR paradigms – influence the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI. These factors provide the background for the case studies in the following three chapters. For the rational actor paradigm, these factors concern the actor's grand strategy; for the organizational behavior paradigm, the actor's organizational structure, as well as the actor's ideological framework that shapes decision-making and acts as alternative SOPs; for the governmental politics paradigm the actor's leadership; and for complexity theory the time and space specific context. The following paragraph describes the context that shaped the emergence of IS and the KRI.

This chapter observes Iraq as a historically internally fragmented state. When the Iraqi state appeared weakest in 2014, IS and the KRI aimed for territory and autonomy. Yet, IS and the KRI suffered from internal ideological and organizational fragmentation. IS' religious ideology was disputed among other jihadi-salafist organizations – notably *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates – and jihadi-salafist groups occasionally joined or left IS, despite IS' strict hierarchical internal organization with undisputed leaders. Within the KRI, fragmentation had led to different interpretations of Kurdish nationalism within the Barzani- and Talabani-dominated areas. Within international relations, the KRI maintained good relations with its Western allies, whereas IS was a pariah. Nevertheless, that pariah was able to push back ISF from northern Iraq in 2013-2014.

#### 4.1 Iraq

Iraq's history is relevant for understanding the emergence of both IS and the KRI. Iraq provided the circumstances and, thus, the context in which IS and the KRI emerged and

evolved.<sup>694</sup> The area is among history's most fought-over grounds. Actors from either the Syrian deserts in the west or the Persian plains in the east historically have invaded the lands, often benefitting from disagreement among the peoples there.<sup>695</sup> Modern Iraq emerged after the First World War<sup>696</sup>, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and its former territory was mainly under the control of France and Great Britain, which divided the area into spheres of influence in the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916).

The Sykes-Picot Agreement sketched – literally – the British and French mandate territories, which would eventually evolve into independent states themselves after the Second World War.<sup>697</sup> Although the Sykes-Picot treaty never came into fruition<sup>698</sup>, it was regarded illustrative of the destructive effect of Western neo-colonialism on the Middle East<sup>699</sup>: '[i]t is often erroneously assumed that the causes of all modern Middle Eastern conflict lie in the First World War, which is perhaps understandable given the significant political, social, economic, and cultural changes it provoked,' but not sustainable given 'the longevity of numerous causal factors, the proximity of religious claims, and population distribution.'<sup>700</sup>

Since the 1920s, a Sunni minority governed Shia-dominated Iraq. Sunni control continued when a coup in 1963 brought the *Ba'ath* (rebirth) party to power, which, despite its pan-Arab nationalist ideology, was dominated by Sunnis. Through internal powerplay, in 1968, Saddam Hussein became vice-chairman of *Ba'ath's* regional command council, finally seizing total control over Iraq in 1979.<sup>701</sup> *Ba'ath* longed for a robust Arab nation-state and regarded Kurdish nationalism as a threat to this ideal. Iranian support for rebellious Iraqi Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) seemed to confirm this perceived threat of Kurdish nationalism. Since the 1991 Gulf War – operation "Desert Storm" – Iraq started disintegrating with American-monitored no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq, aimed at protecting the Kurdish and Shia populations, respectively, with the intention of provoking uprisings that would topple Hussein's regime. United Nations Security Council Resolution 688 led to the establishment of the de facto independent KRI.<sup>702</sup>

694 Eyal, "Introduction," 1; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 17; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 13.

695 Kaplan, *De wraak van de geografie*, 309-10. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 125; Lawrence, *Zeven zuilen van wijsheid*, 72-3; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 9.

696 Robert Fisk, *The great war for civilisation. The conquest of the Middle East* (London: Harper Collins, 2005), 180-2.

697 James Barr, *A line in the sand. The Anglo-French struggle for the Middle-East, 1914-1948* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 283-97. Also see: Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 150.

698 Robert Johnson & James Kitchen, "Introduction. The Great War in the Middle East. The clash of empires and global war," in *The Great War in the Middle East. A clash of empires*, Robert Johnson & James Kitchen (eds.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 4, 8.

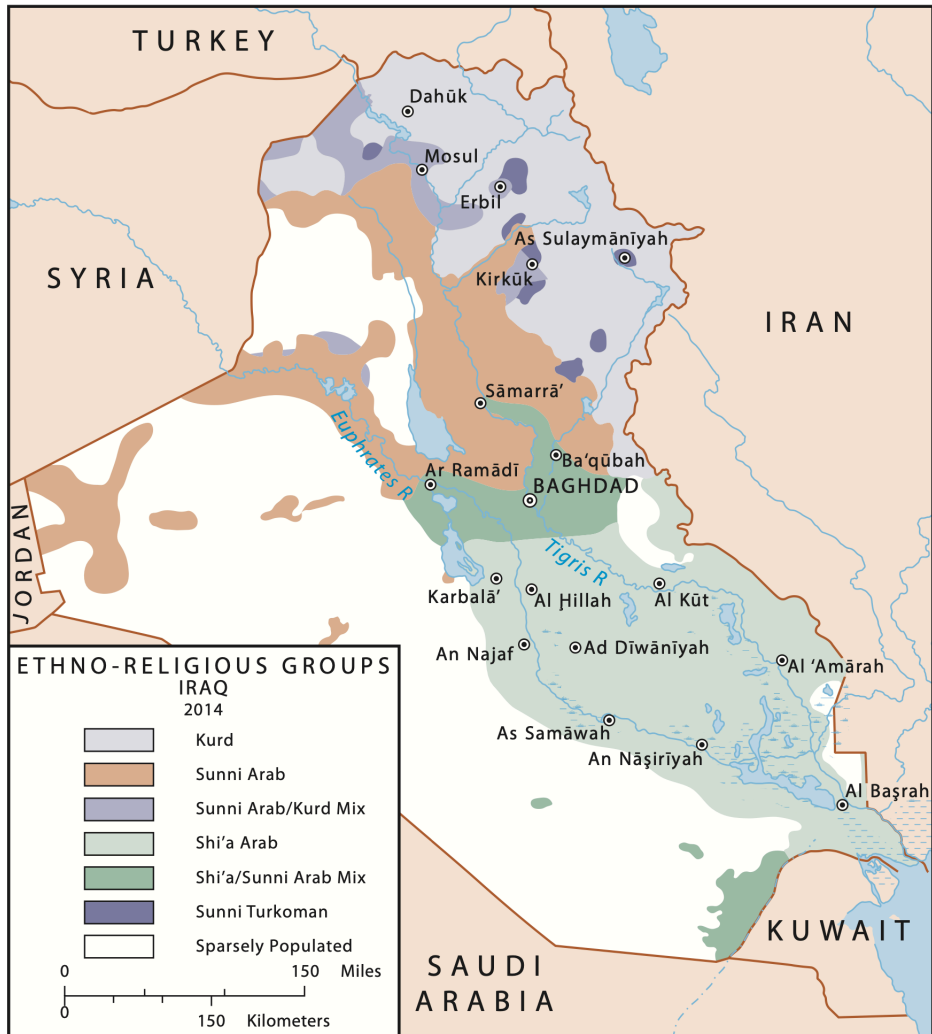
699 "Foreword," *Dabiq* 8 (1436H|2015), 4. Also see: Barr, *A line in the sand*, 3-83; Fishman, *The master plan*, 10-1; Fisk, *The great war*, 176; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 128; Kaplan, *De wraak van de geografie*, 310; Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, xii-xiv; Umunç, "A hope so transcendent," 189.

700 Johnson & Kitchen, "Introduction," 4.

701 Fisk, *The great war*, 180-2; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 32-5.

702 Aziz, *The Kurds of Iraq*, 5-6, 130; Gunter, "The foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurds," 9; Kepel, *Fitna*, 279; Peter

Figure 4.1: ethno-religious map of Iraq in 2014.<sup>703</sup>



Some analysts saw the next invasion of Iraq in 2003 as proof that the Middle East does not exist in isolation but interacts with other areas.<sup>704</sup> The invasion is often mentioned with the Arab Uprisings, as the consecutive Syrian civil war (2011-present) merged with Iraq's insurgency

Mansfield, *A history of the Middle East*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 343; Aylin Noi, "The Arab Spring, its effects on the Kurds, and the approaches of Turkey, Iran Syria and Iraq on the Kurdish issue." *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 16:2 (2012), 21. Also see: Larry Addington, *The patterns of war since the eighteenth century*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 317-23; Venable, "The result is never final," 121-47.

<sup>703</sup> Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 10.

<sup>704</sup> Rabi', *Contemporary Arab thought*, 3. Also see: Kaplan, *De wraak van de geografie*, 79, 87-91.

from which IS' predecessors benefitted.<sup>705</sup> While analysts considered Iraq's fragmentation as a country both the cause<sup>706</sup> and the effect<sup>707</sup> of the conflict, it did create opportunities for the KRI as one of the allies that defeated Iraq<sup>708</sup>, as well as 'opportunities of rapprochement between Arab nationalism and Islamism'<sup>709</sup> that contributed to the rise of IS.

## 4.2 IS

IS was next in a sequential series of jihadi-salafist organizations that followed a pattern of rising, expanding, being forced back, and changing strategy and tactics to start rising again<sup>710</sup>, thus using defeat to guide improvement.<sup>711</sup> The historical background of IS and its predecessors is relevant as 'even a cursory glance through [IS'] early history reveals operational and strategic patterns that emerge time and again even to this day.'<sup>712</sup> IS has had a dynamic history through which the organization had different outlooks and names, sometimes used interchangeably and inconsistently by analysts and authorities.<sup>713</sup> Some researchers have labeled IS' history non-linear, as 'IS is a clear-cut product of its own time, circumstances, and geography.'<sup>714</sup> Next to IS' history, the sections below focus on IS' strategy, ideology, and leadership, which are essential in the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm, respectively, and, thus, when using the paradigms as input, for complexity theory.

### 4.2.1 History (1999-2014): mergers and splits

Although its ideological roots are older<sup>715</sup>, IS began its history around 1999<sup>716</sup> in Jordan as the jihadi-salafist group *Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad* (Group of monotheism and *jihad*; JTJ).<sup>717</sup>

705 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 5, 124-5.

706 Freedman, *Command*, 430, 435.

707 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 14. Also see: Kepel, *Fitna*, 269-76.

708 Noi, "The Arab spring," 22.

709 Rabi', *Contemporary Arab thought*, 135.

710 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 209.

711 Cf. Luttwak, *Strategy*, 19-20.

712 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 3.

713 For example: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 224; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 98.

714 Chigudu, "Sectarianism and the ideology of the Islamic State," 5, 147.

715 Fishman, *The master plan*, 7-8. For example: "The call for a global Islamic resistance," *Counterterrorism blog*, November 12, 2008. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 9; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 233. The future founders of JTJ had established *Bayt al-Imam* (Allegiance to the Imam) in Jordan in 1993. *Bayt al-Imam's* leaders were quickly imprisoned but released in 1999.

716 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Remaining in Iraq and Syria," in Kyle Orton, "ISIS rejects al-Qaeda's command to return to Iraq," June 14, 2013, transl. unknown, *Kyle Orton's Blog*, April 3, 2014. Also see: "From hijrah to khilafa," *Dabiq* 1 (1435H|2014), 34-5; "Reflections on the final crusade," 35.

717 Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 6; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 13-5; Truls Tonnessen, "Heirs of Zaraqawi or Saddam? The relationship between Al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015), 48; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1-10, 26.

Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi proved JTJ's capable founder and leader.<sup>718</sup> Forced out of Jordan, joining *al-Qaeda* in Afghanistan around 2000<sup>719</sup> and via Iran, ending up in Iraq<sup>720</sup> – in the vicinity of Halabja, in the KRI – in 2002<sup>721</sup>, JTJ became closely linked to Kurdish Islamist group *Ansar al-Islam* (Partisans of Islam, AaI) and joined the Iraqi insurgency against the United States in the 2003 Gulf War.<sup>722</sup> Benefiting from the perceived marginalization of Iraq's Sunni community<sup>723</sup>, JTJ eventually became the vanguard of the insurgency.<sup>724</sup> In 2003, JTJ formally joined the *al-Qaeda* network under the name *Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* (The organizational base for *jihad* in Iraq) but became better known as *al-Qaeda* in Iraq (AQI).<sup>725</sup> AQI's goal was re-establishing a caliphate.<sup>726</sup> How to achieve that was the subject of intense debate among jihadi-salafists.<sup>727</sup> Zarqawi believed establishing a caliphate could be achieved by radicalizing Iraqi Sunnis through provoking Shia repression: '[i]f we [AQI] succeed in dragging them [the Shia] into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death.'<sup>728</sup> How this

- 718 Edwin Bakker & Leen Boer, "The evolution of al-Qaedaism. Ideology, terrorists, and appeal" (The Hague: *Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael*, 2007), 17-8; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 114; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 74-9; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 87, 103, 207.
- 719 Abū Jarir ash-Shamāli, "Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan. A testimony from within," *Dabiq* 6 (1436H|2014), 41; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 223. Also see: Renner, "Air power in the Battle of Mosul," 257-8.
- 720 "From hijrah to khilafa," 35; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 3; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 85.
- 721 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 224. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 23-5, 99; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 148; Kyle Orton, "The Islamic State's official biography of the caliph's deputy," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, December 18, 2016.
- 722 Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 187-91. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 16-7; Bakker, *Terrorism and counterterrorism studies*, 19; Ian Beckett, *Modern insurgencies and counter-insurgencies. Guerillas and their opponents since 1750* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), vii-viii; Boeke, "Understanding al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 22-8; Chuang *et al.* "Local alliances and rivalries," 20,898; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 87-117; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 224; Mark Grdovic, "Untangling the Gordian knot that is irregular warfare," *Small Wars Journal*, February 9, 2023; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 15; Jenkins, "International terrorism," 70-1; Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 360-2; Kiras, "Key concepts," 301-15; Lynn, *Battle*, 323-8; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 64n1; Venable, "The result is never final," 141.
- 723 Fishman, *The master plan*, 39-40; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 22; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 21, 45. Also see: Venable, "The result is never final," 140.
- 724 Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 187-91. Also see: Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37-54; Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 6-15; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 87-103; "The worshipping scholar and the mujahid preacher. Shaykh Abu Ali al-Anbari," cited in Orton, "The Islamic State's official biography of the caliph's deputy"; Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership.
- 725 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 154-5; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 87, 103, 207.
- 726 Bahney & Johnston, "Who runs the Islamic State group?"; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 28, 233; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 4. Also see: McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 23; Morell & Harlow, *The great war of our time*, 305. For the Sunni-Shia schism in Islam see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 18-27. McChrystal *et al.* and Morell & Harlow confused Zarqawi's means of creating sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia populations with his actual goal or re-establishing a caliphate.
- 727 Bernard Lewis, *The crisis of Islam. Holy war and unholy terror* (New York: Random House, 2003), 40-1; Abū Maysarah ash-Shāmī, "The Qa'idah of adh-Dhawāhirī, al-Harārī, and an-Nadhārī, and the absent Yemenī wisdom," *Dabiq* 6 (1436H|2014), 20n4; Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29:3 (2006), 228.
- 728 Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Also see: Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 86n16.

translated into the group attacking a political rally of the KDP and PUK in 2004<sup>729</sup> remains unknown. Attacks like these and Zarqawi's narrative concerned many Iraqi Sunnis<sup>730</sup>, even leading to Sunni tribes – later supported by the United States and the Iraqi government – taking up arms against AQI in 2005-2008, known as the *sabwa* (awakening).<sup>731</sup> Nevertheless, AQI merged with jihadi-salafist groups with whom AQI shared *manhaj* (methodology), forming *al-Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen* (*Mujahideen Shura Council*, MSC) in January 2006.<sup>732</sup>

MSC eventually evolved into an actual Islamic state within the Iraqi state.<sup>733</sup> After Zarqawi died in 2006<sup>734</sup>, *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq* (Islamic State in Iraq; ISI) succeeded MSC on October 15, 2006.<sup>735</sup> Although *al-Qaeda* disagreed<sup>736</sup>, ISI claimed to have left *al-Qaeda*<sup>737</sup> and increasingly acted independently, even creating a bureaucratic structure to govern territory and people.<sup>738</sup>

ISI's governance was frustrated when Zarqawi's immediate successor died together with his replacement on April 18, 2010, during an American raid in Tikrit. The death of Zarqawi's successors illustrated the increased pressure ISI found combatting, next to the American counterinsurgency also rival jihadists and Sunni tribal groups.<sup>739</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was announced the new leader of ISI on May 16, 2010. Under Baghdadi's leadership, the organization seized opportunities and strategic depth – fallback in case of breached defense<sup>740</sup>

729 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 148-9. AaI might have played a role in the decision to conduct the attack. Some discrepancy here exists, as Hashim claimed JTI conducted the attack, while the group had already joined *al-Qaeda* by 2004.

730 Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 86-90, 265-6; Ayman al-Zawahiri, untitled letter to Zarqawi, July 9, 2005, transl. unknown. Also see: Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 363-4.

731 Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 86-7. Also see: Stephen Biddle *et al.*, "Testing the surge. Why did violence decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37:1 (2012), 36-40; Freedman, *Command*, 437; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 140-1; 'Abd al-Rahman Atiyah, untitled letter to Zarqawi, transl. unknown, 2005; "The Fallujah memorandum, December 2009/January 2010," author(s) unknown, 2009-10, transl. Anas Elallame, cited in Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 134-7.

732 "The worshipping scholar," cited in Orton, "The Islamic State's official biography of the caliph's deputy." Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 53; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 91; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 87, 103, 207.

733 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 61; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 87; Zawahiri, untitled letter to Zarqawi. Also see: Ayman al-Zawahiri, transcript of interview by *al-Sahab Media Productions*, September 11, 2006, transl. unknown; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 16.

734 James Corum, "Air power in interagency operations," in *Routledge handbook of air power. Royal Netherlands Air Force special edition*, John Olsen (ed.) (London: Routledge, 2018), 215.

735 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 60. Also see: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Allah will not allow except that his light should be perfected," Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton's Blog*, December 29, 2014; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 115; "The alliance of al-Mutayyabin," transl. Anas Elallame, October 12, 2006, cited in Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 53-60.

736 Fishman, *The master plan*, 110-1; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 94; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 70-6.

737 "The Fallujah memorandum," cited in Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 120. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 87-93; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 7.

738 Fishman, *The master plan*, 89, 110-1, 155. Also see: Atiyah, untitled letter to Zarqawi; Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, "Truth had arrived, and falsehood perished," transl. unknown, December 22, 2006, cited in Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 64-7; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 68; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 89-97, 97n58, 113.

739 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 95-121.

740 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 173.

– in the then-emerging Syrian civil war.<sup>741</sup> ISI benefited from the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq in 2010-2011<sup>742</sup>, which left Iraq's Nineveh governorate under ISI control<sup>743</sup>, and other warring parties that left Syria's eastern governorates alone during the first years of the civil war.<sup>744</sup> Overall, ISI increased its activities to allegedly 7,681 military operations in 2012-2013, from 4,500 in 2011-2012<sup>745</sup>, a trend confirmed by the Global Terrorism Database.<sup>746</sup> ISI's distinctive use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) – in particular suicide vest improvised explosive devices (SV-IEDs), remote bombs, and sniper attacks 'reflects strategic calculations by the insurgents to enable them to fight and, sometimes, defeat much stronger foes.'<sup>747</sup> Figure 4.2 shows ISI's 2012-2013 infographic. ISI also benefitted from Syrian insurgent groups, supported with weapons and finance by state actors, which joined ISI, including their resources.<sup>748</sup>

Depending on interpretation, the infographic can indicate efficiency, as well as an internal loss of control.<sup>749</sup> The infographic's numbers might also attract supporters or deter potential adversaries by showing that ISI could control its fighting capacity. As such, ISI suggested it was ready for governing, which was its overall goal, elaborated on in the next section.

741 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 13. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 39-40; Wietse van den Berge, "The instrumental use of terrorism. The case of the Syrian regime," *Leiden Security and Global Affairs Blog*, March 31, 2014; Kyle Orton, "Provocation and the Islamic State. Why Assad strengthened the jihadists," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, September 3, 2014.

742 Fishman, *The master plan*, 143-4; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 185; "Islamic State ascendant. Iraq struggles to tackle the proto-state," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, August 12, 2014; Kiras, "Key concepts," 302; Renner, "Air power in the Battle of Mosul," 259; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 11.

743 Priyanka Boghani, "David Petraeus: ISIS's rise in Iraq isn't a surprise." *PBS*, July 29, 2014; Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris."

744 Derek Flood, "Breaking down borders. The Islamic State's campaign to redraw the boundaries of the Levant," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, August 28, 2014; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 15-6.

745 Dylan Matthews, "The surreal infographics ISIS is producing, translated," *Vox*, June 24, 2014, transl. Katie Paul *et al.* Cf. Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 69n26. The large fluctuation between 2011-2 and 2012-3 cast doubts on the reliability of the figures.

746 Charles Blair, "ISIS. The unsurprising surprise that is sweeping Iraq," *The bulletin*, June 18, 2014. Also see: Chuang *et al.*, "Local alliances and rivalries," 20,900.

747 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 12.

748 Michael Stephens, "The emergence of ISIS," in *Inherently unresolved. Regional politics and the counter-ISIS campaign*, Jonathan Eyal & Elizabeth Quintana (eds.) (London: RUSI, 2015), 12-3.

749 Cf. Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 11.

Figure 4.2: alleged results of ISI operations during 1434H in Iraq.<sup>750</sup>



750 “Results of operations of the Islamic State during AH 1434 in Iraq,” showed in Matthews, “The surreal infographics.” Also see: Alex Bilger, “ISIS annual reports reveal a metrics-driven military command” (Washington D.C.: *Institute for the Study of War*, 2014); Fishman, *The master plan*, 142; “State building.” Starting atop, the infographic mentioned 78 SV-IED’s, 537 vehicle borne remote bombs, 160 suicide remote bike bombs, 4,465 IEDs, 336 small, medium and heavy arms attacks, 1,083 assassinations, 607 rocket/mortar attacks, 1,015 bombings and burnings of houses and headquarters, thirty check points, 1,047 sniper operations, eight cities under ISIS’ control, over a hundred forced atonement of apostates, over a hundred prisoners freed, and over a hundred expulsions of deserters and fighters from Muslim lands, totaling up to allegedly 7,681 military operations.

Internally, tensions developed into a power struggle between ISI and its successful Syrian branch, *Jabhat al-Nusra* (*Nusra* front; JaN)<sup>751</sup>, eventually leading JaN to join *al-Qaeda*.<sup>752</sup> ISI announced a new name, *Dawlat al-Islam fi al-Iraq wa Bilad al-Sham* (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria; ISIS) on April 8, 2013: ‘we declare [...] abolishing the name of the Islamic State in Iraq and abolishing the name of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, and joining them under one name “The Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham”<sup>753</sup>, indicating further involvement in Syria. ISIS rejecting orders of *al-Qaeda*<sup>754</sup> led *al-Qaeda* to disown ISIS on February 3, 2014.<sup>755</sup> ISIS responded by killing *al-Qaeda*’s representative in Syria using two suicide bombers.<sup>756</sup> The schism between *al-Qaeda* and ISIS was not solely about power.<sup>757</sup> It was about strategy too: ‘[w]hile *al-Qaeda* wanted the world to think it was nowhere [...], ISIS wanted the world to think it was everywhere, a strategy designed to produce rapid growth.’<sup>758</sup> And rapid growth occurred: ‘by 2014 [...], all of its jihadi resistance rivals either collapsed or eventually joined the Islamic State.’<sup>759</sup> The capture of Raqqa – the capital of the Syrian governorate Raqqa – in January 2014<sup>760</sup> and the capture of the strategic Iraqi town of Sulaiman Bek on February 13, 2014<sup>761</sup> illustrated the success.

751 Kyle Orton, “Al-Qaeda disowns ISIS,” *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, March 21, 2014; Kyle Orton, “Ayman al-Zawahiri expels ISIS from al-Qaeda,” *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, March 21, 2014.

752 Orton, “Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency.”

753 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “Give good news to the believers. The declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” audio speech, April 8, 2013, transl. unknown, in “The announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, April 2, 2014. Italics added. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 128, 205; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 154; “Khilafah declared,” *Dabiq* 1 (1435H|2014), 7; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.

754 Baghdadi, “Remaining in Iraq and Syria.” Also see: Ezeldeen Khalil, “Partners to foes. Al-Qaeda-ISIL split worsens civil conflict in Syria,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, May 29, 2014.

755 Orton, “Al-Qaeda disowns ISIS”; Orton, “Ayman al-Zawahiri expels ISIS.” Also see: Chuang *et al.* “Local alliances and rivalries,” 20,899; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 130. Chuang *et al.* stated the disowning happened on February 2, 2014.

756 Carlino, “How Al-Qaeda and Islamic State differ”; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 246-7; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 130.

757 Morell & Harlow, *The great war of our time*, 307. Morell and Harlow oversimplified the rift by stating it was ‘an issue of “who would be calling the shots,” not an issue of a different vision.’ *Al-Qaeda* and ISIS shared a goal, but differed on how to establish the caliphate.

758 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 9. Italics added.

759 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 125.

760 Toivanen, *The Kobane generation*, 3-4.

761 “Militant seizure of Iraqi town underlines growing risk to commercial assets in northern provinces,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, February 14, 2014.

### 4.2.2 Strategic goal: re-establish caliphate

The ‘overarching goal’ of ISIS and its predecessors was ‘the caliphate’s reestablishment’<sup>762</sup>, which translated into ‘political hegemony over Sunni Iraq’ to replace the national government with a *shari’a* (Islamic law) led state.<sup>763</sup>

From August 19, 2013, the motto *dawlat al-islam bakiyya wa tattamaddad* (the Islamic State is remaining and expanding) reflected ISIS’ goals<sup>764</sup>, indicating that the organization regarded victory as not being defeated.<sup>765</sup> Remaining and expanding must be undertaken simultaneously.<sup>766</sup> ISIS reasoned that the Shia-dominated Iraqi government and the KRI were actual states for the Shia and Kurds, respectively. According to ISIS, the Shia and the Kurds refused the Sunni population a state, to control the Sunnis and ‘make them the most remote people and strip them of all assets for advancement or thinking of a rightly-guided Islamic State.’<sup>767</sup>

Jihadi-salafism partly explains the aim to expand. Jihadi-salafism does not accept alternative world views<sup>768</sup> and suggests abolishing national borders to allow Muslims to form a true *ummah* (community) once again.<sup>769</sup> Furthermore, the practical aspect seemed applicable that large political entities ‘are more powerful than smaller ones and can protect themselves better. Large political entities can shape the international environment to suit their interests.’<sup>770</sup> These interests practically included gaining personnel, material, and financial resources.<sup>771</sup> Perhaps most important was the acquisition of oil fields within Shia and Kurdish territories, without which the caliphate would not have a viable economy.<sup>772</sup>

762 Baghdadi, “Allah will not allow.” Also see: Bahney & Johnston, “Who runs the Islamic State group?”; Carmon *et al.*, “Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,”; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 28, 233. For the original caliphate see: Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 74-100.

763 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 4, 129. Also see: Rabi, *Contemporary Arab thought*, 373; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 152; “State building.”

764 Carmon *et al.*, “Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” n8. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 215; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 109n5; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 123; Kyle Orton, “ISIS rejects al-Qaeda’s command to return to Iraq,” *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, April 3, 2014, n1; “Remaining and Expanding,” *Dabiq* 5 (1436H|2014), 32-3. From April 17, 2007 onwards, ISI leader Abu Umar al-Baghdadi used the motto *dawlat al-islam bakiyya* (the Islamic State is remaining). Baghdadi used the expanded motto in an audio speech on June 14, 2013.

765 Cf. Heuser, *War*, 399.

766 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 255.

767 Abu Abdullah al-Masri, “Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology,” 1435H|2013-4, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, December 7, 2015. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 260.

768 Fishman, *The master plan*, 6; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 2-3. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 39.

769 Carlino, “How Al-Qaeda and Islamic State differ”; Flood, “Breaking down borders”; “The world had divided into two camps,” *Dabiq* 1 (1435H|2014), 11.

770 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 129. Also see: Biddle, “The determinants of nonstate military methods,” 720.

771 Powell & Florea, “Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset,” 200-1. Also see: Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 74.

772 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 166. Cf. Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 46.

Of IS' strategic DIME instruments, the military strategy appeared to have priority over the diplomatic, information, and economic strategies.<sup>773</sup> Translating Gray's Clausewitz-based definition of military strategy to IS strategies results in using force and the threat of force for re-establishing and expanding the caliphate. Analysts suggested that IS' aggressive strategy and brutal tactics limited the perceived threats and exploited the opportunities it recognized.<sup>774</sup> These suggestions imply that IS behaved as a calculating actor.<sup>775</sup> Still, it did so within the framework of a strict jihadi-salafist ideology.

Ingram *et al.* spoke of IS' 'strategic culture of critical reflection and innovation,' and 'especially amongst the Islamic State's leaders, that seems to encourage surprisingly critical and considered assessments of its theatre of operations through not only political, military, and information lenses, but demographic, sociocultural and psychological ones too.'<sup>776</sup> That strategic culture allowed IS to transform to conventional tactics in times of prosperity and to return to guerilla and terrorism tactics in times of adversity. It also permitted propaganda as a strategic tool, framing messages as it saw fit.<sup>777</sup>

Yet, jihadi-salafism was of fundamental interest in applying IS strategy: 'the political goal of a caliphate could not be achieved except through violence.'<sup>778</sup> While internally, IS established governance, given its jihadi-salafist ideology, the caliphate could not participate in international relations any other way than by conflict.<sup>779</sup> IS acknowledged this conclusion in internal guidelines: '[a]ccording to the *Shari'a* politics, the [IS] leadership is not allowed to adopt decisions to ally with a state or implement an agreement with it if that violates *Shari'a* politics.'<sup>780</sup> Therefore, unsurprisingly, no state supported IS, making IS' grand strategy unviable<sup>781</sup> with no chance of recognition for the caliphate as an actual state within international relations. IS did acknowledge the importance of external relations, though, considering these 'the first foundation for building every nascent state.'<sup>782</sup> Although IS rejected non-*shari'a* countries, it did allow people to go there or trade with these countries.<sup>783</sup>

773 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 188-9. Also see: Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37.

774 Ahmed Hevidar, "Senior Kurdistan official. IS was at Erbil's gates; Turkey did not help," *Rûdaw*, September 16, 2014; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,340-1n23.

775 Jenkins, "ISIS's calculated barbarity"; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37.

776 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37, 303. Also see: Gray, *Modern strategy*, 129-51; Last, *Strategic culture*, 6-11.

777 *Ibid.*, 304-6. Also see: "State building."

778 Fishman, *The master plan*, 159.

779 Stephens, "The emergence of ISIS," 11, 15; Fishman, *The master plan*, 71; Fukuyama, *Identity*, 73. Also see: Bakker, *Terrorism and counterterrorism studies*, 125-7.

780 Masri, "Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology." Italics added. For example: "Fighting alongside FSA factions," *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi; "Negotiations and ceasefire agreement with the regime over the thermal plant and surrounding in Aleppo," *Islamic State*, June 2013, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi. Also see: Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris."

781 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 10, 204. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 186; Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 165-6.

782 Masri, "Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology."

783 For example: "Fatwa on eating meats imported from Turkey," *Islamic State*, July 20, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-

IS' preference for violence made it inherently suitable for winning conflicts but unsuitable for winning peace.<sup>784</sup> Considering the four grand strategy elements – diplomacy, information, military, and economics – IS regarded all<sup>785</sup> but preferred the military instrument, guided by its jihadi-salafist ideology.<sup>786</sup> Yet, '[b]y consuming and destroying the material and moral resources needed to keep fighting, war prevents its own continuation.'<sup>787</sup> This paradoxical logic illustrated the inherent tension between lasting and expanding.

### 4.2.3 Ideology: jihadi-salafism

According to the organizational behavior paradigm, to understand IS' strategic decisions and decision-making, it is necessary to comprehend IS' SOPs. Assuming that Western-style SOPs did not apply to IS, its ideologically inspired doctrine provided guidance to jihadi-salafists.<sup>788</sup> Mainly on the principle of *manhaj*, which included ideological obligations, different jihadi-salafist groups merged into what would become IS.<sup>789</sup> So, to understand IS, it is necessary to understand its jihadi-salafist worldview<sup>790</sup>: 'much of what the group does looks nonsensical except in light of a sincere, carefully considered commitment to returning civilization to a seventh-century legal environment, and ultimately to bringing about the apocalypse.'<sup>791</sup> IS based 'its legal system, governing bodies, and foreign policy on the sacred texts alone.'<sup>792</sup>

Jihadi-salafism is 'an ideological trend that seeks violent overthrow of the existing political order in favor of a transnational theocratic entity, with the creation of a caliphate being the most common objective.'<sup>793</sup> Overthrowing the existing political order implied that IS

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Tamimi; "Permission slip for travel to Kuwait," *Islamic State*, October 25, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi. Also see: "Conditions for travel outside Mosul," *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi; Two Hawija inhabitants, interview by Wietse van den Berge & Mark Dechesne, Kirkuk, November 11, 2015. No audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview.

784 Cf. Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 10, 204; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 186.

785 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37.

786 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 188-9. Also see: Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 74.

787 Luttwak, *Strategy*, 57.

788 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 10. Also see: Bahney & Johnston, "Who runs the Islamic State group?"; Amatzia Baram, "Saddam's ISIS. Tracing the roots of the caliphate," *Foreign Affairs*, April 8, 2016; Fishman, *The master plan*, 41-2, 202-3; Graaf & Pothoven, "De Islamitische inlichtingenstaat" 461-4; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 12, 168-9; Mohammed Mustafa & Abdulrahman Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," *Review of Middle East Studies* (2023), 9-10; Perlmutter, *The military and politics in modern times*, 7; Rabi', *Contemporary Arab thought*, 127; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 21-2.

789 Abū 'Abdir-Rahmān al-Banghālī, "The revival of jihad in Bengal. With the spread of the light of the Khilafah," *Dabiq* 12 (1437H[2015]), 39n2; 'Irjā', the most dangerous bid'ah," *Dabiq* 8 (1436H[2015]), 39-56; Shāmī, "The Qa-'idah," 20n4. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 79-87. Hashim traced back IS' ideology to Zarqawi and labeled it 'Zarqawism,' characterized by a struggle between Islamists and a plethora of enemies.

790 Fishman, *The master plan*, 6; Gerges, *ISIS*, 23; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 271-2; Graeme Wood, "What ISIS really wants." *The Atlantic*, March 2015, 81.

791 Wood, "What ISIS really wants," 80. Also see: Gerges, *ISIS*, 23-49.

792 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 65.

793 Fishman, *The master plan*, 6. Also see: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 2-3. Also see: Rabi',

intended to dismantle the concept of the nation-state.<sup>794</sup> Jihadi-salafism belongs to the salafist interpretation of Islam.<sup>795</sup> Salafism holds a literal interpretation of the Quran, viewing the earliest days of Islam as the ideal for Muslims to strive for, put into practice by *shari'a* and rejecting any religious innovation since then. Added are descriptions of the life of the prophet Muhammad, provided by the companions of the prophet, known as the *salaf* (predecessors).<sup>796</sup> The companions' accounts form the origin of the salafist interpretation and serve as an 'instrument of mobilization and as an avenue to express the dissatisfaction of the masses with the ruling elite.'<sup>797</sup> The underlying idea of strict adherence to the Quran is to avoid as much human interpretation as possible, thus enabling the identification of Allah's true intentions. This principle of *tawhid* (oneness of God) is essential to salafism.<sup>798</sup> Still, three schools emerged within salafism, sharing the same beliefs but differing on when these apply: 'the purists, the politicians, and the jihadis.'<sup>799</sup> Within these factions, different opinions also exist<sup>800</sup>, leading to alternative ways to classify salafists.<sup>801</sup> In general, the purists propose a non-violent way to achieve their aims without interfering with politics, something the politicians do. The jihadis – or jihadi-salafists – argue they can only succeed by applying the concept of *jihad*<sup>802</sup>, hence the name. Jihadi-salafists claim that *jihad* is only possible using the *talwar* (sword)<sup>803</sup>, indicating a violent interpretation of *jihad*.<sup>804</sup> Jihadi-salafists go further than the politicians in their call for violence and revolution.<sup>805</sup> They are more extreme and oriented towards international relations than other salafist groups<sup>806</sup>, as they operate under the assumption that punishment against every non-believer is allowed.<sup>807</sup> Jihadi-salafists disagree on who are non-believers.<sup>808</sup> Jihadi-salafists agree with the belief that non-practicing Muslims weaken the Muslim community,

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*Contemporary Arab thought*, 127, 370-1; Fukuyama, *Identity*, 39.

794 Salih, "The Islamic State's visions of political community," 11.

795 Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the salafi movement," 208. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 65-7. Salafism originated with mediaeval Islamic scholar Taqi al-Din Ahmed ibn Taymiyyah, who lived when Arabs fought both crusaders and Mongols. Taymiyyah justified violence against rulers who did not apply *shari'a*.

796 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 64-5; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 7. Also see: Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 161.

797 Rabi', *Contemporary Arab thought*, 135.

798 *Ibid.*, 203; Michaelle Browsers, *Democracy and civil society in Arab political thought. Transcultural possibilities* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 44-5; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 65; Lewis, *The crisis of Islam*, 24; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 10; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 263-4; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 150; Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the salafi movement," 208.

799 Lewis, *The crisis of Islam*, 24; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 265-8; Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the salafi movement," 208.

800 Lewis, *The crisis of Islam*, 23; Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the salafi movement," 228-34.

801 Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi salafis or revolutionaries? On religion and politics in the study of militant Islamism" in *Global salafism. Islam's new religious movement*, Roel Meijer (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), 244-66.

802 Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 271-2.

803 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 8.

804 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 10. For example: Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership.

805 Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the salafi movement," 208.

806 Hegghammer, "Jihadi salafis or revolutionaries?" 257-8.

807 Kepel, *Jihad*, 31-2; Ahmad Moussalli, "Wahhabism, salafism and Islamism. Who is the enemy?" *Conflicts Forum*, January 30, 2009. 17-8.

808 Lewis, *The crisis of Islam*, 40-1; Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the salafi movement," 228. For example: Shāmi, "The Qa'idah," 20n4.

which the jihadi-salafists must take care of. Thus, they called on their followers to fight all (Muslim) infidels<sup>809</sup> and targeted Shia and the government regimes in Iraq and Syria.<sup>810</sup>

According to IS, a caliphate based on *shari'a* should replace these government regimes. A fundamental assumption within IS' ideology is that the Sunni *ummah*<sup>811</sup> is under threat and needs to be defended against infidels<sup>812</sup>, IS being 'the Sunni protector of Islam and a defense against colonialism.'<sup>813</sup> Still, for an actor claiming to protect Sunni interests, IS behaved aggressively and offensively towards potential allies, such as the Kurds, most of whom considered themselves Sunni.<sup>814</sup> Merely focusing on IS' religiously inspired propaganda that a primordial struggle exists between Sunni Islam and other religious interpretations<sup>815</sup> – notably Shia Islam – simplifies the conflict in which IS was involved. Yet, '[t]he quest for security [...] brings a sense of urgency to politics and is one of the enduring sources of passion in policy controversies.'<sup>816</sup> Historically, however, no proof exists of a primordial conflict between Sunni and Shia Islam. IS claimed otherwise, using religious differences for political purposes.<sup>817</sup> Therefore, Noyes argued that IS'

'grand strategy is based in its *takfiri-jihadist*, Islamist ideology. Islamic State is not a Salafist organization. Its attempts to emulate the Muhammadan era are fleeting and inconsistent. Instead, Islamic State has a propensity to leverage modern mechanisms, *shirk ijma* (consensus within the Islamic world), and demonstrate *bidaa* (innovation within Islamic ideology) when it is organizationally or ideologically convenient.'<sup>818</sup>

809 Black, *The history of Islamic political thought*, 12; Lewis, *The crisis of Islam*, 29-38; Moussalli, "Wahhabism, salafism and Islamism," 17-8.

810 Gerges, *ISIS*, 5-6. Also see: Baghdadi, "Allah will not allow"; Baghdadi, "Remaining in Iraq and Syria"; Fishman, *The master plan*, 20; "Foreword," *Dabiq* 8, 4; "ISIS celebrates takeover of Nineveh province"; Masri, "Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology"; "The allies of al-Qā'idah in Sham," *Dabiq* 8 (1436H|2015), 8; Umunç, "A hope so transcendent," 189.

811 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 21.

812 Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Also see: "Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism," *Dabiq* 7 (1436H|2015), 20-4.

813 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 2. Also see: Kyle Orton, "Governing the caliphate. Profiles of Islamic State leaders" (London: *The Henry Jackson Society*, 2016), 2-3; "Purpose of jihad," *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

814 Besheer Mohamed, "Who are the Iraqi Kurds?" *Pew Research Center*, August 20, 2014. Also see: Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. A 2011 research by Pew Research Center found that 98 percent of Iraqi Kurds considered themselves Sunni.

815 Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 93; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37-54; Kirschner, *Trust and fear in civil wars*, 8; Abraham Maslow, "A theory of human motivation," *Psychological Review* 50 (1943), 376; Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 35-51; Wood, "What ISIS really wants," 80.

816 Stone, *Policy paradox*, 86. Also see: Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership.

817 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 5, 57.

818 Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris." Italics in original. Takfiri-jihadism refers to the same ideology as jihadi-salafism; *takfiri* refers to rejecting other interpretations of Islam, considering these apostates.

Noyes added that IS' leadership changed its 'decision-making – focusing on either of its priorities – depending on the organization's strength or existential challenges,' pivoting 'between the temporal and the ideological.'<sup>819</sup> Yet, it mirrored how the prophet Muhammad allegedly behaved: conducting cruelty in battle, he was willing to reach a compromise and tactical arrangements into his policy.<sup>820</sup> Four key jihadi-salafist documents had translated this ideology into practices and, thus, seemingly influenced IS.

Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's *The global Islamic resistance call*<sup>821</sup> presented an alternative to the 'regionally-focused elite jihadi vanguards determined to seize power from the top.'<sup>822</sup> Suri urged replacing a commanding top-down system with decentralized operations conducted by operatives who decided when and where to attack.<sup>823</sup>

Abu Bakr Naji's *The management of savagery*<sup>824</sup> is considered IS' 'guidebook to [...] strategic thinking'<sup>825</sup>, its 'field manual'<sup>826</sup> or blueprint for IS' doctrine<sup>827</sup> and part of IS' curriculum.<sup>828</sup>

819 Ibid. Also see: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 380; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 53; Kiras, "Key concepts," 302-4.

820 Carmon *et al.*, "Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi."

821 "The call for a global Islamic resistance." Also see: Banghālī, "The revival of jihad," 39n2; Michael Ryan, "Hot issue. Dabiq. What Islamic State's new magazine tells us about their strategic direction, recruitment patterns and guerrilla doctrine," *The Jamestown Foundation*, August 1, 2014. Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's was the *kunya* of Mustafa Setmariam Nasar. Suri wrote the document in 1991, which *al-Qaeda*-affiliated websites released in 2004. IS explicitly stated that Suri's 'unnecessarily long 1600-page book' has 'never defined the methodology of the *mujahidin* [Islamic fighters]. The top Islamic State leadership [...] did not recommend as-Sūrī's book,' thus acknowledging awareness of the work. An English translation of the book is unavailable at the time of writing.

822 "The call for a global Islamic resistance."

823 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 53. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, xv; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 5; Jessica Stern, *Terror in the name of God* (New York: Harper Collins: 2003), 173.

824 Abu Bakr Naji, *The management of savagery. The most critical stage through which the Umma will pass*, transl. William McCants (Harvard: *Harvard University John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2004 [2006]). Also see: André Gagné, "Understanding ISIS' 'foreign' jihadist strategy," *Open Canada* June 17, 2016; Ryan, "Hot issue. Dabiq"; David Jones & M.L.R. Smith, "The strategy of savagery. Understanding the Islamic State," *War on the rocks*, February 24, 2015. Who Naji was, remains disputed. In 2014, the founder of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad claimed that Naji had been Egyptian Muhammad Khalil al-Hakaymah, an early supporter of Zaraqawi.

825 Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 949.

826 Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 40. Also see: Jeff Sole, "Management of savagery: A model for establishing the Islamic State," *The Mackenzie Institute*, June 2, 2016; "The management of savagery," *Think Defence*, March 16, 2015.

827 Fishman, *The master plan*, 38-45, 279n46; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 250; Hassan & Weiss, *ISIS*, 40; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 4-5; Jones & Smith, "The strategy of savagery"; Sole, "Management of savagery." Also see: Banghālī, "The revival of jihad," 39n2. According to Fishman and Ingram *et al.*, IS denied Naji's influence, but Banghālī in *Dabiq* merely disagreed with the author's position towards 'the *takfir* of parties who forcefully resist the *Shari'ah* and its laws,' referring to *The management of savagery* as a 'concise but beneficial 100-page book,' which 'describes very precisely the overall strategy of the *mujahidin*.' Banghālī cited Zaraqawi, who after reading the document allegedly stated that '[i]t is as if the author [Naji] knows what I'm planning.' Hashim noted that IS mentioned several countries where jihadist could form groups in *Dabiq* 1, which were rather similar to those mentioned by Naji, suggesting that Naji's book was used as input.

828 Hassan Hassan, "ISIS has reached new depths of depravity. But there is a brutal logic behind it," *The Guardian*, February 8, 2015.

The book integrated military strategy with media strategy, using media to disseminate guidance for decentralized operations<sup>829</sup> to establish an Islamic state despite powerful enemies.<sup>830</sup> Assuming that jihadi-salafists can defeat an enemy by destabilizing social cohesion<sup>831</sup>, Naji suggested polarizing society<sup>832</sup> using ‘small bands and separate, disparate organizations.’<sup>833</sup> Attritional warfare by a combination of ‘vexation and exhaustion’<sup>834</sup> – using violence as a means to an end<sup>835</sup> in a ‘deeply realist’ strategy<sup>836</sup> – should exhaust opponents, gain territory, and attract new supporters.<sup>837</sup> Nevertheless, Naji was reluctant to use alliances and proxies. Furthermore, Naji seemed to suggest politics’ primacy<sup>838</sup>, yet mentioning that ‘the political decision issues from the military leader.’<sup>839</sup>

Abū Hamzah al-Muhājir’s<sup>840</sup> “Advice for the soldiers of the Islamic State”<sup>841</sup> and “Advice for the leaders of the Islamic State”<sup>842</sup> provided further guidance to jihadi fighters and leaders, respectively. Emphasizing the importance of cooperation<sup>843</sup>, Muhājir expected IS fighters to obey their leaders to avoid disunity.<sup>844</sup> A captured low-rank IS member interviewed for this study acknowledged that IS operated as a hierarchical, rigid organization.<sup>845</sup> Yet, Muhājir advised the leaders to ‘[s]eek consultation and hold discussions’<sup>846</sup>, warning for uncritical

829 Naji, *The management of savagery*, 21. Also see: Jones & Smith, “Return to reason,” 950. For muslim tactics fighting crusaders see: Thomas Asbridge, *The crusades. The war for the holy land* (London: Pocket 2010), 343-61; Hassan; “ISIS has reached new depths of depravity”; Heuser, *War*, 36-7; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 74, 88.

830 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 247-8.

831 Fishman, *The master plan*, 236-79; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 6; Jones & Smith, “Return to reason,” 949.

832 Naji, *The management of savagery*, 22. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 6; Fishman, *The master plan*, 44.

833 *Ibid.*, 12. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 152-3.

834 *Ibid.*, 13, 81-4. Also see: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 27.

835 *Ibid.*, 28-31. For example: “A message from Sotloff,” 47-51; Cantlie, “Hard talk,” 52-5; “The burning of the murtadd pilot,” 6-7.

836 Jones & Smith, “Return to reason,” 950.

837 Naji, *The management of savagery*, 16-8. Also see: Graaf & Yayla, “The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance,” 17; Orton, “Governing the caliphate,” 3.

838 *Ibid.*, 35-7. Also see: Atiyah, untitled letter to Zarqawi; Clausewitz, *On war*, 87; Jones & Smith, “The strategy of savagery.” Jones and Smith recognized in Naji’s text Clausewitz’ dictum that ‘[w]ar is merely the continuation of policy by other means.’ Atiyah had referred to the primacy of politics in his 2005 letter to Zarqawi.

839 *Ibid.*, 37.

840 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 233. Also see: Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 54. Abū Hamzah al-Muhājir was the *kunya* of Abdul Munim bin Izz al-Din al-Badawi.

841 Abū Hamzah al-Muhājir, “Advice for the soldiers of the Islamic State,” *Dabiq* 6 (1436H|2014), 6-15. Muhājir’s advice for IS’ fighters was dated Ramadān 1, 1428 (September 13, 2007).

842 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 93-106; Abū Hamzah al-Muhājir, “Advice for the leaders of the Islamic State,” *Dabiq* 7 (1436H|2015), 9-16. Muhājir’s advice for IS’ leaders was dated Ramadān 1, 1428 (September 13, 2007).

843 Fishman, *The master plan*, 131. For example: Muhājir, “Advice for the soldiers of the Islamic State,” 7.

844 Muhājir, “Advice for the soldiers of the Islamic State,” 10.

845 Low-rank IS-member 2, interview by Wietse van den Berge & Mark Dechesne, Kirkuk, November 11, 2015. No audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview. Low-rank IS-member 2 stated that anyone who would express doubt on remaining with the organization, would be killed.

846 Muhājir, “Advice for the leaders of the Islamic State,” 10.

followers and urging for contradiction during decision-making.<sup>847</sup> Still, during a 2015 interview for this study, a captured IS *emir* stated that ‘there was never any possibility to express doubt. Also, you do not know the consequences if you do.’<sup>848</sup> So, a representative of middle-rank leadership – in this case, an *emir* – did not question orders. Uncritical behavior contradicted Muhājir’s advice, seemingly supporting rational decision-making and cost-benefit calculation<sup>849</sup>: ‘[t]he leader must study the battlefield very well. He should not fight from a position that will be easy for the enemy to surround without ensuring that the vulnerable points are guarded. And he should not take his soldiers out to a place so far that it’s impossible to bring them back safely.’<sup>850</sup> Muhājir urged leaders to avoid unjust bloodshed and provided advice on liaising.<sup>851</sup>

Elements of Suri’s, Naji’s, and Muhājir’s advice seemed merged into a handbook-like document from 2014, written by Abu Abdullah al-Masri, titled “Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology.” It contained IS’ vision on military and long-term, non-military issues. Next to obedience to battlefield commanders and *shari’a* officials, Masri suggested consultation among the field commanders and *shari’a* officials over the course of action. Also, in what seems a way to establish a monopoly of violence, Masri suggested controlling the production of and trade in weapons and establishing committees for administering production projects.<sup>852</sup>

More battlefield-oriented than Masri’s was IS’ doctrine, as published in a 2019 *al-Naba* newsletter:

‘this method relies on surprising the enemy forces in weak areas, in which the *mujahideen* can be secure in their superiority in force, and assaulting a village or more or one of the localities or towns, according to the strength of the *mujahideen*. From there they strike or neutralize the force of the enemy inside it, thereby allowing the *mujahideen* to move about inside the area freely, and realize their aims from the expedition in a matter of a few hours. Then they withdraw from the attack site, while avoiding entrance into a decisive battle against the enemy, and trying to avoid losses in the ranks of the *mujahideen* as far as possible.’<sup>853</sup>

847 *Ibid.*, 10-1. Also see: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 283-7.

848 IS *emir*, interview by Wietse van den Berge, Suleimaniyah, April 8, 2015. No audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview. The IS *emir* was captured and awaiting trial, possibly denying full responsibility.

849 Cf. Jenkins, “ISIS’s calculated barbarity.”

850 Muhājir, “Advice for the leaders of the Islamic State,” 13. Cf. Clausewitz, *On war*, 348-51; Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 510-2.

851 *Ibid.*, 15-6. Cf. McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 177-8.

852 Masri, “Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology.”

853 “Bringing down the towns temporarily as a method of operation for the *mujahideen* i,” *al-Naba* 179, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, April 26, 2019. Italics added.

The aim of the expeditions – the wording used by IS – was to inflict damage to the enemies, gain resources, free prisoners, harass or fix the enemies in an area, and enable IS supporters<sup>854</sup>, much like seventh century Muslim fighters had conducted raids.<sup>855</sup> To do so, IS relied on actual intelligence on the target.<sup>856</sup> IS planned the withdrawal too, to avoid unnecessary casualties<sup>857</sup>, although the execution was left with local commanders<sup>858</sup>, expecting obedience from its fighters.<sup>859</sup> Following Zarqawi's example, IS aimed to prevent authorities from establishing powerful intelligence and security agencies that could defeat IS and to force IS' enemies into 'allout war with *Ablus-Sunnah* [the Sunni people]. So, he [Zarqawi] targeted the Iraqi apostate forces [army, police, and intelligence], the *Rafidah* [Shia] markets, temples, and militias, and the Kurdish secularists [Barzani and Talabani partisans].<sup>860</sup>

Despite *manhaj*, Western-style SOPs seemed not – or hardly – available within IS' organization.<sup>861</sup> Nevertheless, IS seemed to operate according to a *modus operandi* regarding military and economic affairs, the latter 'viewed purely as a vehicle for organizational strength.'<sup>862</sup> Whereas Ashour observed a three-phase, operational-level *modus operandi*<sup>863</sup>, Hashim observed an ongoing and simultaneous use of terrorist tactics next to semi-conventional warfare<sup>864</sup>, which combined violence and restraint, reminiscent of Muhājir's advice<sup>865</sup>: '[w]hen it succeeded militarily in territorial control, it would capitalize to boost its limited resources (such as in Nineveh [...]). When it faltered militarily, it would launch

854 "Bringing down the towns temporarily as a method of operation for the mujahideen ii," *al-Naba* 180, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, May 17, 2019. Also see: "From hijrah to khilafa," 36; Haroro Ingram *et al.*, "The Islamic State's global insurgency and its counterstrategy implications" (The Hague: *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 2020), 33.

855 Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 74.

856 "Bringing down the towns temporarily as a method of operation for the mujahideen iii," *al-Naba* 181, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, May 19, 2019.

857 "Bringing down the towns temporarily as a method of operation for the mujahideen iv," *al-Naba* 182, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, May 19, 2019. Also see: "Iraq-based jihadist group consolidates position in central Syria and moves to extend control along Iraqi-Syrian border," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, April 14, 2014.

858 "Bringing down the towns i"; "Bringing down the towns iii"; "Bringing down the towns iv."

859 "Bringing down the towns iv."

860 "From hijrah to khilafa," 37. IS stressed that Zarqawi 'never targeted Sunni public places and gatherings.'

861 For example: Graaf & Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance," 21, 47.

862 Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris." Also see: Wietse van den Berge, "Islamic State's ambivalent relation to drugs," *Leiden Security and Global Affairs Blog*, March 7, 2016; "Der Gelehrte, Anbeter, Prediger und Mudschahid Schaych Abu Ali al-Anbari. Karawane der Schuhada," *Rumiyah* 3 (1438H[2016]), 15; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 103-4, 117; Masri, "Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology"; Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris"; Barbara Starr *et al.*, "Pentagon: ISIS finance minister killed," *CNN*, March 25, 2016.

863 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 47, 83, 202-3. Also see: Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 102-3; Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Enemy of my enemy. Re-evaluating the Islamic State's relationship with Baathist JRTN," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, June 5, 2015.

864 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 236-7. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 103.

865 Muhājir, "Advice for the leaders of the Islamic State," 15. Also see: "The Fallujah memorandum," in Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 128-9.

tenacious operational counteroffensives, and then shift its strategies and adjust or innovate its tactics accordingly.<sup>866</sup>

As far as diplomacy is concerned, IS claimed to maintain relations with Sunni tribes, regularly accepting their *bay'ah* and, in return, promising support and security.<sup>867</sup> Negotiating with tribes potentially offered IS capabilities, such as money, men, and equipment. The constraint was that such negotiations took time and effort and guaranteed no positive outcome. Apart from tribes, IS asked defeated secular enemy units to repent.<sup>868</sup> Tamimi emphasized that IS conveniently worked with other groups and tribes but did not join alliances. IS tried to control them as soon as possible.<sup>869</sup> Perhaps IS was organizationally handicapped as its jihadi-salafist ideology was anti-establishment and, therefore, potentially vulnerable to internal fracture, as IS aimed to establish another establishment as a caliphate.<sup>870</sup> Its anti-establishment character also explains that IS' tactical and operational hierarchies were almost always based on need and *'urf* (tradition) as opposed to internal regulations or standard operating procedures.<sup>871</sup>

Jihadi-salafist ideology shaped the overall doctrinal framework<sup>872</sup>, which IS approached rather pragmatically.<sup>873</sup> Although IS' ideology is too extreme and unappealing to the masses<sup>874</sup>, Naji argued that jihadi-salafists had to show they could govern the territory. Doing so would win over public support among the Sunni masses.<sup>875</sup> Having learned from lacking governance capabilities and benefitting from former *Ba'ath* officers among its ranks<sup>876</sup>, IS had established a bureaucratic structure aimed at governance.

#### 4.2.4 Organization: centralized leadership

From April to June 2010, ISI had lost around 80 percent of its leadership, including the *emir* and his deputy. Despite its centralized command structure with decentralized operational cells, ISI was infiltrated by Iraqi intelligence. When Baghdadi became ISI's new leader in May 2010, he restructured the organization. ISI strengthened or created councils tasked with

866 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 209. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 10-1.

867 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 12-4. For example: "Conditions for travel outside Mosul"; "Fatwa on eating meats imported from Turkey"; "Permission slip for travel to Kuwait." Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 48; "Iraq-based jihadist group."

868 "Islamic State news," *Dabiq* 1 (1435H|2014), 49.

869 Tamimi, "Enemy of my enemy." Also see: Flood, "Breaking down borders."

870 Fishman, *The master plan*, 70; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 262.

871 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 43. Italics added.

872 For some nuance see: Black, "Strategic practice," 11.

873 Cf. Stern, *Terror in the name of God*, 173.

874 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 186.

875 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 365; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 268n36. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 61.

876 "Islamic State ascendant."

various duties to insulate the leadership against infiltration, while allowing lower levels more operational autonomy.<sup>877</sup>

Some analysts observed that IS struggled to balance centralized leadership with its decentralized characteristics.<sup>878</sup> Other analysts recognized resilience in IS' decentralized organization. Next to the top level of command existed a 'fluid hierarchy that decentralises power to a number of local *emirs* across Iraq and Syria.'<sup>879</sup> Shapiro stated that 'groups with a political doctrine that provides little guidance to operatives regarding which targets should be attacked will place a higher value on hierarchical structures that help manage attacks than groups with more specific political doctrines,'<sup>880</sup> adding that how that organization is structured is less dependent on ideology than on 'operational guidance drawn from their political goals.'<sup>881</sup> Zarqawi had realized that his organization was vulnerable to decapitation, and he established councils and committees for resilience in case he died. Eventually – possibly copying Aal's structure – he created a three-tier structure composed of critical leadership in tier one, regional and operational leaders in tier two, and individual cell leaders responsible for execution in tier three.<sup>882</sup> During the days of ISI, the organization already had established bureaucratic frameworks that overlooked not only the political and military but also 'public works, health and finance, to counterbalance the Kurds and Shiites [in Iraq], who already had some form of self-government.'<sup>883</sup> ISIS' goal of re-establishing the caliphate 'set in motion across all of its bureaucratic entities a routinization of its structure into state-like management tools.'<sup>884</sup> Considering agency challenges, it made sense that IS created bureaucratic entities to organize conflict and govern as a means in itself.<sup>885</sup> A 2015 interview for this study illustrated its effect: two allegedly unaffiliated Sunni Arab men who lived in IS-controlled Hawija nevertheless saw IS as the only viable alternative for governance.<sup>886</sup>

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877 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 11. Also see: Graaf & Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance," 33.

878 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 364. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 116.

879 Stephens, "The emergence of ISIS," 14. Italics added.

880 Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 10.

881 *Ibid.*, 58.

882 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 148-51.

883 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 231-2. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 9, 94.

884 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 5. Also see: Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 31-3, 45-51. Cantlie, "Hard talk," 55.

885 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 12.

886 Two Hawija inhabitants. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 61; Graaf & Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance," 35; Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 365; Masri, "Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology"; Muhājir, "Advice for the leaders of the Islamic State," 15; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 268n36.

IS hinted in 2014 that the organization had approximately 32,000 members.<sup>887</sup> At the time, IS' organization remained unknown.<sup>888</sup> A 2016 IS video offered insight into IS' organizational structure, which consisted of the caliph, the *shura* council, the delegated committee, the *wilayat* (provinces), the *dawawin* (departments), and the committees and offices.<sup>889</sup>

At the head of the IS organization was the caliph.<sup>890</sup> It was the caliph who the individual IS fighters pledged allegiance to.<sup>891</sup> The main tasks of the caliph included (1) upholding and spreading religion, (2) defending the Islamic State and fortifying the fronts, (3) preparing the armies, and (4) implementing and enforcing adherence to the *shari'a*.<sup>892</sup> These four tasks emphasized the role of the caliph as described by Ingram *et al.*: 'the position of the caliph represents a unique fusion of legal-rational authority, based on adherence to "law" or a legally-enshrined process, and traditional authority, based on established order and custom.'<sup>893</sup> It also confirmed that IS had adopted Naji's suggestion to merge military affairs with political leadership.<sup>894</sup> Still, the structure of the caliphate depended not on individuals and the caliph typically exercised influence more strategically than by micro-management.<sup>895</sup>

The *shura* council supported the caliph in his tasks by advising on politics or strategy<sup>896</sup>, which created redundancy in leadership if the caliph was no longer in place.<sup>897</sup> The delegated committee communicated orders along the chain of command<sup>898</sup> and supervised the *dawawin*. The *dawawin* protected public interest, religion, and security.<sup>899</sup> Each *diwan* (department) had an office in every *wilayat*. A *wali* (governor) ran each of the *wilayat* on behalf of the caliph.<sup>900</sup>

887 Cantlie, "Hard talk," 55. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 2; Milton, "Structure of a state," iv, 11-14. The CIA in 2014 believed IS to have between 20,000 and 31,000 fighters. In 2016, Milton identified more than 60,000 IS-identification numbers for male IS-members in Iraq, suggesting that by that time IS was larger.

888 For example: Moubayed, *Under the black flag*.

889 "The structure of khilafa." Also see: Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 235-47; Milton, "Structure of a state," 18n42; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 74.

890 *Ibid.* Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 175-7.

891 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 13, 16.

892 "The structure of khilafa."

893 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 172.

894 Naji, *The management of savagery*, 37-40.

895 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 22.

896 "The structure of khilafa." Also see: Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, cited in Kyle Orton, "ISIS announces the restoration of the caliphate," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, June 29, 2014; Baghdadi, "Remaining in Iraq and Syria"; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 177; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 11.

897 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 144; "The structure of the caliphate." Also see: "The Fallujah memorandum," in Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 142.

898 "The structure of khilafa."

899 *Ibid.* Also see: Kiras, "The historical practice," 333; Kyle Orton, "The structure of the Islamic State," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, August 8, 2016; Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Aspects of Islamic State (IS) administration in Ninawa province. Part II," *Aymenn Jawad*, January 20, 2015. Orton pointed out that discrepancies exist between the video and documentary evidence.

900 *Ibid.* Also see: Milton, "Structure of a state," 10n22; Orton, "The structure of the Islamic State."

Five *dawawin* had existed since Zarqawi established JTJ: (1) *shari'a*; (2) media; (3) *emni* (security); (4) administration/finance; and (5) *al-jund* (soldiers).<sup>901</sup> Besides evolving into more *dawawin*, the names of the entities appear inconsistent among IS documents. Following Tamimi, Ingram *et al.* pointed out that these inconsistencies indicate 'structural flux and legion of local peculiarities within an organization fighting an insurgency in some places and conventional war in others.'<sup>902</sup>

A *fatwa* issued by IS clarified that the 'spoils [of war] are to be distributed according to the necessity dictated by the Islamic State's military situation.'<sup>903</sup> Approximately eighteen percent of IS' 2015 income originated in *ghana'im* (spoils)<sup>904</sup>, which some analysts regarded as a way to legitimize activities that otherwise might be seen as illegal.<sup>905</sup> Yet, the *diwan al-hisba* (religious compliance police) was charged with population control and enforcing the *shari'a*, promoting virtue, and preventing vice.<sup>906</sup> The *hisba* 'is bound by direct order to the military commander without resort to the *wali* in special military matters.'<sup>907</sup> In his study on bureaucracy in terrorist organizations, Shapiro concluded that internal 'punitive strategies should only exist when the organization can wield a credible threat of violence over the agent or their loved ones.'<sup>908</sup> It allegedly guaranteed good governance by IS officials, who put public interest above their own and punished those who did not.<sup>909</sup> IS tried to gain popular support by showing it was capable of good governance.

The *diwan al-jund* was responsible for managing wars, protecting its frontlines, planning and preparing resources for military raids/offensives, distributing troops, and supplying trained individuals when needed.<sup>910</sup> As Tamimi noted, during Baghdadi's leadership, IS established a military council under its first *emir* Haji Bakr.<sup>911</sup> The establishment of a military council increased resilience against decapitation, but also meant professionalization compared to the *diwan* led by an individual war minister. The military council led the *diwan al-jund*.<sup>912</sup> Bakr

901 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 6.

902 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 247.

903 "Spoils of war for the mujahideen," *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

904 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 40n85.

905 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 142; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 19-20. Also see: Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 76.

906 "The structure of khilafa." Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 259.

907 "Qualities and manners of the mujahid commander," *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi. Italics added.

908 Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 109.

909 Cf. Fukuyama, *Identity*, 128-9; Talha, "Administrative and judicial frameworks," 35.

910 "The structure of khilafa"; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 9.

911 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi & Islamic State succession lines," *Aymenn Jawad*, January 24, 2016. Also see: Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 12.

912 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 46; Kyle Orton, "The Islamic State's first war minister," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, January 25, 2017.

oversaw IS' 'creeping intervention in Syria'<sup>913</sup>, allegedly using Naji's *Management of savagery* as a reference.<sup>914</sup> Bakr died in January 2014. Bakr's immediate successor as the *emir* of the military council was Abu Abdulrahman or Adnan al-Bilawi<sup>915</sup>, who had planned IS' advance on Mosul.<sup>916</sup> After his death on June 4, 2014, Abu Mohannad al-Suwaydawi succeeded Bilawi. After Suwaydawi's death in May 2015, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani took over until he died in August 2015.<sup>917</sup> Next to the *shura* council, '[t]he Military Council is believed to be the most important institution'<sup>918</sup> within IS. The security and intelligence council was a sub-component of the military committee, which controlled the *emmi*. As former *Ba'ath* security officials dominated IS' military council since its inception, extremism researcher Kyle Orton concluded that these former *Ba'ath*-ists highlight the fact that 'ISIS has a mature bureaucracy capable of retaining intellectual capital and putting it to use in long-term planning.'<sup>919</sup> The security and intelligence council was also responsible for separating IS' strategic leadership from the rest of the organization, to avoid infiltration.<sup>920</sup>

Abdullah Ahmed al-Mashadani was a member of the military council and acted as IS' Minister for Foreign Affairs. As such, Mashadani managed the arrival of foreign jihadis and provided resources and housing. He was also the logistics coordinator for moving foreign fighters to their designated locations.<sup>921</sup> Mashadani's tasks explain why part of the *diwan al-jund* was the *idarat al-mu'askarat* (camps administration), which was responsible for IS' military camps and together with the *diwan al-'eftaa wa al-buhuth* (*fatwa* issuing and investigation department; also: *hay'at al-buhuth wa al-iftaa'*, the office of research and studies) published (theological) training manuals.<sup>922</sup> The *diwan al-jund* aimed to operate as a conventional force securing IS' territorial sovereignty instead of the insurgency force it was before. IS' armed forces adapted, made possible by 'an adhocratic organizational culture that embraced fluidity and constant change.'<sup>923</sup> Since the JJJ days, IS' predecessors had known a department for its fighters and,

913 Reuter, "The terror strategist"; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 7. Also see: Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 108-9.

914 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 170.

915 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 46; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 7.

916 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," *Islamic State Report* 3 (1435H|2014), 4; "Islamic State News," *Dabiq* 1, 47; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 7.

917 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 124. Suwaydawi was the *kunya* of Adnan al-Suwaydawi al-Dulaymi.

918 Kyle Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy and the ghost of Saddam Hussein," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, August 22, 2015.

919 Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy." Also see: Graaf & Pothoven, "De Islamitische inlichtingenstaat," 461-4; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 168-70; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 12.

920 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 12-3.

921 *Ibid.*, 49.

922 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The archivist. Unseen Islamic State military commanders manual. Qualities and manners of the mujahid commander," *Aymenn Jawad*, April 11, 2016.

923 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 5. Also see: Bilger, "ISIS annual reports," 10-1; Boghani, "David Petraeus."

depending on the situation, operated either centralized or decentralized<sup>924</sup> and changed in size.<sup>925</sup> From one hybrid army in Syria and a guerrilla army in Iraq in 2013, the department expanded its force structure to four distinct entities after the conquest of Mosul, each with a different purpose.<sup>926</sup> These four entities were: (1) the caliphate army, a conventional force protecting IS' territorial integrity across Iraq and Syria; (2) the Dabiq army, loosely organized foreign fighters grouped into ethnic or language-centric units and dispersed among different fronts as 'highly motivated shock troops defending key nodes of the caliphate'<sup>927</sup>; (3) the *al-usra* army, a special operations force for defending Mosul; and, (4) the army of the provinces, which were all forces under control of a particular *wali*.<sup>928</sup>

An IS *emir* interviewed for this study explained that he had no interactions with the foreign IS members: 'they are in separate groups. We form separate groups with the locals. We do not have any contact with the foreigners.'<sup>929</sup> The IS *emir* suggested that within the strong IS hierarchy, no interaction took place with the foreign fighter sub-organizations, acknowledging the *status aparte* of the foreign fighters of the Dabiq army. The organizational structure of its military showed IS' emphasis on specialization. Apart from separate armies for conventional and irregular forces, on a lower level, IS had specialized units, for example, for sniping and intelligence. Some difference exists over whether IS tried to diversify the origin of a unit's fighters. Some analysts indicated that IS did share the burden of losses over as many areas as possible, with the unintended benefit of quickly spreading knowledge and skills.<sup>930</sup> Other analysts suggested that IS grouped fighters with the same origin to strengthen unit cohesion.<sup>931</sup>

Before advancing on Mosul, notably in Fallujah and Ramadi in late 2013 and early 2014<sup>932</sup>, ISIS units 'moved in large semiconventional formations.'<sup>933</sup> ISIS proved successful due to a combination of 'significant military build-up, tactical innovations in urban terrorism and shifts between conventional and guerrilla warfare.'<sup>934</sup> By the end of 2013, 'ISIS was a sophisticated

924 *Ibid.*, 6-7. Cf. Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 16.

925 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 43.

926 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 8.

927 *Ibid.*, 8.

928 *Ibid.*, 8.

929 IS *emir*.

930 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 43.

931 Milton, "Structure of a state," 32. Cf. Wietse van den Berge, "Muitertij in Frankrijk. Gevechtsbereidheid in de Eerste Wereldoorlog," *Militaire Spectator* 174:1 (2005), 12.

932 Ben Connable, "Iraq picture may not be as bleak as it seems," *RAND*, January 31, 2014.; Fishman, *The master plan*, 51, 183; "ISW covers al-Qaeda in Iraq. Stand-off underway in Fallujah and Ramadi," *Institute for the Study of War*, January 6, 2014.

933 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 238.

934 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 39.

military organization with the ability to conceive and to carry out multiple coordinated attacks across Iraq.<sup>935</sup>

The *diwan* of *emni* maintained public order<sup>936</sup> but was also responsible for collecting intelligence, handling agents, and conducting operations within and beyond IS-controlled territories. As such, '[t]he *emni*, [...] served as ISIS's *de facto* intelligence organization, and was responsible for collecting intelligence on military affairs, ISIS' citizens, and for gathering intelligence for running new attacks and operations abroad.'<sup>937</sup> While some analysts argued that IS based the *emni*'s organization on the *Ba'ath* party's *mukhabarat* (secret police)<sup>938</sup>, others argued that jihadi-salafists had well-established security organizations without much influence from former *Ba'ath*-ists.<sup>939</sup> In its *Dabiq* magazine, IS referred to 'the Islamic State's security apparatus'<sup>940</sup> without providing much detail. IS did mention that its security apparatus was able to record a meeting of a secret enemy cell in IS' held territory and was able to prevent attacks that the cell had planned against IS. Although who, when, where, and how were not mentioned, a remark that the cell coordinated with 'crusaders, the FSA [Free Syrian Army], and the PKK [*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Worker's Party]<sup>941</sup> suggests that this event had happened in Syria. It illustrated *emni*'s alleged capacities, though.

IS' committees and offices, comprised of specialized personnel, dealt with miscellaneous matters. These committees included the *hijrah* committee, which received foreign volunteers and distributed them among the appropriate *dawawin*; the prisoners' and martyrs' committee, which resolved matters of captured IS fighters and provided aftercare for their families; the administration of distant *wilayat*, which oversaw the provinces outside Iraq and Syria; the public and tribal relations office, which liaised between the IS leadership and the tribal leaders within IS-held territory; and *diwan al-eftaa' wa al-buhuth*.<sup>942</sup> Established after IS proclaimed the caliphate, the *diwan al-eftaa' wa al-buhuth*, while changing names occasionally<sup>943</sup>, investigated religious questions and disseminated *fatwas*, thus resolving matters submitted to the office. The *diwan* described its role as 'an independent entity concerned with researching

935 Blair, "ISIS." Also see: Bilger, "ISIS annual reports," 10-1.

936 "The structure of khilafa."

937 Graaf & Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance," 15-6. Italics in original. Also see: Anne Speckhard & Ahmet Yayla, "The ISIS *emni*. Origins and inner workings of ISIS's intelligence apparatus," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11:1 (2017), 3.

938 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 357; Graaf & Pothoven, "De Islamitische inlichtingenstaat," 461-4.

939 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The archivist. The Islamic State's security apparatus structure in the provinces," *Aymenn Jawad*, August 2, 2017.

940 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 6 (1436H|2014), 31.

941 *Ibid.*, 31.

942 "The structure of khilafa."

943 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State research office's self-history," *Aymenn Jawad*, December 4, 2018; "The structure of khilafa."

*Shari'i* issues and issuing *fatwas* on matters of incidents and events, and it is directly affiliated with the *Amir al-Mu'mineen* [supreme leader, that is, the caliph] or whoso represents him, and it was established by direct order from him.<sup>944</sup> The office issued dozens of works and instructed which textbooks to use in the training camps.<sup>945</sup>

IS had central management with departments: “[a]ll Islamic State facilities are to be set forth in the service of the military commander and that will take place following a letter to the military *amir* in the Islamic State.”<sup>946</sup> The focus on the military seemed to offer IS’ military commanders some space for maneuvering. The same document summed up the elements the military commanders had to coordinate with, though: the security officials of the *wilaya*, the provincial governor’s office for an overview of equipment gained and lost during battle, the media office, the camps administration for new *mujahid*, and – perhaps most important – the military *emir*, who oversaw military operations in a specific region.<sup>947</sup> This structure was applied on lower levels, too, like the *wilayat*, providing these entities significant autonomy.<sup>948</sup> Such autonomy might explain possible discrepancies between different IS entities.<sup>949</sup> Other differences occurred within repressive systems, as over time, control decreases.<sup>950</sup> Especially when the rational actor paradigm struggles to explain such discrepancies, studying IS by applying the organizational behavior paradigm might prove beneficial for understanding IS’ strategic decision-making.<sup>951</sup>

#### 4.2.5 Leaders: Baghdadi, Turkmani, and Anbari

IS’ strategic decision-makers in 2014 were selected on political and religious qualities.<sup>952</sup> Furthermore, IS leadership demanded a robust military element.<sup>953</sup> The IS leader to whom the organization’s leadership pledged allegiance was Baghdadi<sup>954</sup>, who, as IS’ self-proclaimed

944 “Clarifications about some of the works of the Maktab al-Buhuth wa al-Dirasat during two years,” *Islamic State*, July 2, 2016, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

945 Aymenn al-Tamimi, “The archivist. Unseen Islamic State fatwas on jihad and sabaya,” *Aymenn Jawad*, September 25, 2015; Tamimi, “The Islamic State research office’s self-history”; “The structure of khilafa.”

946 “Qualities and manners.” Italics added.

947 *Ibid.*

948 Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma*, 94. For type of structure, see: Arturo Bustamante, “U-form vs. M-form. How to understand decision autonomy under healthcare decentralization?” *International Journal of Health Policy Management* 5:9 (2016), 561; Gennaro Guofano, “U vs M-form organization,” *Fourweek MBA*, August 12, 2022.

949 Cf. Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma*, 94-5.

950 Luttwak, *Strategy*, 84.

951 For example: Graaf & Yayla, “The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance.”

952 “Imamah is from the millah of Ibrahim,” *Dabiq* 1 (1435H|2014), 20-31.

953 “Qualities and manners.” Cf. Naji, *The management of savagery*, 37-40.

954 “From hijrah to khilafa,” 40. Baghdadi was the *kunya* of Ibrahim Awwad Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai.

caliph, adopted the name Ibrahim. Baghdadi ran a war cabinet consisting of himself and his two deputies<sup>955</sup>: for Iraq, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani<sup>956</sup>, and for Syria, Abu Ali al-Anbari.<sup>957</sup>

Baghdadi was the youngest of three<sup>958</sup> or four<sup>959</sup> brothers in a middle-class family that – although disputed – traced back its lineage to the prophet Muhammad. Baghdadi supposedly originated from the Albu-Badri tribe.<sup>960</sup> Through marriage, he obtained influential tribal affiliations with the approximately seven million members of the Duleimi tribe, primarily located in Samarra and Diyala.<sup>961</sup> Born on July 1, 1971<sup>962</sup>, and raised in Samarra, Baghdadi had not experienced any troubles between Sunni and Shia. Yet, during the Iran-Iraq War, at school, Baghdadi was taught to chant '[a]l-mawt lil fars wa al-majooos [death to the Persians and the Shia].'<sup>963</sup> Saddam Hussein's persistence and brutality impressed the juvenile Baghdadi. In 1998, Baghdadi started studying for a bachelor's in Islamic Studies<sup>964</sup>, eventually obtaining a doctorate in June 2006 on *tajwid* (pronunciation rules for reciting the Quran). Baghdadi already had become acquainted with Zarqawi, after Baghdadi – then using the *kunya* Abu Du'aa – had co-founded the Islamic militia *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* (Army of the followers of the teachings and the collective)<sup>965</sup> in 2003 and served as the head of the militia's *shari'a* committee. Baghdadi was arrested in Fallujah in January 2004 and imprisoned in Camp Bucca in southern Iraq, where he met future IS leaders.<sup>966</sup> Baghdadi was released from prison on December 8, 2004<sup>967</sup>, according to some accounts among a large group of inmates, all assessed as low-level threats by coalition analysts.<sup>968</sup>

955 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 128; Orton, "The Islamic State's official biography of the caliph's deputy," n6. Also see: Charles Lister, "Islamic State senior leadership. Who's who," *Brookings*, October 20, 2014; Abu al-Waleed al-Salafi, Twitter, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, in Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi." For feasibility, this study focuses on the war cabinet.

956 Turkmani was the *kunya* of Fadl Ahmad Abdullah al-Hiyali.

957 "Der Gelehrte," 10; Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy." Anbari was the *kunya* of Abd al-Rahman al-Qaduli.

958 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 102. Also see: Joby Warrick, *Black flags. The rise of ISIS* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015), 24.

959 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 16.

960 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 121.

961 Abdel Atwan, "A portrait of Caliph Ibrahim," *Cairo Review* 19 (2015), 69; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 220. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 121.

962 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 161; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 16.

963 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 99.

964 Turki al Binali, "Stretch forth your hands to give the bay'ah to Al-Baghdadi," August 5, 2013, transl. Ubaidullah ibn Adam al-Ibrahim, *Kyle Orton's Blog*, January 8, 2015; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 103.

965 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 103. Also see: Omer Spahic, "Too many Islamic sects and groups. Which group is right? The emergence of the concept of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah," *About Islam*, January 4, 2018.

966 These included: Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, IS' future Iraq deputy; Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, IS' future chief spokesman; Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi, future member of IS' *shura* council; and Abu Mohammed al-Golani, future leader of IS' Syrian branch – and later rival – *JaN*.

967 Hunter Walker, "Here is the army's declassified Iraq prison file on the leader of ISIS," *Business Insider*, February 18, 2015. Also see: Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 14.

968 Atwan, "A portrait of Caliph Ibrahim," 71; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 99-104. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 162-5. Hashim claimed Baghdadi was arrested in Fallujah in February 2004.

Baghdadi joined the *Ba'ath*-salafist faction *Jaysh al-Mujahideen* after his release from prison. Possibly, he served as an AQI agent within the ranks of *Jaysh al-Mujahideen*. Baghdadi's allegiances around 2005-2006 remain disputed.<sup>969</sup> Yet, AQI's senior leadership, in particular Muhājir, invited Baghdadi and his organization to join the MSC.<sup>970</sup> The merger occurred on January 29, 2006.<sup>971</sup> Muhājir, with whom Baghdadi maintained a close relationship, asked Baghdadi in MSC's *shari'a* committee.<sup>972</sup> Later, Baghdadi headed ISI's *shari'a* committee and was a member of its *shura* council.<sup>973</sup> Eventually, Baghdadi became responsible for ISI's general committee, overseeing ISI provinces in Iraq. He frequently visited tribes to liaise and requested them to pledge *bay'ah* to ISI's then-*emir*, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. When Abu Umar al-Baghdadi died, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became his successor<sup>974</sup>; his battlefield experiences, lineage, and doctorate made him an outstanding candidate.<sup>975</sup> IS crafted a warrior-scholar image for Baghdadi, which usually preceded live footage as Baghdadi rarely appeared in public.<sup>976</sup> Bin Laden's death in 2011 might have been a factor here, creating a leadership vacuum within the global jihadi-salafist movement and thus an opportunity for Baghdadi to claim its leadership.<sup>977</sup>

Baghdadi did have battlefield experience in Iraq. As a military leader, he was described 'shrewd and calculating.'<sup>978</sup> Baghdadi had studied *al-Qaeda* operations abroad, from which he learned to 'immediately order full withdrawal from a battle that cannot easily be won.'<sup>979</sup> Furthermore, 'Baghdadi's military style was robust and confrontational, favoring hit-and-run strikes and full-on raids.'<sup>980</sup> The raids in particular resembled the *modus operandi* of seventh century Muslim fighters, who sometimes turned the raids into permanent occupation of territories.<sup>981</sup> Next to such pragmatism, analysts described Baghdadi as vindictive<sup>982</sup>, 'ruthless and menacing,' 'calm and self-possessed,' and 'charismatic.'<sup>983</sup> A former IS commander described Baghdadi as 'resolute. He

969 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 18-9.

970 Atwan, "A portrait of caliph Ibrahim," 72; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 165.

971 Binali, "Stretch forth your hands"; Fishman, *The master plan*, 151; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 99-104.

972 Atwan, "A portrait of caliph Ibrahim," 72.

973 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 99-104.

974 Binali, "Stretch forth your hands."

975 Fishman, *The master plan*, 152.

976 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 173; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 22. For example: "In the hospitality of Amir al-Mu'mineen," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, April 29, 2019, transl. Halummu; Kyle Orton, "The reappearance of the caliph," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, May 10, 2019. Cf. "Image of Osama bin Laden," no date.

977 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 17.

978 Atwan, "A portrait of caliph Ibrahim," 68.

979 *Ibid.*, 69.

980 *Ibid.*, 72.

981 Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 74.

982 Atwan, "A portrait of caliph Ibrahim," 68. *Shura* council member Jamal al-Hamdani had voted against Baghdadi as leader of IS and was murdered shortly after Baghdadi's election, allegedly by order of Baghdadi.

983 *Ibid.*, 68; Abu al-Waleed al-Salafi, Twitter, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, in Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi." Cf. "Battle of Indochina," cited in Freedman, *Command*, 38.

would not go back on a decision unless he was 100% certain that it was wrong. Only then would he change his mind. He would not admit any faults. Rather, he would try to cover them up.<sup>984</sup>

Abu Muslim al-Turkmani was an ethnic Turkoman who originated from Tal Afar. Turkmani had a long career in intelligence, had a background in special operations within Saddam Hussein's elite Republican Guard, and was a former lieutenant colonel in Iraq's army. He remained with the *Ba'ath* regime until Americans fired him from service and imprisoned him in Camp Bucca in 2003. There, he met Baghdadi in 2004.<sup>985</sup> Alongside Anbari, Turkmani contributed to integrating Anbari's Tal Afar jihadists with Kurdistan-based AaI by providing military training.<sup>986</sup> Turkmani in IS combined several roles at the same time.<sup>987</sup> Baghdadi appointed Turkmani governor of the conquered territories in Iraq in 2014. In that role, he monitored local IS councils and maintained internal security.<sup>988</sup> Perhaps most significant was Turkmani's position as the deputy to Baghdadi, who officially headed IS' military council and was the direct commander of IS's forces in Iraq. Turkmani took over the military committee in June 2014. Turkmani was skilled in operational security and counterintelligence like his predecessors due to his service in the *Ba'ath* security apparatus.<sup>989</sup> Nevertheless, a drone strike killed Turkmani near Mosul on August 18, 2015.<sup>990</sup> During his jihadist career, Turkmani used several other *kunya's*: Abu Mutaz al-Qurayshi and Haji Mutazz.<sup>991</sup>

Whereas Turkmani was the governor of Iraq, Anbari held the same position for Syria, being responsible for IS' Syrian affairs and intelligence cells.<sup>992</sup> Also, Anbari acted as IS' finance minister.<sup>993</sup> Some analysts believed Anbari served as Baghdadi's deputy for his political pragmatism, as he lacked the extensive knowledge of *shari'a* that other IS leaders had.<sup>994</sup> Anbari originated from the Nineveh countryside<sup>995</sup> but grew up in Tal Afar, where he had

984 Abdul Nasser Qardash, interview, *Al-Arabiya*, May 20, 2020, transl. unknown, in "Captured senior ISIS commander Abdul Nasser Qardash: fanatics in ISIS had the upper hand; new leader not as resolute as al-Baghdadi," *Middle East Media Research Institute*, May 20, 2020. Also see: Salafi, in Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi."

985 Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy."

986 "Der Gelehrte," 11.

987 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 7.

988 Cf. Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 109.

989 Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy"; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers," 7.

990 Barbara Starr & Jim Acosta, "U.S.: ISIS No. 2 killed in U.S. drone strike in Iraq," *CNN*, August 26, 2015. Also see: Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 109; Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy." IS acknowledged Turkmani's death on October 13, 2015. Others claimed Turkmani was killed in November 2014, December 2014, or February 2015.

991 Orton, "The Islamic State's official biography of the caliph's deputy," n6.

992 *Ibid.*, n9, n12. Also see: Orton, "Governing the caliphate." 29. Anbari used numerous *kunya's*: Abu Iman, Haji Iman, Abu Alaa al-Afri, Abu Abdullah Rashid al-Baghdadi, Abu Jasim al-Iraqi, Abu Umar al-Qurdash, Abu Ali al-Qurdash al-Turkmani, and Dar Islami.

993 Starr *et al.*, "Pentagon."

994 Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 124. Also see: Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 24.

995 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The biography of Abu Ali al-Anbari. Full translation and analysis," *Aymenn Jawad*,

met Turkmani, who allegedly recruited Anbari for *jihad*. Like Turkmani, Anbari was ethnic Turkoman.<sup>996</sup> He eventually joined AQL.<sup>997</sup> Anbari had been a preacher in Mosul during Iraq's *Ba'ath* regime<sup>998</sup> when he witnessed *Ba'ath*-ist abuses and was harassed by the security services after he spoke out. He moved to Tal Afar and became involved in several jihadi-salafist groups, which assisted mergers, including of JTJ into AQL, in which Zarqawi appointed Anbari as his deputy. Before accepting the position, Anbari was arrested and detained in Abu Ghraib prison. He was released after a few months in late 2003 or early 2004, as American investigators could not verify Anbari's identity or importance. Anbari returned to AQL, assisted in merging into MSC, and was elected MSC's first *emir*. On April 16, 2006, American forces again arrested Anbari, and again, the investigators could not verify his identity or assess his importance. Nevertheless, it took until early 2012 before Anbari was released. After his return, ISI leadership requested Anbari to establish lines of communication with *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates. He was closely involved in the decision to dissolve JaN and establish ISIS. Later, Anbari became responsible for the *shari'a* council and joined the delegated committee in Syria. He liaised with the factions and organizations and guided and facilitated the judges and Islamic courts founded by ISIS in conquered areas. Therefore, Anbari established several *shari'a*-related *dawawin*.<sup>999</sup> After ISIS had captured Mosul in June 2014, Anbari requested to join the *jihad* in Iraq, participating in battles against the PKK and the KRI *peshmerga* on and around Mount Sinjar. Yet, ISIS summoned him to assume a government position, eventually initiating the Islamic monetary project, for which he met with merchants and administrators within IS territory. Anbari died at age sixty during a coalition raid, allegedly by igniting his explosive belt when almost arrested.<sup>1000</sup> Anbari's biographic obituary and other descriptions sketch a fanatic jihadi-salafist who built and maintained relations among like-minded organizations and their leaders and held great authority. He appeared to truly believe in *jihad*, joining fights near Sinjar despite fulfilling leading positions. Anbari's obituary mentioned that he was asked or tasked to perform specific duties within IS and its predecessors, which might have contributed to his authority as a suitable man for the job.

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December 17, 2018. Also see: Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 128; Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy." Moubayed and Orton claimed Anbari originated from Mosul.

996 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 176; Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy."

997 Tamimi, "The biography of Abu Ali al-Anbari."

998 Cf. Lister, "Islamic State senior leadership,"; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 128; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 124. Anbari was long believed to have been a senior intelligence officer in the Saddam regime as a major general in the Iraqi army, originating from Anbar

999 These included the departments for judgment and grievances, for the *hisbah*, for *da'wah*, and for *zakat*, as well as the office of research and studies, which investigated religious questions and disseminated *fatwas*, thus resolving matters submitted to the office.

1000 "Der Gelehrte," 10-5. Also see: Orton, "The Islamic State's official biography of the caliph's deputy," n10; Starr *et al.*, "Pentagon."

### 4.3 The KRI

Forming the largest non-state nation in the Middle East<sup>1001</sup>, Kurds live divided among Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.<sup>1002</sup> Analysts estimated the number of Kurds to be between twenty-five and thirty million, with approximately one million living in the diaspora outside the Middle East.<sup>1003</sup> Analysts estimated the 2012 KRI population to be around 5.3 million.<sup>1004</sup> Since around 3,000 bce, the Kurds are among the indigenous people in the Middle East. The Arabs conquered their area in the seventh century.<sup>1005</sup> During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Saljuks ruled the Kurds indirectly through tribal families and chiefs.<sup>1006</sup> The Ottomans incorporated the area into the Ottoman Empire, leaving the remainder of the Kurdish territory to Persia<sup>1007</sup> in 1516.<sup>1008</sup> After the First World War, France, Great Britain, and Russia controlled the Kurdish regions. During the Versailles Peace Conference (1919), the Allies supported the idea of forming a Kurdish state, leading to the Sèvres Treaty (1920), in which the Kurds were promised a state by the Allies and the Ottoman government.<sup>1009</sup> Yet, the signatories did not ratify the Sèvres Treaty, and the new state of Turkey came into existence with the 1923 Lausanne Treaty.<sup>1010</sup> The Kurds from the former Ottoman Empire lived in either the new Turkish state or in one of the newly created British or French mandate territories, which eventually became independent states after the Second World War.<sup>1011</sup> However, it was not until after the Second World War and the formation of new nation-states in the Middle East that ethnicity among Kurds became important in reaction to the territory-possessive attitudes of the states where they lived.<sup>1012</sup> Figure 4.3 indicates the areas where Kurds live in the Middle East and the area according to the Sèvres Treaty.

1001 Noi, "The Arab spring," 15-29; "Syria's Kurds. A struggle within a struggle" (Brussels: *International Crisis Group*, 2013), i.

1002 Harff & Gurr, *Ethnic conflict in IR*, 38-40; Ivan Nasidze *et al.*, "MtDNA and Y-chromosome variation in Kurdish groups," *Annals of Human Genetics* 69:4 (2005), 401-12.

1003 Harff & Gurr, *Ethnic conflict in IR*, 38. Exact numbers are difficult to obtain as some authorities try to diminish the number of Kurds, for example to emphasize national unity. On the other hand, Kurdish leaders tend to overestimate the number to seem more powerful.

1004 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1005 Nasidze *et al.*, "MtDNA and Y-chromosome variation," 401-412.

1006 Antony Black, *The history of Islamic political thought*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 92.

1007 Nasidze *et al.*, "MtDNA and Y-chromosome variation," 401-12.

1008 Black, *The history of Islamic political thought*, 196.

1009 Harff & Gurr, *Ethnic conflict in IR*, pp 39-45; Noi, "The Arab Spring," 15-6.

1010 Harff & Gurr, *Ethnic conflict in IR*, 44; Mansfield, *A history of the Middle East*, 170-1; Noi, "The Arab Spring," 15-29.

1011 Barr, *A line in the sand*, 283-97.

1012 Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds. History, politics and society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 16-7, 42.

**Figure 4.3:** map indicating Kurdish inhabited areas (brown), the area appointed to form Kurdistan according to the 1920 Sèvres treaty (red), and the area that became the KRI (yellow; indicated here as Iraqi Kurdistan).<sup>1013</sup>



#### 4.3.1 History (1992-2014): repression, internal fragmentation

The Iraqi Kurds have suffered a history of repression and instigated rebellion against Iraqi regimes. Kurdish rebels benefitted from the mountainous area to seek shelter and as a base for staging attacks. A local saying reflected the Kurdish reliance on the mountains: ‘[I]level the mountains, and in a day the Kurds would be no more.’<sup>1014</sup> Violent repression and the consecutive rebellion of the Iraqi Kurds started during the British mandate period (1919-1932) and continued since the 1932 creation of modern Iraq. The pan-Arab nationalist *Ba’ath* party longed for a robust Arab nation-state and regarded Kurdish nationalism as a threat to this ideal. During the Iran-Iraq War, both warring parties supported different factions of Iraqi Kurds to weaken the other side. Still, Iranian support for rebellious Iraqi Kurds seemed to confirm the perceived threat of Kurdish nationalism, as Iran tried to weaken Iraq from within by igniting a Kurdish revolt. Although some Kurdish factions negotiated with the Iraqi regime until 1984, Iraq fiercely repressed the Kurdish rebellion, including use of chemical weapons against the Kurdish population.<sup>1015</sup> Following the 1991 Gulf War, United Nations Security

<sup>1013</sup> Hakan Özoğlu, “Lessons from the idea, and rejection of Kurdistan,” *NY Times*, July 5, 2014.

<sup>1014</sup> Cited in Harff & Gurr, *Ethnic conflict in IR*, 40. Also see: Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 155.

<sup>1015</sup> Aziz, *The Kurds of Iraq*, 5-6, 130. Infamous is the Anfal campaign, during which mustard gas was used by Iraqi troops against the population of the Kurdish village of Halabja in 1988.

Council Resolution 688 established a safe haven for Kurdish refugees, including a no-fly zone enforced by American and British airplanes. Iraq withdrew civil administration from the area, leaving 'Iraqi Kurdistan [the KRI] to function de facto independently'<sup>1016</sup> as a 'de facto state.'<sup>1017</sup> The KRI came into existence. Iraqi Kurds held elections in 1992 and created the Kurdistan National Assembly as its legislative power and the KRG as its executive power.

A dispute over customs revenues ignited the Kurdish Civil War (1994-1998) between the KRI's two main political factions, the KDP and the PUK.<sup>1018</sup> Negotiations to end the Kurdish Civil War started in 1996, initiated by Great Britain, Turkey, and the United States. It led to the Washington Agreement, signed by both parties on September 17, 1998.<sup>1019</sup> The conflict caused approximately eight thousand casualties<sup>1020</sup>, and tensions have remained since. Nevertheless, during the 2003 Gulf War, the KRI proved a valuable regional ally for the United States and Great Britain.<sup>1021</sup> Considered as one of the allies that defeated Iraq, '[t]he Kurds entered [...] national politics on an equal footing with Iraq's Arabs.'<sup>1022</sup> Also, the KRI's authorities assisted Western special operations forces in targeting jihadi-salafist ANSA *Ansar al-Sunnah* (Partisans of the teachings, AaS) and its allies.<sup>1023</sup> The new 2005 Iraqi constitution contained the KRI in a federal setting<sup>1024</sup>, allowing the KRI to maintain security forces and embassies abroad. Within the Iraqi context, until 2011 – when American troops left the country – the KRI was hardly involved in countering the insurgency. When American troops returned in 2012, the KRI became more actively involved than the nine years before.<sup>1025</sup> In May 2013, the KRI's *peshmerga* moved towards the outskirts of Kirkuk when ISF redeployed to fight ISI.<sup>1026</sup> Tensions between the KRI and Iraqi authorities remained, though. The tensions included control over territory claimed by Iraq and the KRI, notably the oil-rich Kirkuk area.<sup>1027</sup> The tensions led to the KRI allegedly refusing to support ISF during battles with ISIS over Fallujah and Ramadi in January

1016 Noi, "The Arab spring," 21. Also see: Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 154-5.

1017 Aziz, *The Kurds of Iraq*, 5; Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 13; Gunter, "The foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurds," 9.

1018 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 350-1; Wladimir van Wilgenburg & Mario Fumerton, "Kurdistan's political armies. The challenge of unifying the peshmerga forces" (Beirut: *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2015), 1. Also see: "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 5; Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 14; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1019 "Kurdish peshmerga."

1020 Stefano Torelli, "Kurdistan and the Middle East. Historical divisions and international plots," in *Kurdistan. An invisible nation*, Stefano Torelli (ed.) (Milan: ISPI, 2016), 38.

1021 Fishman, *The master plan*, 29.

1022 Noi, "The Arab spring," 22.

1023 Fishman, *The master plan*, 29; Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 353. AaS was mainly active in northern Iraq and consisted of many former Aal-members.

1024 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1025 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 185.

1026 "Iraqi Kurds 'fully control Kirkuk' as army flees," *BBC*, June 12, 2014.

1027 Albert Charara, "Why Kirkuk matters. A Kirkuk-centric approach to Iraqi election and the country's most immediate challenges," *Notes Internationals* 197 (2018), 2; Nahwi Saeed, "The problem of Kirkuk. Its complexity and importance" (Suleimaniyah: *Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center*, 2017).

2014<sup>1028</sup>, and Iraqi authorities cutting the 17 percent of the Iraqi national budget allocation for the KRI.<sup>1029</sup>

### 4.3.2 Strategic goal: pursue autonomy

The KRI's aim in its publicly available 2013 document "Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2020. A vision for the future" was that '[i]n the Kurdistan Region–Iraq, all people will enjoy the benefits of freedom, health, welfare, and economic security and opportunity.'<sup>1030</sup> The document referred to the post-First World War plan for a Kurdish state.<sup>1031</sup> Although the KRI's official narrative is not to strive for independence, an implicit undertone seemed to claim otherwise and the KRI aimed for more political autonomy.<sup>1032</sup>

Political scientist Hajar Sadoon observed that 'the KRI can be said to be a strategic rational actor matching its policies with its available power.'<sup>1033</sup> Yet, internally, the KDP and the PUK were 'unable to formulate a consistent and cohesive political and military strategy, they had developed the federal region through competitive clientelistic networks.'<sup>1034</sup> In their analysis of relations between Iraqi authorities and the KRI from 1991 to 2019, political scientists Kamaran Palani *et al.* concluded that 'despite the internal divisions between key political actors [the KDP and the PUK], neither abandoning the goal of de facto independence, nor the complete reintegration into the parent state [Iraq], is considered a realistic policy option by any of the players, due to the longevity of de facto independence and the prevailing mistrust between the de facto state population, leadership, and the parent state.'<sup>1035</sup> Externally, other countries with a Kurdish minority were cautious and shared an interest in prohibiting the formation of a Kurdish state out of fear of a 'domino effect in the region.'<sup>1036</sup> The rivalry between the KDP and the PUK created an opportunity for external actors to maneuver between the two parties to pursue their own goals:

[o]n the one hand, Turkey has forged increasingly close ties with the Kurdish Regional Government, especially with the KDP, in order to contrast the PKK and to create its own sphere of influence in northern Iraq. On the other, the PUK has continued to seek and

1028 "Offensive manoeuvres. The Islamic State advances on the Kurds in northern Iraq," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, August 8, 2014.

1029 "Oil sales obstacles"; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 8.

1030 "Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2020. A vision for the future," *Kurdistan Regional Government - Ministry of Planning*, 2013, 1.

1031 *Ibid.*, 2.

1032 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 12.

1033 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 15.

1034 Joost Jongerden, "Governing Kurdistan. Self-administration in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria," *Ethnopolitics* 18:1 (2019), 69.

1035 Palani *et al.* "De facto states engagement with parent states," 787.

1036 Noi, "The Arab Spring," 26.

obtain the support of Iran, in turn interested in extending its influence in Iraq through an alliance with local actors. Moreover, the PUK tolerates the presence of the PKK in the Qandil area, thus indirectly counterbalancing the hegemony of the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan's internal balances. As a result of the emergence and the advance of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq since 2014, Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have also assumed another role, that of the vanguard in the fight against the caliphate's jihadism.<sup>1037</sup>

Historically, however, 'the *Peshmerga* have always been a defensive force, retreating back into the mountains in very small groups, absorbing the punishment inflicted upon them by the Iraqi Army, and then undermining their opponents over a long period of low-intensity warfare.'<sup>1038</sup>

In 2005, the Iraqi constitution allowed the KRI a Department of Foreign Relations<sup>1039</sup>, established in September 2006 under a KDP minister. The department administered KRG foreign policy and bolstered the KRI's international relations.<sup>1040</sup> Next to informal external networks through parties, tribal relations, or the diaspora, this indicates that the KRI invested in the diplomatic instrument to achieve foreign policy goals. The KRI maintained a neutral position towards other Middle Eastern conflicts, using its secular profile to remain distant from Sunni-Shia rivalries.<sup>1041</sup> Furthermore, the KRI used its economic instrument, trade with Turkey, to establish and enhance foreign relations.<sup>1042</sup>

### 4.3.3 Ideology: Kurdish nationalism

A rational actor paradigm historical background would explain Kurdish aspirations as rational interests of a single unitary actor, that is, the KRI. The paradigm would fall short of addressing the complexities within the Kurdish communities, though: '[t]he group which is known and recognized under the generic name of "Kurd" is far from being homogenous. It includes several dialects, religious denominations (Sunnism, Shi'ism, Alevism, and Yazidism), and various social and geographic identities (both tribal and nontribal).'<sup>1043</sup> Therefore, analysts labeled

1037 Torelli, "Kurdistan and the Middle East," 39. Also see: Wietse van den Berge, "PKK and Turkey. Time for peace?" *Leiden Security and Global Affairs Blog*, March 9, 2015; Kyle Orton, "Turkey fears a Kurdish state more than the Islamic State," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, July 28, 2015.

1038 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,346. Italics added.

1039 Abbaszadah, "KRG's military help to Kobane."

1040 "Falah Mustafa Bakir," *University of Kurdistan*, accessed July 16, 2023; "H.E. Falah Mustafa Bakir, former Minister and Head of Department of Foreign Relations (DFR) Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)," *Department of Foreign Relations – Kurdistan Regional Government*, September 6, 2020.

1041 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1042 Sibel Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Economic and social impact assessment of the Syrian conflict and ISIS crisis," (Washington D.C.: *World Bank*, 2015), 21. Also see: Kirschner, *Trust and fear in civil wars*, 158; "Oil obstacles."

1043 Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 3

Kurdish ethnicity as ‘macroethnic.’<sup>1044</sup> While the rational actor paradigm would consider the Kurds as one entity, the organizational behavior paradigm would focus on bureaucratic entities within Kurdish society, and the governmental politics paradigm on Kurdish key individuals. The latter two seemed intermingled in the Iraqi-Kurdish context, separated by ideologies and interests. While Kurds based their identity on ‘common culture, including a contiguous homeland, a myth of common origin, a shared faith in Islam, similar languages, and a history of bitter conflict with outsiders’<sup>1045</sup>, among Iraqi Kurds, two dominant Iraqi Kurdish groups emerged that operated as guerrilla groups fighting against the Iraqi regime, and eventually transformed into the KRI’s two main political parties: the KDP and the PUK.

‘Following the first parliamentary elections in May 1992, they [the KDP and the PUK] set themselves the task of governing, while keeping real power in the parties, supported by their respective security forces. Based on historical, cultural and linguistic differences, the KDP extended its reach throughout Erbil and Duhok governorates, while the PUK’s stronghold was Suleimaniya, as well as, after the 2003 U.S. invasion, Kirkuk governorate, outside the Kurdish region in disputed territories.’<sup>1046</sup>

Or: ‘[w]hile the KRG’s parliament passes legislation, it is up to the independent bureaucracies of the PUK and KDP to enforce that legislation and govern in their respective regions.’<sup>1047</sup> Ideologically, officially, the KDP is more Kurdish nationalistic oriented, whereas the PUK holds a more social democratic posture, occasionally adopting the PKK’s socialist stance.<sup>1048</sup> In practice, both approach the ideological difference pragmatically; who joined which party is typically a matter of kinship or tribe, the KDP being dominated by the Barzani family and the PUK by the Talabani family. The tribal differences translated into geography, leading to two Iraqi-Kurdish quasi-states.

#### 4.3.4 Organization: two quasi-states

Historically, the KRI is internally divided.<sup>1049</sup> In the 2006 document “KRG Unification Agreement,” the KDP and the PUK equally divided the ministries among the KDP and the

1044 *Ibid.*, 70. The term macroethnic is Tejel’s and implies the internal divisions described in the previous quote.

1045 Harff & Gurr, *Ethnic Conflict in IR*, 39.

1046 “Arming Iraq’s Kurds,” 5.

1047 “Kurdish peshmerga.”

1048 For PKK’s ideology see: Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison writings. The PKK and the Kurdish question in the 21st century*, transl. Klaus Happel (City unknown: Transmedia, 2011), 86-91; Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison writings. The roots of civilization*, transl. Klaus Happel (London: Pluto, 2007), 255-61.

1049 Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 349-50. Also see: Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan?” 12; Hamzeh Hadad & Brandon Wallace, “The Iraqi Kurdish security apparatus. Vulnerability and structure,” *Small Wars Journal*, September 29, 2017.

PUK. The document included ‘KRG representations abroad.’<sup>1050</sup> The Department of Foreign Relations had to be established at the time, which the Iraqi constitution allowed since 2005, separate from Iraqi foreign affairs.<sup>1051</sup> Despite fourteen representations abroad by 2014, Kurdish foreign relations still occurred along party lines<sup>1052</sup> and included international oil companies.<sup>1053</sup> The “KRG Unification Agreement” also included the Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs, assigned to the KDP.<sup>1054</sup> However, in practice the KDP and the PUK maintained their fighting capacity.<sup>1055</sup>

Both *peshmerga* forces officially became part of a single, joint Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs in 1992. Nevertheless, rivalries between the KDP and the PUK emerged. A dispute over customs revenues ignited in 1994 the Kurdish Civil War between the KDP and the PUK.<sup>1056</sup> The complexity of the conflict is illustrated by a seemingly ad hoc cooperation between the KDP and the PUK when trying to expel the PKK from the KRI. However, the PKK secretly worked together with the PUK.<sup>1057</sup> Also, regional powers intervened; the ‘[t]wo Iraqi Kurdish parties had partially lost control over their fates due to ongoing civil war since the KDP was supported by Turkey, whereas PUK was backed by Iran.’<sup>1058</sup> Despite hostility among their Iraqi-Kurdish proxies, Iran and Turkey tried to prevent the formation of a Kurdish state between 1992-1995, fearing secessionist movements among their own indigenous Kurdish minorities. Eventually, Turkey intervened militarily with around 35,000 troops to fight the PKK. The KDP supported the intervention, while the PUK objected, as did Iran. More Turkish interventions took place in the KRI, aimed at destroying the PKK, strengthening the KDP, weakening Iran’s relationship with the PUK, and preventing Iranian domination in the region.<sup>1059</sup>

After the Kurdish civil war, the KDP and the PUK re-established the joint KRG. They governed the KRI from its capital, Erbil. Yet, in practice, from 1996 onwards, the KRI existed of two countries: ‘[h]alfway from Erbil to Suleimaniyah, the flags change from yellow to green, as do the posters of martyred fighters. This is the non-official border between the KDP and the PUK, which, in spite of both being part of the KRG, have distinct command structures.’<sup>1060</sup> The KDP and the PUK ‘retained de facto parallel systems of governance, with their own military

1050 “Kurdistan Regional Government Unification Agreement,” *KRG*, January 21, 2006.

1051 Abbaszadah, “KRG’s military help to Kobane”; “Kurdistan Regional Government Unification Agreement.”

1052 Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 352-4. Also see: Jongerden, “Governing Kurdistan,” 73-74n12; “KRG: no foreign offices will be closed,” *Rûdaw*, August 9, 2016.

1053 Mustafa, “Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum,” 902.

1054 “Kurdistan Regional Government Unification Agreement.”

1055 Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan?” 13; Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 353-4.

1056 Wilgenburg & Fumerton, “Kurdistan’s political armies,” 1; “Arming Iraq’s Kurds,” 5.

1057 “Arming Iraq’s Kurds,” ii.

1058 *Ibid.*, 21. Also see: Berge, “PKK and Turkey?”; Kirschner, *Trust and fear in civil wars*, 91-127.

1059 Eyal, “Introduction,” 4-5.

1060 Vicken Cheterian, “Turkey in 2017. A focus on the Kurdish question and military formations in Middle Eastern battlefields,” in *The war report. Armed conflicts in 2017*, Annysa Bellal (ed.) (Geneva: Geneva Academy, 2017), 142; Jongerden, “Governing Kurdistan,” 63-4, 73n12. Also see: “American Kurdistan,” *Dabiq* 10 (1436H[2015]), 32-3.

and security agencies, patterns of co-optation, rules of advancement and reporting lines for both civil servants and *peshmerga* fighters, imposing party loyalty throughout.<sup>1061</sup> Adding to the cleavage are the two significantly different dialects of Kurdish that are spoken in the KDP-dominated area and the PUK-dominated area.<sup>1062</sup>

In practice, the KDP and the PUK party structures decided on 'recruitment, appointments, promotions, and deployments of their *peshmerga* affiliates.'<sup>1063</sup> As this proved highly ineffective and inefficient, the KDP and the PUK gradually merged their parallel structures from 2008 onwards due to a resurgent Iraqi central government. A joint Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs reappeared in 2009, as did mixed units and a *hawalgry* (intelligence) department operated by KDP and PUK officers. Next to its *kargerri* (administrative) departments, the Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs existed of the *harakat* (operations) departments, with teams attached to *peshmerga* units in the field. By 2014, the joint Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs comprised twelve brigades with around 150,000 men. The merger claimed by the Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs is only partial, though. While merged administratively and professionalizing, the KDP's *yekey* (unit) 80 and the PUK's *yekey* 70 remained under their respective party's control, as did 'the most sensitive recruitment and appointments issues.'<sup>1064</sup> In early 2014, analysts estimated the KDP *peshmerga* at 10,000 strong and the PUK *peshmerga* at 15,000.<sup>1065</sup>

The KDP-PUK rivalry eventually caused the establishment of a breakaway party of the PUK, named *Gorran* (change), as a third political party in 2009.<sup>1066</sup> After the KRI's parliamentary elections of 2013, *Gorran* became the second-largest party after the KDP.<sup>1067</sup> Since 2014, a *Gorran* minister led the Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs. Still, the KDP and the PUK kept dividing commanding positions evenly, with deputies from the other party, and recognizing the traditional zones of influence<sup>1068</sup>: '[i]n important areas of the Kurdistan Region's functions, the two parties [the KDP and the PUK] maintain separate administrations. This is the most significant in terms of security and intelligence.'<sup>1069</sup> *Gorran* lacked a fighting capacity, which

1061 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 5. Italics added. Also see: Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach"; Stansfield, "Iraq," 19-20.

1062 Hadad & Wallace, "The Iraqi Kurdish security apparatus."

1063 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 9. Italics added.

1064 *Ibid.*, 9. Also see: Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 26-7.

1065 "PUK and KDP likely to agree in government in Iraqi Kurdistan," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, March 12, 2014.

1066 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach"; Torelli, "Kurdistan and the Middle East," 69.

1067 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach"; "KRG's fiscal dependency on central Iraqi government ensures support for a Maliki government after April parliamentary election," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, February 24, 2014.

1068 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 9, 22. Also see: "New ministers join KRG cabinet, others to keep their posts," *Rûdaw*, April 14, 2014.

1069 "KRG's fiscal dependency"; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

the KDP and the PUK did possess.<sup>1070</sup> The *peshmerga*, thus, consisted of three parts: one commanded by the KRG, one commanded by the KDP, and one commanded by the PUK.<sup>1071</sup>

In her 2015 study on civil-military relations within the KRI, political scientist Verena Gruber found that the KRI's 'president (Masoud Barzani) heads the General Command Staff [...]. The president is in charge of all military decisions and is advised by his General Command Staff. Decisions of war lie with him [Barzani], and the management of day-to-day affairs with the Ministry.'<sup>1072</sup> Of the General Command Staff's six members, four were members of the KDP, one of the PUK, and one of *Gorran*<sup>1073</sup>, which suggests that the KDP dominated the KRI's military strategy.

Next to the fighting capacities, the parties' intelligence agencies – the KDP's *parastin* and the PUK's *zanyari* – remained under party control.<sup>1074</sup> The responsibility of the KRI's security agency, *asayesh* (security), is typically situated with the Ministry of Interior, unless the *asayesh* operates near the front line. In that case, the military commander of the region is in control. The party that controls the region chooses the commander there.<sup>1075</sup>

#### 4.3.5 Leaders: Barzani versus Talabani

Within the KRI, the organizational behavior and governmental politics paradigms seem intermingled when examining strategic decision-making. The rivalry between the Barzani and Talabani families, controlling the KDP and the PUK respectively<sup>1076</sup>, led to actors in international relations – acknowledging the intra-Kurdish rivalries – to deal 'with politicians from the region as [...] party leaders and not with them as KRG government officials.'<sup>1077</sup> Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani signed the Washington Agreement on September 17, 1998, on behalf of the KDP and the PUK, respectively. After the 2003 Gulf War, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, together with three independent Kurds, became members of the transitional Iraqi governing council.

1070 "PUK and KDP likely to agree." Also see: Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 20n53; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1071 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 5.

1072 Verena Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory. A case of the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq." MA thes., Lund University, 2015, 39. Also see: Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 15.

1073 Wilgenburg & Fumerton, "Kurdistan's political armies," 9n28.

1074 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 9. Also see: Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1075 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 39-42. Also see: Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 14.

1076 Mustafa, "Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum," 897; Torelli, "Kurdistan and the Middle East," 38.

1077 Jongerden, "Governing Kurdistan," 73-74n12.

Based on the legacy of Kurdish tribal leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani, his son Masoud Barzani became the KRI's president in 2005.<sup>1078</sup> His term officially ended in July 2013 but was extended by the KRI's parliament until August 19, 2015, based on an apparent need to amend the constitution before new elections.<sup>1079</sup> As the president, Masoud Barzani tried to manifest himself as the leader of all Kurds, including Syrian Kurds, openly calling for independence and striving to deliver a Kurdish state before he died.<sup>1080</sup> Barzani's personal involvement in brokering a peace settlement between Turkey and the PKK had consolidated his status.<sup>1081</sup>

Among KDP senior ranks, a rivalry for who would succeed the aging Masoud Barzani seemed at stake. The rivalry included Masrour Barzani, Masoud Barzani's son, who might be considered his father's natural successor. Masrour Barzani was the head of KDP's intelligence apparatus, became the commander-in-chief of security operations next to his father, held primary decision-making powers and the ability to shape KRG domestic and regional politics.<sup>1082</sup> Furthermore, Masrour Barzani, since July 2012, headed the *Encumena Asayîşa Herêma Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Region Security Council), which was established in 2011 and administratively is part of the president's office.<sup>1083</sup>

Considered Masrour Barzani's rival, is Nechirvan Barzani, KRG prime-minister and son of Masoud Barzani's late older brother. Nechirvan Barzani has well-established connections with the PUK and the PKK, as well as with Iran and Turkey. According to Nechirvan Barzani, Kurdish independence is not a priority.<sup>1084</sup>

Responsible for the KRI's foreign policy was Falah Mustafa Bakir. Bakir had studied Development Studies and Government in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. On behalf of the KDP, he served as the KRG's deputy minister of Agriculture and Irrigation between 1999 and 2002. Later, Bakir was the KRG's liaison officer to the CPA in 2003 and to the Multi-National Forces' Korean Contingent stationed in Erbil in 2004, while also being senior advisor to the KRG prime-minister from 2002 until 2004. In September 2006, when the KRI established the Department of Foreign Relations, Bakir became the KRI's first minister of Foreign Relations. He again assumed the position from June 2014 until July 2019.<sup>1085</sup> The Department of Foreign Relations was not involved in military affairs<sup>1086</sup> and appeared restricted to diplomatic affairs.

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1078 "Masoud Barzani."

1079 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1080 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 7, 7-8n30.

1081 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 8. Also see: Eyal, "Introduction," 4-5.

1082 *Ibid.*, 7-8n30.

1083 "President Barzani inaugurates the security council of the Kurdistan Region," *Kurdistan Region Presidency*, July 8 2012.

1084 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 7-8n30.

1085 "Falah Mustafa Bakir"; "H.E. Falah Mustafa Bakir."

1086 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 39.

With its leading political figure, Jalal Talabani, on his sick bed for years, the PUK's internal struggle has been between security figures such as Mulla Bakhtiar and Jalal Talabani's ex-wife Hero, who both marginalized Barham Salih, a pro-Western figure who maintained good relations with the KDP.<sup>1087</sup> Jalal Talabani's son, Lahour Talabani, was the head of PUK intelligence, and, as a fluent English speaker due to education abroad, played a prominent role in the coalition against IS. The PUK's internal power struggle made the party an unreliable partner for the KDP in governing the KRI, causing political instability.<sup>1088</sup>

## 4.4 Other ANSAs

Apart from IS and the KRI, other actors were involved in the conflict that featured these ANSAs. Without claiming to be conclusive, this paragraph focuses on other ANSAs involved, recognizing that state actors such as Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and the United States, influence the situation too.<sup>1089</sup> The sections below address the Syrian Kurds, *al-Qaeda*, and the Shia in Iraq.<sup>1090</sup>

### 4.4.1 Syrian Kurds

Syrian Kurds mainly live in three Kurdish cantons in northern Syria, along the Syrian-Turkish border, from West to East: Afrin/Kurd Dagh, Kobani/Jarablus, and Hasakah/Jazira.<sup>1091</sup> Figure 4.4 contains a map indicating the Kurdish inhabited areas in Syria.

Syrian Kurds faced repression under the Syrian *Ba'ath* party and were rendered ineffective as a political power. Nevertheless, they never picked up arms against the Syrian regime. Syrian Kurds did not inhabit a compact, continuous region and lacked state sponsors.<sup>1092</sup> Also, they could not benefit from a mountainous area to seek shelter.<sup>1093</sup> Consequently, the Syrian Kurds counted as an acceptable partner to negotiate with for the Syrian regime once they became a relevant political power during the Syrian Civil War.<sup>1094</sup> When Syrian regime forces withdrew from the Kurdish cantons at the start of the Syrian Civil War, Syrian Kurds took over control.

1087 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 8n32.

1088 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1089 Mustafa, "Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum," 893. For example: "Iraq and Syria increasingly becoming one battlefield, with foreign arms heightening risk of prolonged conflict," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, June 27, 2014; "Islamic State ascendant"; "Kurds' ability to hold Kirkuk will increasingly be challenged by Islamic State and Shia militias in Iraq," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, July 23, 2014; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 100; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1090 Cf. Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 9.

1091 "Syria's Kurds," 6. Also see: Katherine Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo. Five reasons the battle for Kobane matters," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, October 10, 2014.

1092 Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 42, 65. Also see: Fisk, *The great war for civilisation*, 1004-6.

1093 "Syria's Kurds," 6. Cf. Harff & Gurr, *Ethnic conflict in IR*, 40.

1094 Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 136-7.

They became one of the successful actors in the Syrian Civil War.<sup>1095</sup> Almost three years into the Syrian Civil War, the dominant *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party; PYD) declared Syrian Kurdistan an autonomous political entity named Rojava.

**Figure 4.4:** ethno-religious map of Syria in 2014, indicating Kurdish inhabited areas in grey along the Turkish border.<sup>1096</sup>



Next to the PYD, the *Encûmena Nîştîmanîya Kurdi li Sûriyê* (Kurdish National Council, KNC) was a prominent political bloc.<sup>1097</sup> While the Syrian Kurdish political parties appeared somewhat similar in their goals, fierce inter-party rivalries existed, nonetheless.<sup>1098</sup> The PYD

1095 Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 102; Voller, "Rethinking armed groups and order," 860; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 14-5.

1096 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 15.

1097 Rodi Hevian, "The resurrection of Syrian Kurdish politics," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 17:3 (2013), 46; Hokayem, *Syria's uprising*, 78-9.

1098 Wietse van den Berge, "Syrian Kurdish political activism. A social movement theory perspective," *META-journal* 4 (2015), 160.

and the KNC emphasized the struggle for an autonomous and democratic Syrian Kurdistan that would guarantee minority rights.<sup>1099</sup> But neither outlined what the blocs meant by these critical concepts.<sup>1100</sup> Furthermore, their resources differed significantly<sup>1101</sup>, and foreign actors influenced both blocs. Whereas the PYD was linked to the PKK, the KNC's parties had strong connections to foreign parties like the KDP and the PUK. Still, some KNC parties sympathized with the PKK as well.<sup>1102</sup> Overall, next to historical repression, political choice in Rojava mainly depended on leadership.<sup>1103</sup> Apart from the client-patron relationship, other factors caused intra-Kurdish differences, such as rivalries between clans or families.<sup>1104</sup>

#### 4.4.2 *Al-Qaeda*

One of IS' rivals was a jihadi-salafi organization, *al-Qaeda*<sup>1105</sup>, including its Syrian affiliate JaN. *Al-Qaeda* was established in Afghanistan in 1988, at the end of the jihadist fight against Soviet forces there. The organization established training camps in Taliban-run Afghanistan to prepare for large-scale terrorist attacks.<sup>1106</sup> Whereas most jihadist organizations targeted local regimes, *al-Qaeda* aimed at the so-called far enemy. *Al-Qaeda* leader bin Laden assumed that jihadi-salafists could not defeat regional governments that were supported by the United States. Therefore, bin Laden suggested attacking the United States instead, forcing the United States to withdraw the support of local regimes, leaving them vulnerable to jihadist attacks and possible overthrow.<sup>1107</sup> However, despite executing spectacular terrorist attacks abroad, *al-Qaeda* proved incapable of mobilizing enough Muslims to achieve a significant political change.<sup>1108</sup>

*Al-Qaeda's* more long-term approach at the time seemed contrary to Zarqawi's direct-action approach. Nevertheless, in Afghanistan, *al-Qaeda* supported Zarqawi in establishing a training

1099 Christian Sinclair & Sirwan Kajjo, "The evolution of Kurdish politics in Syria," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, September 2, 2011.

1100 Eva Savelsberg, "The Syrian-Kurdish movements. Obstacles rather than driving forces for democratization," in *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East. Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria*, David Romano & Mehmet Gurses (eds.) (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 102.

1101 Hevian, "The resurrection of Syrian Kurdish politics," 47.

1102 Savelsberg, "The Syrian-Kurdish movements," 94-6.

1103 Wietse van den Berge, "The cleavage in Syrian Kurdish politics. Equality versus non-violence," in *Expanding research on countering violent extremism*, Sara Zeiger (ed.) (Abu Dhabi: Hedayah, 2016), 66.

1104 Cf. Stathis Kalyvas, "The ontology of 'political violence.' Action and identity in civil wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 1:3 (2003), 475-94.

1105 Fishman, *The master plan*, 18. Also see: Carmon *et al.* "Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi"; Chigudu, "Sectarianism and the ideology of the Islamic State," 5,154; Freedman, *Command*, 445; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 255-313; Aaron Zelin, "The war between ISIS and al-Qaeda for supremacy of the global jihadist movement," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 26, 2014.

1106 Bakker, *Terrorism and counterterrorism studies*, 60-1; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 13-4. Also see: Bakker & Boer, "The evolution of al-Qaedaism," 8-14.

1107 Fishman, *The master plan*, 12; Last, *Strategic culture*, 222. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 115.

1108 Kepel, *Fitna*, 203-4.

camp. Zarqawi received money and logistical support in return for allegiance to *al-Qaeda*. In practice, Zarqawi's organization remained independent.<sup>1109</sup> *Al-Qaeda* tried to control Zarqawi, urging for reluctance on violence towards the population.<sup>1110</sup> *Al-Qaeda* – like most jihadi-salafists – did not attack individuals or organizations not explicitly mentioned as legitimate targets. Zarqawi turned the logic around: violence was legit unless explicitly stated it was not. Stated differently, '*al-Qaeda*'s leaders believe that most people who call themselves Muslims actually are, whereas the Islamic State's leaders do not.'<sup>1111</sup> The controversy increased when IS' predecessors behaved more independently of *al-Qaeda*. When bin Laden died on May 2, 2011, this created an opportunity for ISI to challenge *al-Qaeda*'s position as the global jihadi-salafist vanguard.<sup>1112</sup> Still, JaN leader Golani claimed to have pledged *bay'ah* to Ayman al-Zawahiri, successor of bin Laden, not to Baghdadi. ISIS did not accept that Golani and Baghdadi would be equals under the supervision of *al-Qaeda* and dissolved JaN.

In reality, from 2006 onwards, *al-Qaeda* did not have any supervision over ISI or its successors.<sup>1113</sup> When Baghdadi proclaimed ISIS on April 8, 2013, he rejected *al-Qaeda* as the vanguard of jihadi-salafism and challenged Zawahiri's authority.<sup>1114</sup> Eventually, Zawahiri renounced ISIS on June 9, 2013, claiming JaN to be *al-Qaeda*'s Syria branch. Baghdadi's countermove was to join the Syrian Civil War, fighting any other organization to control territory and establish a caliphate, including JaN.<sup>1115</sup> The conflict between IS and *al-Qaeda* culminated when IS proclaimed its caliphate on June 29, 2014<sup>1116</sup>, and claimed that *bay'ah* to only one caliph was allowed<sup>1117</sup>, basically outmaneuvering *al-Qaeda*.<sup>1118</sup> Research found no evidence of outbidding between *al-Qaeda* and IS in 2014, where the actions of the other should overtake the activities of one party.<sup>1119</sup> Still, in 2014-2015, IS hardly fought Syrian regime forces. Despite calls for rapprochement between IS and JaN in September 2014 by prominent jihadists<sup>1120</sup>, IS in Syria focused on eliminating ANSA rivals, especially JaN<sup>1121</sup>; while in Iraq, IS fought ISF, the KRI, and Shia militias.<sup>1122</sup>

1109 Fishman, *The master plan*, 17-9, 58-9.

1110 Atiyah, untitled letter to Zarqawi; Zawahiri, untitled letter to Zarqawi. Also see: Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 87.

1111 Fishman, *The master plan*, 63. Italics added. Also see: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 262.

1112 *Ibid.*, 112, 153-63. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 131; Khalil, "Partners to foes."

1113 *Ibid.*, 173-91; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 159; Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 199.

1114 Baghdadi, "Give good news to the believers," in Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 154; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 154, 157.

1115 Fishman, *The master plan*, 173-91.

1116 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "This is the promise of Allah," *Islamic State*, June 29, 2014, transl. unknown.

1117 "Allegiance to the caliph," *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1118 Carmon *et al.* "Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi"; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 269-70. Also see: "Declaration of caliphate in Iraq and Syria likely to increase infighting between ISIL and other Sunni insurgents," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, June 30, 2014.

1119 Chuang *et al.*, "Local alliances and rivalries," 20,898-902.

1120 "Islamic State-Jabhat al-Nusra divergences are unlikely to be mended despite calls for truce," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, October 8, 2014.

1121 Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 178, 181.

1122 "Iraq and Syria increasingly becoming one battlefield"; "Kurds' ability to hold Kirkuk."

### 4.4.3 Shia

Zarqawi had written to the *al-Qaeda* leadership about the threat that Shia people posed to Sunni Iraqis by cooperating with American forces to take over power in Iraq and taking revenge on Sunnis. In his view, the Shia are pivotal for change, reason for Zarqawi to lure the Shia into a sectarian war which would mobilize the Sunni masses.<sup>1123</sup> Baghdadi continued the anti-Shia rhetoric in his second speech as ISI's leader, urging 'jihad against the Safavid Rafida – the Magian Shiites.'<sup>1124</sup> In line with IS' animosity against the Kurds was the Shia's supposed involvement in suppressing the Sunni population by denying Sunnis a state-like political entity, which the Shia and the Kurds did already have.<sup>1125</sup>

## 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter observed Iraq as a historically internally fragmented state. By 2014, a situation occurred where different ANSAs fought the state and one another, reminiscent of the new mediaeval model.<sup>1126</sup> IS and the KRI actively contributed to and tried to profit from that situation, aiming for territory and autonomy. They both suffered from internal ideological and organizational fragmentation. IS' religious ideology was disputed among other jihadi-salafist organizations – notably *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates – while IS' internal organization was strictly hierarchical with undisputed leaders. Within the KRI, fragmentation led to different interpretations of Kurdish nationalism within the Barzani- and Talabani-dominated areas. Within international relations, the KRI maintained good relations with its Western allies, whereas IS was a pariah. Nevertheless, that pariah was able to push back ISF from northern Iraq in 2013-2014.

This chapter provided the background from where the key events within the conflict between IS and the KRI occurred in 2014. The chapter provided that background along the lines of the paradigms that the following three chapters apply.

1123 Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Also see: Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37-54.

1124 Baghdadi, "Allah will not allow." Italics added. *Rafida* (rejectors) was the term used by ISI to refer to Shia in general, whereas Magian referred to the Zoroastrian cults among the Shia.

1125 Masri, "Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology."

1126 Bull, *The anarchical society*. 245. Also see: Brown, "Purposes and pitfalls," 244-5, 255.



## Chapter 5

### Vacuum (June 2014)

**A**NSAs ISIS and the KRI challenged the Iraqi state in northern Iraq in June 2014. When controlling and governing northern Iraqi territories, ISIS declared a state and the KRI announced an independence referendum. The Iraqi state seemed obsolete, while ISIS and the KRI seemed the successor-states and behaved state-like. Although the occurrences appear in hindsight to be a given, strategic decisions by ISIS and the KRI to advance militarily into Iraqi-controlled territories preceded the ANSAs actually taking over the territories. This chapter explains the strategic decision-making by answering the question how to explain the strategic decision-making of ISIS and the KRI regarding the filling of the vacuum in northern Iraq in June 2014?

Much has been written about the consequences of ISIS' conquest of Mosul.<sup>1127</sup> Less was written about the simultaneous moves of the KRI into the disputed territories, including Kirkuk. The strategic decision-making that preceded ISIS and the KRI taking over northern Iraq lacks academic attention. This chapter contributes to understanding the under-researched strategic decision-making with respect to a crucial phase in the conflict between ISIS and the KRI. Taking over power in northern Iraq indicates how ISIS and the KRI took their strategic decisions in pursuit of their respective foreign policies.

Despite an increasing rivalry between ISIS and the KRI, ISIS fought an existential war of necessity with the Iraqi state. Taking over ISF-held territory was part of that war. For the KRI, taking over ISF-held territory was a war of choice, as the KRI's survival was not challenged. As ISIS and the KRI behaved state-like, three traditional IR paradigms – the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm – seem appropriate to explain their strategic decisions. Complexity theory serves as an encompassing fourth paradigm. As each paradigm adopts different views, each offers different answers to the question how to explain the strategic decisions of ISIS and the KRI to fill the vacuum in northern Iraq in June 2014.

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<sup>1127</sup> For example: Black, *Geopolitics*, 243-4; Florea, "Rebel governance," 1,026; Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 78; Jenkins, "ISIS's calculated barbarity"; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 235. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 50-2

The rational actor paradigm – considering goals, perceived strategic threats and opportunities, alternative options, and cost-benefit calculations – expects ISIS and the KRI to optimize their alternatives by advancing into the areas left behind by ISF. The organizational behavior paradigm expects an internal bureaucratic struggle between different SOPs or doctrines. For the KRI in particular, the organizational behavior paradigm expects sub-optimal decision-making<sup>1128</sup>, given the historical inter-Kurdish rivalries.<sup>1129</sup> The governmental politics paradigm expects the strategic decisions to have been the compromise of key leaders' political power play. Combining elements of the other paradigms, complexity theory expects the strategic decisions to be time-, space-, and context-specific, which occur multi-level and multi-directional.

The first paragraph sketches the situation before and during ISIS and the KRI taking over Iraqi-held territories in northern Iraq. Each following paragraph applies a different paradigm to the strategic decision-making.

## 5.1 Setting

Sometimes labeled 'the northern Iraq offensive of June 2014'<sup>1130</sup>, ISIS and the KRI filled the power vacuum when the ISF left northern Iraq: '[w]hen the sovereignty of a state is eroded, chaotic spaces emerge, wherein powerful groups are able to exercise autonomy over particular areas.'<sup>1131</sup> However, such powerful groups do not appear out of nowhere. Conditions must be such that they can 'emerge.'<sup>1132</sup> Analysts related ISIS' emergence to the American-led 2003 invasion<sup>1133</sup>, when Sunnis lost political power due to the Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) *de-Ba'athification* policies.<sup>1134</sup> Yet, the 2011 American withdrawal from Iraq removed the incentive for the Shia Iraqi prime-minister Nouri al-Maliki to fulfill his 2010 electoral promise to cooperate with Kurdish and Sunni politicians. Instead, Maliki alienated Kurdish and Sunni politicians by accusing them of anti-Iraqi activities.<sup>1135</sup>

1128 Cf. Biddle, "The determinants of nonstate military methods," 728.

1129 For example: Torelli, "Kurdistan and the Middle East," 18-43.

1130 "Northern Iraq offensive (June 2014)," *Wikipedia*. Also see: Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 28. Northern Iraq offensive is also used for IS' attack on the KRI in August 2014, elaborated on in chapter 6.

1131 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 19. Also see: Jackson, "Warlords," 148.

1132 *Ibid.*, 19. The word 'emerge' indicated a complexity theory-link.

1133 Eyal, "Introduction," 1; Kaplan, *De wraak van de geografie*, 79, 87-91.

1134 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 50. Also see: Hashim, "The Iraqi insurgency, 2003-2006," 150-5; Kepel, *Fitna*, 267, 292; Leffler, "Bush, 9/11, and the roots of the Iraq War"; Pimic & O'Connell, "Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)," 1-60.

1135 Gareth Stansfield, "Iraq," in *Inherently unresolved. Regional politics and the counter-ISIS campaign*, Jonathan Eyal & Elizabeth Quintana (eds.) (London: RUSI, 2015), 17; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 11.

Maliki's anti-Sunni rhetoric ignited a series of protests by Sunnis in the Anbar governorate that took place from December 21, 2012, onwards, and lasted for a year. The arrest of the Sunni minister of Finance, Rafi al-Issawi, by the Iraqi state, was a direct provocation.<sup>1136</sup> The protestors' main concern was the marginalization of Sunnis in Iraq, due to the *de-Ba'athification* policies, which – according to the protestors – led to harassment of Sunnis and a growing influence of Iranian Shia proxies.<sup>1137</sup> The protestors demanded the resignation of Maliki. Government forces dismantled a Sunni camp – labeled *al-Qaeda*-affiliated by Maliki – in Ramadi on December 30, 2013, to crush the protests.<sup>1138</sup> Next to the attack on the camp, authorities arrested a Sunni member of parliament and well-known supporter of the demonstrations, Ahmed al-Alwani. Instead of calming the situation, the attack on the camp and the arrest of Alwani escalated into a violent uprising, in which Sunni tribes fought alongside ISIS against ISF. In another attempt to calm the situation, ISF withdrew from the Anbar governorate, effectively leaving Anbar under ISIS control.<sup>1139</sup>

The societal unrest benefitted the “Soldiers’ Harvest” offensive that ISIS had conducted since July 29, 2013. Through the offensive, ISIS sought control over Iraq’s northern provincial capitals, eventually to re-establish an Islamic state.<sup>1140</sup> On January 4, 2014, reports appeared that ISIS had captured Fallujah and fought ISF in Ramadi.<sup>1141</sup> ISIS proved successful due to a combination of ‘significant military build-up, tactical innovations in urban terrorism and shifts between conventional and guerrilla warfare.’<sup>1142</sup> Fights between ISIS and ISF continued throughout the first months of 2014 and expanded to other governorates in Iraq, such as Diyala.<sup>1143</sup> Nevertheless, ISIS’ focus remained on Nineveh, where it conducted 41 percent of its 16,603 operations in northern and central Iraq between November 2013 and April 2014, more than in any other governorate.<sup>1144</sup> Additionally, instead of strengthening the Sunni tribes that fought alongside ISF, Maliki alienated these tribes by a speech in which he labeled the planned ISF counter-offensive an ancient war between ‘the followers of Hussein and the followers

1136 Boghani, “David Petraeus”; Christine Hauser, “Iraq: Maliki demands that protesters stand down,” *NY Times*, January 3, 2013; Watson, “The conflict with ISIS,” 17.

1137 Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,334.

1138 “Ten die as Iraq security forces dismantle Sunni camp,” *BBC*, December 30, 2013.

1139 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 244-5; “Iraqi forces, tribesmen battle Qaeda-linked militants,” *Daily Star*, January 2, 2014.

1140 Jessica Lewis, “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham captures Mosul and advances toward Baghdad,” *Institute for the Study of War*, June 11, 2014.

1141 Connable, “Iraq picture may not be as bleak as it seems”; “Iraq’s Fallujah falls to ‘Qaeda-linked’ militants,” *Daily Star*, January 4, 2014; Fishman, *The master plan*, 51, 183; “ISW covers al-Qaeda in Iraq”; Stansfield, “Iraq,” 18.

1142 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 39.

1143 Jessica Lewis, “The Islamic State of Iraq returns to Diyala” (Washington D.C.: *Institute for the Study of War*, 2014), 15.

1144 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 41.

of Yazid.<sup>1145</sup> Maliki, thus, referred to a seventh-century intra-Muslim battle<sup>1146</sup>, framing the contemporary conflict as a primordial struggle between Shia and Sunni Muslims.<sup>1147</sup>

ISIS targeted the Iraqi parliamentary elections of April 30, 2014, attacking a distribution center of voting cards, shooting candidates, and declaring the elections un-Islamic.<sup>1148</sup> Nevertheless, Iraqis re-elected Maliki, which increased tensions between the different ethnicities in Iraq. As a result, Sunnis increasingly supported ISIS.<sup>1149</sup> Tensions between the Iraqi state and Iraqi Kurds increased too. During the elections, the KDP and the PUK, for the first time since 2005, did not compete as a joint Kurdish bloc, but as two separate parties.<sup>1150</sup> Analysts expected the KDP and the PUK eventually to form a coalition to advance Kurdish interests in the Iraqi parliament. In the absence of that coalition, the Iraqi state did not allocate budgets to pay Kurdish government officials' salaries, which caused protests and strikes in the KRI from May 14 onwards.<sup>1151</sup>

ISIS continued its advance in northern Iraq on June 4, 2014. Documentary evidence indicated that other jihadist groups, former *Ba'ath*-ists, and Sunni tribes supported ISIS during the advance.<sup>1152</sup> Later, it became known that the Iraqi state authorities, as of May 2014, had intelligence about ISIS attacking Mosul, and had in early June considered allowing the *peshmerga* into the disputed areas in Nineveh, Salaheddine, and Diyala governorates to contain ISIS.<sup>1153</sup> Before the start of its advance on Mosul on June 4, ISIS had conducted 'at least six [SV-IED] attacks, ten assassinations of high-ranking officers, nine attacks by [guerilla formations] and two attacks by [suicide guerilla formations].'<sup>1154</sup> The purpose of these initial attacks was not only to create havoc among the enemy, but also to cut communications and supply lines to isolate enemy units.<sup>1155</sup>

1145 Nouri al-Maliki, cited in Hassan Hassan, "More than ISIS, Iraq's Sunni insurgency," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 17, 2014.

1146 Hassan, "More than ISIS."

1147 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 5. Also see: Albert Charara, "Why Kirkuk matters," 1; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 92-5.

1148 Ahmed Ali, "Iraq's 2014 national elections" (Washington D.C.: *Institute for the Study of War*, 2014), 24. Also see: "Militant attacks likely to intensify in Iraqi cities in run-up to 30 April parliamentary election," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, April 10, 2014.

1149 "Iraqi prime minister's re-election highly likely to increase sectarian killings in centre and north," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, April 30, 2014.

1150 Ali, "Iraq's 2014 national elections," 17-9; Charara, "Why Kirkuk matters," 2.

1151 "Strikes over salary non-payment in Kurdistan Region increase pressure on Kurdish parties to secure deal with Baghdad," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, May 16, 2014.

1152 "Co-operation between Baathists and jihadists in northern Iraq will probably expand support for Sunni insurgency," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, June 13, 2014. Similar cooperation had existed during battles over Fallujah in January 2014 and Hawija in June 2014.

1153 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 50.

1154 *Ibid.*, 59.

1155 *Ibid.*, 59.

Under the campaign name “Enter upon them through the gate”<sup>1156</sup>, ISIS attacked Samarra on June 4 and captured the town the next day. On June 4 or 5, Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi, the ISIS *emir* of the military council, and, as such, the military commander in Iraq and the planner of the assault, died in Mosul. Allegedly, Bilawi died by self-detonation, while almost captured by ISF. Subsequently, ISIS renamed its campaign *‘Asadullah* (lion of Allah) Al-Bilawi.<sup>1157</sup> The next day, ISIS shelled northeastern Mosul, in what later appeared to be a tactical diversion to allow a convoy of less than one hundred vehicles with four to five fighters each to approach Mosul in the northwest via the al-Jazeera desert around midnight. ISIS ‘overstretched its small units in the east, in a shift in the operational plan with the aim of reaching the eastern banks of the Tigris River.’<sup>1158</sup> ISIS activated its sleeper cells to take over the city.<sup>1159</sup>

The ISF almost succeeded in isolating ISIS in northwest Mosul on June 7. Air assaults supporting the ISF proved inaccurate, killing civilians. Allegedly, surviving civilians turned against the ISF.<sup>1160</sup> In reaction, ISIS brought approximately one hundred more vehicles from Syria on June 8. That day, a suicide attack on the Iraqi Federal Police headquarters in west Mosul killed the Federal Police commanders. The decapitation led to large-scale desertions among Federal Police personnel, effectively leaving western Mosul for grabs by ISIS. On June 9, ISIS controlled west and southwest Mosul and advanced towards the city center and the east. ISIS eventually captured Mosul on June 10 with a force allegedly 800 to 1,100 strong<sup>1161</sup> after ISF retreated to consolidate. ISIS released a communique on June 11, announcing the capture of the Nineveh governorate, including Mosul. Mosul’s importance was significant, not only as Iraq’s second-largest city with around 1.8 million inhabitants, but also for ISIS to free around 3,000 prisoners and to capture critical military installations such as Mosul International Airport and Camp Ghazlani.<sup>1162</sup> Although some analysts, at the time, were taken by surprise by the ISIS advance, ‘[w]hat was a surprise was the pace of the collapse [...] of the Iraqi security forces in northern Iraq.’<sup>1163</sup> Maliki urged to declare a state of emergency after ISIS captured Mosul, which the Iraqi parliament did not allow.<sup>1164</sup>

1156 “Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul,” 2.

1157 “Islamic State news,” *Dabiq* 1, 47. Italics added. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 51, 198; “ISIS announces conquest of Mosul, acknowledges death of senior leader,” *ISIS Twitter*, June 11, 2014, transl. unknown; “ISIS spokesman: the real battle will be in Baghdad,” *ISIS Twitter*, June 11, 2014, transl. unknown; Whiteside *et al.*, “The ISIS files – The Islamic State’s department of soldiers,” 7. Ashour and ISIS differed on when Bilawi died.

1158 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 51.

1159 Fishman, *The master plan*, 132-4, 199. Also see: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, untitled speech, January 19, 2014, transl. Pieter Van Ostaeyen, in “ISIS’s leader calls for the Syrian rebels to cease attacking the jihadists,” Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, December 6, 2014; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 152.

1160 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 52.

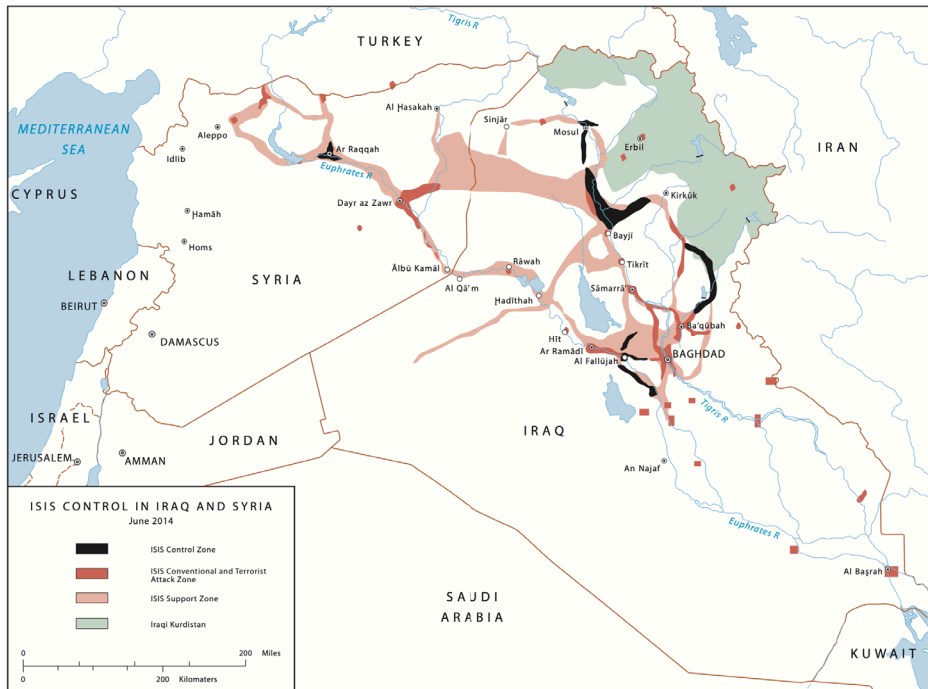
1161 *Ibid.*, 2, 51-2.

1162 “Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul,” 2; Lewis, “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham captures Mosul.”

1163 David Petraeus, cited in Boghani, “David Petraeus.”

1164 “Militant group ISIL likely to expand territory it controls in northern Iraq in coming months,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, June 11, 2014.

**Figure 5.1:** political-geographical situation in Iraq and Syria in June 2014.<sup>1165</sup> The map indicates the situation between 10 and 12 June, as Mosul is controlled by ISIS, but the KRI does not yet control Kirkuk.



On June 12, ISIS troops pushed further south, seemingly heading for Baghdad. That day, most attention went to the so-called Speicher massacre. ISIS executed hundreds of ISF personnel captured from Speicher Airbase. ISIS social media outlets disseminated the executions.<sup>1166</sup>

In response to ISIS' advances and the ISF leaving, the KRI took control over areas west, north, and east of Mosul, as well as Kirkuk and its direct surroundings, allegedly protecting these from ISIS.<sup>1167</sup> Reports differed on whether ISF had already left<sup>1168</sup> or the *peshmerga* forced the ISF to leave.<sup>1169</sup> IR scholar Gregory Gause at the time commented: '[t]o a great extent Kurdish forces had been de facto in control of Kirkuk for some time, but now they're completely in

<sup>1165</sup> Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 22-3.

<sup>1166</sup> Ahmed Ali & Heather Pickerell, "Situation report. June 12-14, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 15, 2014.

<sup>1167</sup> Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 5; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach"; Stansfield, "Iraq," 18. Cf. Ezrow, *Global politics*, 64-5.

<sup>1168</sup> "Iraq. Fixing security in Kirkuk" (Brussels: *International Crisis Group*, 2020), 6; Denise Natali, "Iraqi Kurds maneuver between Maliki and Mosul," *Al-Monitor*, June 13, 2014.

<sup>1169</sup> Dīaa Hadīd & Emad Matti, "How the Kurds seized Kirkuk," *Real Clear Defense*, June 13, 2014; Armin Rosen, "Kurdish takeover of a major oil city is a mixed blessing for Iraq," *Business Insider*, June 13, 2014.

control.<sup>1170</sup> The strategic decision to conduct a military move was a shift in the KRI's foreign policy, which since 2003 had aimed to position the KRI as a 'responsible and dependable actor on the world stage.'<sup>1171</sup> The KRI regarded control over Kirkuk a prerequisite to autonomy and the intent to control the area indicated a next step in its independence aim.<sup>1172</sup>

ISIS had a strong presence within the larger Kirkuk governorate and threatened to take over Kirkuk city after ISF departed. The *peshmerga* moved in first on June 12.<sup>1173</sup> Next to clashes in the Diyala governorate on June 13<sup>1174</sup>, on June 17, ISIS gunmen regained control of Multaqa, southwest of Kirkuk. Two villages near Kirkuk were the scene of heavy fighting between ISIS and a combined force of Iraqi police and the *peshmerga*.<sup>1175</sup> The *peshmerga* was able to hold Kirkuk from ISIS control during clashes on June 18.<sup>1176</sup> Eventually, the KRI controlled the northern and eastern regions, including most of Kirkuk city. ISIS controlled approximately 45 percent of the Kirkuk governorate, mainly its western and southern parts.<sup>1177</sup> From Kirkuk, the *peshmerga* took heavy military equipment left behind by ISF.<sup>1178</sup>

The *peshmerga* further advanced into disputed areas on June 16. The KRI's territory eventually increased by more than forty percent.<sup>1179</sup> Shia members of the Iraqi parliament claimed a conspiracy between ISIS and the KRI.<sup>1180</sup> The areas under control of ISIS and the KRI moved closer and eventually established an approximately 1,050-kilometer-long border – or frontline.<sup>1181</sup> ISIS and the KRI advanced into areas the ISF left. The remainder of this chapter explains the strategic decision-making to move into northern Iraq of both ISIS and the KRI.

1170 Gregory Gause, cited in Hadid & Matti, "How the Kurds seized Kirkuk."

1171 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 357.

1172 Hadid & Matti, "How the Kurds seized Kirkuk"; Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 364.

1173 Fazel Hawramy, "Kurdish peshmerga seize a chaotic victory in Kirkuk," *The Guardian*, June 12, 2014; "Iraqi Kurdish regional government's territorial control set to boost oil export autonomy, Turkish support likely to increase," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, June 16, 2014; "Iraqi Kurds 'fully control Kirkuk' as army flees." Also see: Gunes, "The IS factor," 83-4; Raheem Salman & Isra al-Rubei'i, "Iraq's top Shi'ite cleric issues call to fight jihadist rebels," *Reuters*, June 13, 2014.

1174 Ali & Pickerell, "Situation report. June 12-14, 2014."

1175 Heather Pickerell *et al.*, "Iraq situation report. June 17, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 17, 2014.

1176 "Iraqi Kurds battle Sunni fighters in Kirkuk," *Al-Jazeera*, June 18, 2014. Also see: Gunes, "The IS factor," 83-4.

1177 Samuel Morris *et al.*, "The future of Kirkuk. A roadmap for resolving the status of the governorate" (Erbil: *Middle East Research Institute*, 2015), 14.

1178 Hawramy, "Kurdish peshmerga seize a chaotic victory in Kirkuk."

1179 "Under attack. The Kurdistan Region's response to Islamic State's incursion," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, October 16, 2014. Also see: Hawramy, "Kurdish peshmerga seize a chaotic victory in Kirkuk."

1180 "Increasing involvement of regional players in sectarian fighting raises risk of Iraqi civil war," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, June 17, 2014.

1181 Gerges, *ISIS*, 2; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,336. Also see: "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 8 (1436H|2015), 27.

## 5.2 Rational actor paradigm<sup>1182</sup>

The next three sections view ISIS' and the KRI's strategic decisions to advance into Iraq-held territory in June 2014 from a rational actor paradigm perspective. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: goals, perceived strategic opportunities and threats, alternative options, and consecutive cost-benefit calculations.

### 5.2.1 ISIS

ISIS' 'overarching goal' was 'the caliphate's reestablishment.'<sup>1183</sup> So, ISIS needed to control a territory.<sup>1184</sup> Although ISIS controlled the Anbar governorate since the beginning of 2014<sup>1185</sup>, its focus remained the Nineveh governorate, where it conducted most of its operations between November 2013 and April 2014.<sup>1186</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, ISIS explained the goal of its expansion towards Mosul:

[i]n spite of the advantage of having a strong power base [that is, the Anbar governorate], the Islamic State understood that having just a single power base in any given region would work against them by giving their enemies a point of focus for their strikes. As a result, the Islamic State saw necessary to further expand beyond its center of power and conduct large-scale operations in numerous regions of Iraq in order to confuse and overwhelm the *Rafidi* forces, spread their troops thin and subsequently capture entire cities and towns.<sup>1187</sup>

Thus, ISIS regarded expansion as a strategic goal, necessary for survival. Expansion preceded implementing *shari'a* governance and providing social services.<sup>1188</sup> Together with offering security<sup>1189</sup>, *shari'a* and social services were prerequisites for re-establishing the caliphate.<sup>1190</sup> ISIS – again, in hindsight – recognized the demographic, economic, and symbolic opportunities of Mosul:

'Mosul [...] is home to a population of 1.8 million people, most of whom are from *Ahlus-Sunnab* [Sunni]. It's a historical city that was conquered during the *khilafah* of 'Umar Ibn Al-Khattab (*radiyallahu'anh*), and is currently the second largest city in Iraq after Baghdad.

1182 Parts of paragraph 5.2 appeared as: Wietse van den Berge, "Armed non-state actors and strategic decision-making," in *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East*, Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed.), 279-99 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

1183 Bahney & Johnston, "Who runs the Islamic State group?"; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 28, 233.

1184 Lewis, "The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham captures Mosul"; Wood, "What ISIS really wants," 81-6.

1185 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 244-5; "Iraqi forces, tribesmen battle Qaeda-linked militants."

1186 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 41.

1187 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 2. Italics added. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 97.

1188 *Ibid.*, 2.

1189 Graaf & Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance," 14.

1190 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 383. Also see: Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, 11; "Convention on rights and duties of states," 25. Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 16.

Its location lies at a junction linking routes from Iraq to Syria and Turkey. Mosul is also important economically, considering there are oil fields and refineries in the area, as well as pipelines for transferring oil to Sham and Turkey. The *wilayat* of Iraq also depend a lot upon Mosul Dam for their electricity.<sup>1191</sup>

Mosul traditionally had been an ISIS stronghold. Mosul's multi-ethnic, but mainly Sunni, population provided easy scapegoats for the Iraqi state and a solid base for polarization. Internal 2016 IS documents showed a large proportion of Iraqi IS members originating from Nineveh, Diyala, and al-Jazeera, suggesting these areas were IS' centers of gravity.<sup>1192</sup> Sunnis were potential supporters of ISIS, in particular those imprisoned by Iraqi authorities.<sup>1193</sup> Iraq's Shia-dominated government was relatively uninterested in Mosul's Sunni population, illustrated by the ISF presence – or lack thereof – in Mosul. The ISF was officially 25,000 strong in Mosul. However, many were so-called ghost soldiers who only existed on paper, leaving their salaries for the commanding officers. The actual number was around 10,000.<sup>1194</sup>

Mosul had always been economically important for ISIS. The city served as a logistics hub for personnel and equipment from Syria, despite *peshmerga* control over the main road between the Iraqi-Syrian border and Mosul.<sup>1195</sup> Furthermore, ISIS could tax the population for a steady income and the Mosul oil reserves could serve as the economic backbone of the caliphate.<sup>1196</sup>

Finally, ISIS saw Mosul as a symbol of former caliphal power<sup>1197</sup> and later referred to the Quranic story of Nuh, or Noah, who built an ark to survive a flood. Remains, thought to belong to the ark, long remained in a village just north of Mosul.<sup>1198</sup> Later, in its propaganda, IS used the flood as a metaphor for an overflow of ignorance and false truths of different religious interpretations and political ideologies, and IS as the ark to rescue the *ummah*, aiming to attract supporters.

The main threat for ISIS during the first months of 2014 were the ISF, literally fighting ISIS<sup>1199</sup> and threatening the Sunni *ummah*<sup>1200</sup>, guided by Maliki's anti-Sunni rhetoric<sup>1201</sup> and

1191 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 1. Italics added.

1192 "Gaining ground. ISIL seizes key territory in offensive across northern Iraq," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, June 11, 2014; Milton, "Structure of a state," 11-2.

1193 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 1-2. Also see: Renner, "Air power in the Battle of Mosul," 261.

1194 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 19-20.

1195 Fishman, *The master plan*, 132-4, 199.

1196 "Islamic State news," *Dabiq* 2 (1435H|2014), 36.

1197 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 1.

1198 Abū 'Amr al-Kinānī, "It's either the Islamic State or the flood," *Dabiq* 2 (1435H|2014), 8.

1199 Connable, "Iraq picture may not be as bleak as it seems"; Fishman, *The master plan*, 51, 183; "Iraq's Fallujah falls to 'Qaeda-linked' militants"; "ISW covers al-Qaeda in Iraq"; Lewis, "The Islamic State of Iraq returns to Diyala," 15.

1200 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 2; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 21; Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Also see: "Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism," 20-4; "Purpose of jihad"; Rabi', *Contemporary Arab thought*, 221;

1201 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 244-5; "Iraqi forces, tribesmen battle Qaeda-linked militants." Also see: Hassan, "More than ISIS."

behavior.<sup>1202</sup> ISIS accused the ISF of acting as an American proxy and suggested that America was responsible for the marginalization of Sunni interests in Iraq.<sup>1203</sup> It seems likely that ISIS perceived the KRI's aspirations of an autonomous greater Kurdistan<sup>1204</sup> as a secondary threat, although this study found no evidence to support that claim. Still, in 2003, the *peshmerga* had captured Mosul and Kirkuk<sup>1205</sup> and, according to maps that had appeared on the internet, based on the Sèvres Treaty, greater Kurdistan would reach into the city of Mosul.<sup>1206</sup> Additionally, Iraqi authorities had considered allowing the *peshmerga* into the disputed areas in Nineveh, Salaheddine, and Diyala governorates.<sup>1207</sup>

ISIS' options following the ISF withdrawal concerned to hold, to attack, or to delegate. To hold meant that ISIS maintained its positions. ISIS would not expand its territory, thus not re-establish the caliphate.<sup>1208</sup> ISIS then lost the opportunity to seize the natural resources there. Adversaries like the ISF or the *peshmerga* could gain territory and threaten ISIS. Moreover, ISIS then lost its battlefield momentum – the 'freedom of the initiative in setting the pace and directions of the advance'<sup>1209</sup> – and potentially its combat morale – 'the willingness to fight.'<sup>1210</sup> To hold prevented ISIS from overextending personnel, resources, and supply lines.<sup>1211</sup> Also, ISIS then could establish solid defensive positions<sup>1212</sup> and develop domestic and foreign relations<sup>1213</sup> to position itself as a legitimate actor.<sup>1214</sup>

To attack meant that ISIS then advanced into ISF-controlled territories. ISIS then risked overextension by controlling territories that needed governing and contained rivals<sup>1215</sup>, fighting too many battles on different fronts with limited resources.<sup>1216</sup> Adversaries might advance, too,

1202 Boghani, "David Petraeus"; Hauser, "Iraq"; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,334.

1203 "Foreword," *Dabiq* 3 (1435H|2014), 3-4.

1204 Ofra Bengio, "The Islamic State. A catalyst for Kurdish nation-building," *Tel Aviv Notes* 8:18 (2014), 1-3; Tanya Goudsouzian & Lara Fatah, "Fall of Mosul. What's at stake for the Kurds?" *Al-Jazeera*, June 12, 2014.

1205 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 358.

1206 Lyuba Lulko, "The Great Kurdistan about to be created," *EKurd*, November 13, 2012; Özoglu, "Lessons from the idea, and rejection, of Kurdistan," "The wars of the Kurdish unification," *Emergeopolitics*, September 6, 2013.

1207 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 50.

1208 Cf. "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 2 (1435H|2014), 12-13. Also see: Black, *The history of Islamic political thought*, 12; Lewis, *The crisis of Islam*, 29-38; Moussalli, "Wahhabism, salafism and Islamism," 17-8.

1209 Luttwak, *Strategy*, 18.

1210 *Ibid.*, 18.

1211 Cf. *Ibid.*, 17-22. Also see: "American Kurdistan," 32; Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics," 434-5; Black, *Geopolitics*, 83; Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the great powers*, xvi; Naji, *The management of savagery*, 7.

1212 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 293-4. Also see: Black, *Geopolitics*, 83; Fishman, *The master plan*, 234; Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the great powers*, xvi; "The looming assault on Mosul," *The Soufan Center*, October 6, 2016.

1213 Cf. Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 47; Coggins, "Rebel diplomacy," 98; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 113; Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 20.

1214 Walt, "What should we do."

1215 "American Kurdistan," 32; Naji, *The management of savagery*, 7.

1216 Gerges, *ISIS*, 43; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 2.

turning an easy conquest into a potential quagmire by attrition warfare<sup>1217</sup>, if these adversaries could benefit from shorter supply lines and support among the local population. While attacking, ISIS could expect support from Nineveh's Sunni inhabitants. ISIS could capture an area with strategic assets, like oil and gas, with relatively few resources. The territory diminished ISF control in northern Iraq and American influence, while ISIS could collect revenue there. To attack fitted ISIS' ideology, benefitting from battlefield reputation and momentum<sup>1218</sup>, as well as support of other Sunni and jihadi-salafist groups.<sup>1219</sup>

To delegate meant that ISIS then left the conflict to an ally or proxy, probably a jihadi-salafist group that pledged allegiance to ISIS or local tribes. Contrary to its ideology, ISIS then could lose its battlefield momentum, combat morale, and reputation. The ally or proxy needed to be strong and reliable. Yet, ISIS' experiences with JaN indicated that a strong proxy eventually could act independently, instead of complying with ISIS. By delegation, ISIS avoided overextension, saving resources compared to the attack option.<sup>1220</sup> Depending on how the relationship between ISIS and the proxy or ally developed, ISIS could establish itself in the region as a potentially legitimate actor.<sup>1221</sup> A prerequisite to delegate was the availability of allies or proxies. Several other Sunni and jihadi-salafist groups supported ISIS.<sup>1222</sup>

The cost-benefit calculation for ISIS' options indicated that to attack was most beneficial. ISIS was then able to achieve its goals and interests with relatively few resources.<sup>1223</sup> To attack fitted ISIS' jihadi-salafist worldview to achieve goals violently. Thus, to attack was the best alternative for ISIS, the only option that could achieve its political goal.<sup>1224</sup> Although ISIS cooperated with Sunni and jihadi-salafist groups<sup>1225</sup>, ISIS remained in control and dominated its allies, thus avoiding delegation. To hold or to delegate would save ISIS resources but would hardly achieve any benefits. ISIS in particular rejected other actors in international relations – as the majority of actors in international relations rejected ISIS – thus, a cautious foreign policy to improve relations with other actors, was irrelevant for ISIS.

1217 "Senior Kurdistan official." Also see: Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,340-1,341n23.

1218 Cf. Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 19-24.

1219 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 113. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 47.

1220 Cf. Fishman, *The master plan*, 234; "The looming assault on Mosul."

1221 Walt, "What should we do." Cf. Coggins, "Rebel diplomacy," 98.

1222 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 113. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 47.

1223 Cf. Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 46.

1224 "Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism," 21-24. Also see: "The looming assault on Mosul."

1225 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 113. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 47.

### 5.2.2 The KRI

Careful not to explicitly state its aim for an autonomous Kurdistan, the KRI before June 2014, implicitly maneuvered towards independence from Iraq. In a 2013 vision document, the KRI claimed it aimed for ‘freedom, health, welfare, and economic security and opportunity.’<sup>1226</sup> The KRI did so for the area in Iraq that the Sèvres Treaty had appointed to the Kurds<sup>1227</sup>, which concerned areas outside the KRI and controlled by the ISF, the so-called disputed territories.<sup>1228</sup> Controlling the areas – what the ISF in June 2014 apparently could no longer do – would confirm that the KRI was ready for autonomy.<sup>1229</sup> Export of the natural resources there could sustain the KRI’s economy.<sup>1230</sup> Foreign relations with Iran, Jordan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and European states further strengthened the KRI’s autonomy claim.<sup>1231</sup> Next to the use of the diplomatic and economic instruments, the KRI’s military instrument, the *peshmerga*, had confirmed their reputation as fierce fighters<sup>1232</sup> and fought well in previous clashes with ISIS. The KRI considered the *peshmerga* repelling ISIS – contrary to the collapse of the ISF – proof that the KRI was strong enough militarily, and, unlike Iraq, capable of autonomy.<sup>1233</sup> Furthermore, the expected increase in Shia-Sunni hostilities strengthened the KRI’s position compared to either the Shias or the Sunnis, and decreased the likelihood of a Sunni or Shia attack on or within the KRI.<sup>1234</sup>

Until ISIS captured Mosul, the KRI’s primary threat concerned the Iraqi state, because of disputes over territories and oil revenues.<sup>1235</sup> ISIS’ rise in northern Iraq worried the KRI, due to ISIS’ non-acceptance of anyone differing from ISIS’ visions on religion or society. Also, ISIS conducted attacks on the *asayesh* in Erbil on September 29, 2013, and bomb attacks on political parties’ offices in the KRI on 8 and 9 June 2014.<sup>1236</sup> Related to ISIS’ rise was the

1226 “Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2020,” 1. Also see: Özoglu, “Lessons from the idea.”

1227 *Ibid.*, 2.

1228 Goudsouzian & Fatah, “Fall of Mosul”; Lulko, “The Great Kurdistan”; Özoglu, “Lessons from the idea”; “The wars of the Kurdish unification.”

1229 Cf. Bengio, “The Islamic State,” 1-3; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 97. Also see: Charara, “Why Kirkuk matters,” 3.

1230 “Iraqi Kurdish regional government’s territorial control set to boost oil export autonomy.”

1231 Hussein & Bakir, “Iraq’s crisis and the KRG.” Cf. Mustafa, “Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum,” 897.

1232 Kenneth Pollack, “Iraq: Understanding the ISIS offensive against the Kurds,” *Brookings*, August 11, 2014; Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,336.

1233 Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,334-7. Also see: Hussein & Bakir, “Iraq’s crisis and the KRG”; Mustafa, “Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum,” 905.

1234 “Increasing involvement of regional players”; “Iraqi Kurdish regional government’s territorial control set to boost oil export autonomy.”

1235 Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,333.

1236 Isabel Coles, “Rare bomb attack in Iraqi Kurdish capital kills six,” *Reuters*, September 29, 2013; “Multiple bombings target Kurds in Iraq,” *Al-Jazeera*, June 8, 2014; “Iraqi Kurds targeted.”

increase of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the KRI in 2014, estimated to be over one million people<sup>1237</sup>, which could offset the delicate ethnic balance in the region.<sup>1238</sup>

The KRI's options following from the ISF withdrawal concerned to hold, to attack, or to delegate. To hold meant that the KRI maintained its position, which delayed the actualization of an autonomous KRI, potentially suggesting that the KRI was too weak for autonomy. Other actors, likely ISIS, then controlled the areas with natural resources, leaving them stronger and the KRI relatively weaker. Kurdish people would come to live under ISIS control, potentially leading to their repression.<sup>1239</sup> The areas offered ISIS proximity, to stage possible future attacks. By not behaving aggressively, to hold could strengthen the KRI's position in international relations and create support for future autonomy<sup>1240</sup>, for example of the KRI's most important regional economic partner, Turkey.<sup>1241</sup> The KRI further avoided overextension and spared its hammered economy.<sup>1242</sup>

To attack meant that the KRI then advanced into the disputed territories. The KRI risked overextension, mainly personnel and equipment, for controlling territory with potentially hostile inhabitants.<sup>1243</sup> The economy then suffered from the financial burden of waging war.<sup>1244</sup> Towards other actors in international relations, the KRI could appear aggressive, trying to control territories within Iraq. To attack meant that the KRI could relatively easily take over the areas from the ISF, as had happened in May 2013.<sup>1245</sup> The KRI then signaled how eager it was to control these disputed territories and was ready for autonomy.<sup>1246</sup> The KRI benefitted from the *peshmerga* as the only forces willing and able to withstand ISIS in northern Iraq, anticipating ISIS focusing its advance towards the Shia-dominated Iraqi central regime in Baghdad.<sup>1247</sup>

To delegate implied that the KRI acted by proxy. The KRI then left territories, including the natural resources, under the control of that proxy, possibly the PKK or the PYD. The KRI delayed establishing an autonomous KRI and damaged its reputation of being ready for autonomy. To delegate, though, avoided overextension of the KRI's resources. Actors

1237 Hussein & Bakir, "Iraq's crisis and the KRG"; Morris *et al.*, "The future of Kirkuk," 15. Also see: Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 28; "Iraqi Kurdistan. IDPs now number 2 million," *UNPO*, June 1, 2015; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10.

1238 Nawzad Mahmoud, "Iraqi Kurds worry about ethnic balance from waves of refugees," *Rûdaw*, August 11, 2015.

1239 For example: "From hijrah to khilafa," 37.

1240 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 356-7.

1241 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 21. Also see: Kirschner, *Trust and fear in civil wars*, 158.

1242 *Ibid.*, 111-3.

1243 Natali, "Iraqi Kurds maneuver between Maliki and Mosul."

1244 Joel Wing, "Costs of Iraq's Kurds moving into the disputed territories," *EKurd*, July 19, 2014.

1245 "Iraqi Kurds 'fully control Kirkuk' as army flees."

1246 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,334-6. Also see: Natali, "Iraqi Kurds maneuver between Maliki and Mosul"; Pollack, "Iraq," 2.

1247 Gerjes, *ISIS*, 24.

in international relations then potentially regarded the KRI as non-aggressive, creating support for future autonomy.<sup>1248</sup> However, the KRI was considered a proxy itself – by ISIS<sup>1249</sup> and by Western states.<sup>1250</sup> The KRI lacked reliable allies or proxies to whom to delegate, as each potential proxy, such as the PKK or the PYD, had their own political agendas, which occasionally conflicted with the KRI's.

The cost-benefit calculation for the KRI's options indicated that to attack was most beneficial. The KRI's *peshmerga* could take over areas previously held by the central Iraqi regime with relatively few costs. For the KRI, it solved the conflict over disputed areas with the Iraqi authorities. Capturing oil-rich regions, in particular Kirkuk, boosted the KRI's economy. To hold or to delegate would save the KRI's resources but would hardly achieve any benefits. The KRI lacked reliable local allies or proxies to delegate to. To hold would continue the existing situation, potentially with ISIS as the adversary instead of the Iraqi state.

### 5.2.3 Reflections

With its focus on strategic goals, the rational actor paradigm in this case found that the strategic dimensions of politics, geography, people, and economics and logistics explain strategic decision-making of ISIS and the KRI. Both aimed to control (politics) a territory (geography) with plenty of resources (people, economics and logistics). Jihadi-salafism guided ISIS' strategy (ideology, strategic theory and doctrine). The rational actor paradigm's other focus is on threats and opportunities, where one actor's threats usually are the other actor's opportunities and vice versa. ISIS and the KRI both were in conflict with the Iraqi state (adversary), in ISIS' case, that conflict had already turned into combat (military operations). The ISF proved unable to control northern Iraq and withdrew (friction, chance, and uncertainty). Additionally, and contrary to ISIS, the KRI counted on support of its Western partners (allies). Out of the options offered – that is, to hold, to attack, or to delegate –, ISIS and the KRI chose the option that most likely achieved the actors' strategic goals in the short term. ISIS preferred to attack to re-establish the caliphate and the KRI preferred to attack to achieve independence.

Yet, as criticism on the paradigm suggests, the analysis seems incomplete. It lacks relevant internal decision-making levels. Therefore, the paradigm does not address – thus, does not explain – the adaptations of ISIS doctrine among the *mujahedeen*, when they recognized opportunities in Mosul, nor the historically remarkable cooperation between the KDP and

1248 Cf. Coggins, "Rebel diplomacy," 98.

1249 John Cantlie, "If I were the US president today...", *Dabiq* 5 (1436H|2014), 39.

1250 Beatrice Heuser & Eitan Shamir, "Universal toolbox, national styles or divergence of civilisations?" in *Insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. National styles and strategic cultures*, Beatrice Heuser & Eitan Shamir (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 367.

the PUK, discussed later on. The paradigm simplifies the strategic dimensions by considering them linear, instead of non-linear, thus overlooking how they influence one another. For example, the threat that ISIS was to the ISF, created an opportunity for both ISIS and the KRI to establish political power. Furthermore, non-linear strategic paradoxes challenge the rational actor paradigm. According to these paradoxes, lesser alternatives might be the best options, or the other way around, because adversaries do not anticipate the lesser alternatives. Therefore, lesser alternatives, according to the rational actor paradigm, in practice might be the most effective. Strategic paradoxes make optimizing the alternatives impossible, as there is no best-rational decision. Thus, the paradigm is only able to reverse engineer strategic decisions, making the different options vulnerable for confirmation bias.

Overall, the rational actor paradigm is helpful to explain the strategic decision-making of ISIS and the KRI, regarding the filling of the vacuum. Yet, the paradigm neglects other policy levels than the strategic. On other levels events occur that have strategic effects. In this case, the paradigm is insufficient to fully explain strategic decision-making. The organizational behavior paradigm, discussed in the next paragraph, seems necessary to complement the rational actor paradigm.

### 5.3 Organizational behavior paradigm

The next three sections view ISIS' and the KRI's strategic decisions to advance into Iraqi state-held territory in June 2014 from an organizational behavior paradigm perspective. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: decision-making organizations, SOPs' capabilities and constraints, options, and implementation.

#### 5.3.1 ISIS

ISIS' *diwan al-jund* planned the "Enter upon them through the gate" campaign on Nineveh.<sup>1251</sup> The *diwan al-jund* combined conventional and insurgency forces, and continually adapted, supported by 'an adhocratic organizational culture that embraced fluidity and constant change.'<sup>1252</sup> Analyst Charles Caris assessed how ISIS gained and maintained control over large urban areas, observing that 'ISIS undermined government institutions with large scale racketeering operations and carried out targeted assassinations against key civilian and military leaders. By the time ISIS took full military control of [...] Mosul in June 2014, an organized opposition to ISIS did not exist.'<sup>1253</sup>

1251 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 2.

1252 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 5.

1253 Charles Caris, "How does ISIS maintain control of large urban areas?" *Institute for the Study of War*, September 9, 2014.

Caris' analysis presumed meticulous preparations and long-term strategic planning. ISIS afterwards indeed claimed to have taken control over Mosul after intelligence operations by special units, a diversion operation towards Samarra, and entering the city from different directions.<sup>1254</sup> The claims regarding intelligence operations suggested that either specialized military units were involved<sup>1255</sup>, or that the *emni* provided input for the *diwan al-jund*<sup>1256</sup>, or both. Actual strategic decision-making took place within the *diwan al-jund*'s military council.<sup>1257</sup> If ISIS accepted politics' primacy over the military<sup>1258</sup>, it would have consulted its *shura* council before it made significant strategic decisions.<sup>1259</sup> This study found no documentary evidence whether the *diwan al-jund* consulted the *shura* council before the campaign. Nor did this study find documentary evidence on external coordination with independent local Sunni insurgent organizations, which assisted ISIS during the campaign.<sup>1260</sup>

Documentary evidence suggests that only after the *diwan al-jund* had secured an area on ISIS' behalf, other *dawawin* than the *diwan al-jund* became involved and set up a record-keeping bureaucracy, contributing to allocating scarce resources effectively. The other *dawawin* seemed not involved in ISIS' strategic decision-making regarding filling the vacuum<sup>1261</sup>, but framed a strategic narrative of ISIS' ability to govern.<sup>1262</sup> Ingram stated that such 'messaging is geared towards leveraging rational-choice decision-making in its target audiences by presenting, inevitably jaundiced, cost-benefit consideration of options. Rational-choice messaging was particularly prominent in IS's propaganda through 2014-15 when, unsurprisingly, it had politico-military successes in the field to promote itself as the alternative to its competitors.'<sup>1263</sup> Other studies verified that IS invested in confidence-building measures for the local population<sup>1264</sup>, in particular concerning water, food, power, and security.<sup>1265</sup> ISIS issued instructions for anyone to report misbehavior conducted by IS soldiers or *emirs*.<sup>1266</sup>

1254 "ISIS announces conquest of Mosul"; "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 2. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 208.

1255 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 43.

1256 Cf. "The structure of khilafa." Also see: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 357; Graaf & Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance," 15-6.

1257 Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy."

1258 Naji, *The management of savagery*, 37. Also see: Jones & Smith, "The strategy of savagery."

1259 Cf. "The structure of khilafa." Also see: Baghdadi, "Remaining in Iraq and Syria."

1260 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 207-11; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 55-6.

1261 For example: "Islamic State news," *Dabiq* 1, 49; "Islamic State news," *Dabiq* 2, 36; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 1 (1435H|2014), 12-4. Also see: Abu Hamzah al-Muhājir, "Come to a just word," September 28, 2006, transl. unknown, in "Inducement and terror. How the Islamic State deals with Sunni social leaders," Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton's Blog*, March 14, 2021.

1262 For example: "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 4 (1435H|2014), 27-9.

1263 Ingram, "Islamic State's English-language magazines, 2014-2017," 4.

1264 Caris, "How does ISIS maintain control of large urban areas?"

1265 Graaf & Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance," 18-9. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 52; Mara Revkin, "ISIS' social contract. What the Islamic State offers civilians," *Foreign Affairs*, January 10, 2016. Cf. Two Hawija inhabitants.

1266 "Call for submission of complaints. Aleppo province," *Islamic State*, December, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

ISIS initially claimed that the capture of Mosul ‘followed a shift in the Islamic State’s strategy, which now saw its forces leaving their desert strongholds in Iraq and making their way into the cities.’<sup>1267</sup> ISIS’ main goal was ‘the caliphate’s reestablishment’<sup>1268</sup>, along the five consecutive steps of *hijrah* (immigration), *jama’ah* (majority), destabilize *taghut* (idolater), *tamkin* (establishing the Islamic State<sup>1269</sup>), and *khilafa* (caliphate):

‘these phases consist of immigrating to a land with a weak central authority to use as a base where a *jama’ah* can form, recruit members, and train them. [...] The *jama’ah* would then take advantage of the situation by increasing the chaos to a point leading to the complete collapse of the *taghut* regime in entire areas, a situation some refer to as “*tawabhubush*” (“mayhem”). The next step would be to fill the vacuum by managing the state of affairs to the point of developing into a full-fledged state, and continuing expansion into territory still under control of the *taghut*.’<sup>1270</sup>

Arabist Pieter Van Ostaeyen recognized Naji’s *The management of savagery* in the strategy<sup>1271</sup>: jihadi-salafists believing they can defeat an enemy by destabilizing social cohesion.<sup>1272</sup> ISIS leaders may have recognized the retreat of the ISF as Naji’s third and fourth stages, that is, destabilizing *taghut*, creating an opportunity for *tamkin*.<sup>1273</sup>

Yet, IS published its strategy after the conquest of Mosul. Later, IS claimed that ‘the aim of attacking it [Mosul] was to seize it and not only to strike the enemy inside it and then withdraw. The point is that the collapse of the *Rafidite* army and the security forces led to the *mujahideen* immediately adopting the decision to broaden the assault to include the left side [east] of the city then catch the fleeing remnants of the enemy.’<sup>1274</sup> This quote indicates that ISIS intended to capture eastern Mosul, instead of its usual hit-and-run attack. When the ISF collapsed, the ISIS *mujahideen* seized the opportunity and broadened the attack. As

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Cf. “Establishment of virtue and vice committee (Islamic Court) in Fallujah,” *Islamic State*, January 15, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi; “Expulsion of an official from the Islamic State,” *Islamic State*, June 5, 2015, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi. Also see: “Ultimatum for the Christians of Mosul” *Islamic State*, June 19, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1267 “Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul,” 1.

1268 Baghdadi, “Allah will not allow.” Also see: Bahney & Johnston, “Who runs the Islamic State group?”; Carmon *et al.*, “Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,”; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 28, 233; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 4, 129; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 152; Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab thought*, 373; “State building.”

1269 Ryan, “Hot issue. Dabiq.” Also see: Naji, *The management of savagery*. According to Ryan, the use of the word *tamkin* referred to Naji.

1270 “From hijrah to khilafa,” 38. Italics added. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 133-4; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 123; Ryan, “Hot issue. Dabiq”; Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “Some remarks on the Islamic State’s first issue of Dābiq magazine,” *Bellingcat*, August 2, 2014.

1271 “From hijrah to khilafa,” 38; Ostaeyen, “Some remarks on the Islamic State’s first issue of Dābiq magazine.”

1272 Fishman, *The master plan*, 236-79; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 6; Jones & Smith, “Return to reason,” 949.

1273 Naji, *The management of savagery*. Also see: Hassan, “Isis has reached new depths of depravity.”

1274 “Bringing down the towns i.” Italics added. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 51.

such, the ISIS *mujabedeens* behaved with more risk-appetite than their usual modus operandi of ‘surprising the enemy forces in weak areas, in which the *mujabideen* can be secure in their superiority in force,’ to ‘strike or neutralize the force of the enemy’ while avoiding ‘losses in the ranks of the *mujabideen* as far as possible.’<sup>1275</sup> ISIS usually conducted hit-and-run attacks to inflict damage to its enemies, gain resources, free prisoners, and enable IS supporters<sup>1276</sup>, based on its jihadi-salafist ideology and doctrine of ‘[s]preading the faith by the sword, killing infidels and purifying the Islamic world from foreign ideas and lifestyles.’<sup>1277</sup>

The shared jihadi-salafist ideology guided the ISIS *mujabedeens* and explained their strong unit cohesion. Additionally, and contrary to the ISF or Iraqi Federal Police, ISIS units were highly autarkic, enabling them to sustain fighting even when isolated.<sup>1278</sup> This seems in line with Naji’s suggestion to use ‘small bands and separate, disparate organizations.’<sup>1279</sup> It forced ISIS to delegate decision-making to lower commanders. The separate, disparate organizations had an inherent risk of not being controllable, though: ‘[w]hen small groups of highly motivated people, risking their lives for a cause, live together in close proximity for extended periods, they naturally reinforce each other’s ideological tendencies, leading them to be even less savvy about how attacks will be perceived.’<sup>1280</sup> Here, differences might occur between doctrine and the perception of the units, sometimes referred to as mission creep. In ISIS’ case, the doctrine and the units’ execution might differ.

IS implicitly referred to Naji’s *The management of savagery* when explaining ISIS’ strategy.<sup>1281</sup> It did so only afterwards, possibly to establish a narrative of intentionally capturing Mosul. Documentary evidence suggests no plan beforehand and seizing opportunities seemed more appropriate. ISIS operated in a flexible, mission-oriented approach. Illustrative were moving in reinforcements from Syria to Mosul on June 8, 2014, to resist an ISF counterattack<sup>1282</sup> and ISIS *mujabedeens* pushing through when they realized that seizing eastern Mosul was possible.<sup>1283</sup> SOPs or doctrine did not restrict ISIS, but enabled pragmatism. The *diwan al-jund* strategically decided to conduct a campaign in Nineveh, focusing on western Mosul, but it was ISIS doctrine that allowed freedom of decision for tactical and operational commanders to achieve strategic effects. Once combat was over and ISIS controlled a territory, bureaucratic agencies established SOPs for governance.

1275 *Ibid.* Italics added. Also see: “Bringing down the towns iv.”

1276 “Bringing down the towns ii”; Ingram *et al.*, “The Islamic State’s global insurgency,” 33.

1277 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 10.

1278 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 43-52, 200-1. Also see: Milton, “Structure of a state,” 32.

1279 Naji, *The management of savagery*, 12. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 152-3.

1280 Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma*, 28. Also see: Baghdadi, untitled speech, January 19, 2014; Fishman, *The master plan*, 132-4, 199.

1281 “From hijrah to khilafa,” 38; Ostaeyen, “Some remarks on the Islamic State’s first issue of Dābiq magazine.”

1282 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 51-2, 199, 208.

1283 “Bringing down the towns i.”

### 5.3.2 The KRI

Gruber, in a 2015 study on civil-military relations within the KRI, found that

[t]he front line with the Islamic State is divided into eight administrative sections, each headed by one central command, whose head has not been chosen by the MoP [Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs]. Instead, they were selected by the party in the territory. Communication and coordination happens along the eight administrative sections and the following official structure: The KRG president (Masoud Barzani) heads the General Command Staff [...] The president is in charge of all military decisions and is advised by his General Command Staff. Decisions of war lie with him, and the management of day-to-day affairs with the Ministry [of *Peshmerga* Affairs].<sup>1284</sup>

The joint Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs had four central units: twelve *peshmerga* brigades, the KDP-affiliated *yekey* 80, the PUK-affiliated *yekey* 70, and the *zerevane* (special forces). *Yekey* 80 and 70 were distributed and organized across eight border sectors controlled by the KDP or the PUK, respectively.<sup>1285</sup> Since April 2014, the Minister of *Peshmerga* Affairs was from *Gorran*.<sup>1286</sup> Yet, *Gorran* lacked the fighting capacity that the PUK possessed. With the threat of ISIS increasing, the PUK was necessary to protect the KRI's southern borders. Its fighting capacity offered the PUK an opportunity to demand senior government positions.<sup>1287</sup>

In May 2013, the *peshmerga* moved towards the outskirts of Kirkuk, when the ISF redeployed to fight ISI.<sup>1288</sup> Tensions between the KRI and the Iraqi state over territory remained, notably over the oil-rich Kirkuk area.<sup>1289</sup> The Iraqi state considered any KRI gains in the Kirkuk governorate a move towards independence.<sup>1290</sup> The tensions led to the KRI allegedly refusing to support the ISF during battles with ISIS over Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014<sup>1291</sup>, and the Iraqi state cutting the 17 percent of the Iraqi national budget allocation for the KRI.<sup>1292</sup> In response, the KDP and the PUK paid their respective *peshmerga* salaries from the parties' budgets<sup>1293</sup>, potentially making individual *peshmerga* fighters more dependent on the parties. Despite the tensions with the Iraqi state, during the 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections, the

1284 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 39.

1285 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 26.

1286 "New ministers join KRG cabinet."

1287 "PUK and KDP likely to agree." Also see: Isabel Coles, "Iraqi Kurdish PM fires four ministers after violent unrest: spokesman," *Reuters*, October 12, 2015; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1288 "Iraqi Kurds 'fully control Kirkuk' as army flees."

1289 Charara, "Why Kirkuk matters," 2; Saced, "The problem of Kirkuk."

1290 Morris *et al.*, "The future of Kirkuk," 14.

1291 "Offensive manoeuvres."

1292 "Oil sales obstacles."

1293 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 43.

KDP and the PUK did not compete as a joint Kurdish bloc, but as two separate parties.<sup>1294</sup> The KDP-PUK fragmentation illustrated the intra-Kurdish political rivalries, fueled by *Gorran* becoming the second-largest party after the KDP in the KRI's 2013 parliamentary elections.<sup>1295</sup> Still, analysts expected the KDP and the PUK to form a coalition to advance Kurdish interests in the Iraqi parliament.<sup>1296</sup>

As the ISF withdrew from northern Iraq, the KDP and the PUK agreed on advancing into the disputed territories, though dividing terrain geographically.<sup>1297</sup> The KDP forces entered the Nineveh Plain, while the PUK forces entered the Diyala, Salaheddin, and Kirkuk governorates. Rivalries occurred in and near Kirkuk, where the KDP and the PUK forces bordered each other, while trying to preserve and expand their respective territories. The KDP, which historically had less influence in Kirkuk, insisted on a neutral command structure and deployed its forces at oil fields northwest of the city.<sup>1298</sup> *Peshmerga* belonging to both parties took over an ISF base in the Kirkuk governorate<sup>1299</sup>, indicating coordination between the KDP and the PUK.

Within international relations, the KRI's Department of Foreign Relations pursued a unitary foreign policy next to the KDP's and the PUK's party affiliations abroad.<sup>1300</sup> *Gorran* allegedly stated via private communications that the party did not support Kurdish independence, nor that Kirkuk belonged to the KRI.<sup>1301</sup> The Department of Foreign Relations occasionally explained decisions on behalf of the KRI.<sup>1302</sup> Yet, this study found no evidence that the Department of Foreign Relations was actively involved in the strategic decision-making of the KRI involving filling the vacuum. In fact, while the KRI previously had invested in an international network of diplomatic relations to pursue its goals, it switched from diplomacy to military action as the strategic instrument of choice.<sup>1303</sup>

The KDP and the PUK, each supported by their *peshmerga*, might have been expected to conduct separate courses of action, given their political rivalries. Yet, neither struck separate deals with the Iraqi state, as had happened in the past<sup>1304</sup> and would happen later. The PUK's *yekey* 70 and

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1294 Ali, "Iraq's 2014 national elections," 17-9.

1295 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 359-60; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach"; "KRG's fiscal dependency."

1296 "Strikes over salary non-payment in Kurdistn Region."

1297 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 25.

1298 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 10.

1299 Hawramy, "Kurdish peshmerga seize a chaotic victory in Kirkuk"; "Iraq, Fixing security in Kirkuk."

1300 Jongerden, "Governing Kurdistan," 73-74n12.

1301 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 359-60.

1302 For example: "Iraqi Kurds battle Sunni fighters in Kirkuk."

1303 Cf. Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 366.

1304 For example: Aziz, *The Kurds of Iraq*, 5-6.

the KDP's *yekey* 80 coordinated their advance into the disputed territories. Most notably in the Kirkuk governorate, where the *yekey* 70 obtained southern and eastern Kirkuk city, bordering the PUK-dominated Suleimaniya governorate, and *yekey* 80 obtained north and west of Kirkuk city, which included the primary oil fields, bordering the KDP-dominated Erbil governorate.<sup>1305</sup> Although differences between the KDP and the PUK remained, the shared opponents, that is, the Iraqi state and ISIS, created the trigger and the opportunity to cooperate.

### 5.3.3 Reflections

With its focus on how an actor is organized, assuming internal bureaucratic struggle and emphasis on doctrines, the organizational behavior paradigm in this case found that both ISIS and the KRI typically behaved cautiously before June 2014. ISIS' *diwan al-jund*, despite its violent jihadi-salafism<sup>1306</sup> (ideology), applied a cautious and pragmatic *modus operandi*<sup>1307</sup>, seemingly influenced by Naji's *The management of savagery*, while the KRI used diplomacy as its foreign policy instrument of choice (strategic theory and doctrine, politics). ISIS' *diwan al-jund* worked via highly specialized units<sup>1308</sup>, whereas the KRI's foreign policy was historically fragmented along the KDP's and the PUK's party-lines<sup>1309</sup> (organization). The *diwan al-jund*'s units were able to turn tactical and operational opportunities into strategic effects, whereas the KRI switched from diplomacy to the military strategic instrument (culture), benefitting from the fact that 'Western partners remained silent on the KDP – and the PUK, for that matter – confiscating areas in the disputed territories'<sup>1310</sup> (friction, chance, and uncertainty).

The organizational behavior paradigm simplifies the strategic dimensions mentioned above, by considering them linear, instead of non-linear, thus overlooking how they influence one another, for example how ISIS' internal doctrine allowed local commanders to adapt and achieve strategic goals. The paradigm should be able to explain the KRI's strategic decisions, assuming intra-Kurdish rivalries. Yet, while the KRI's parties were fragmented in April 2014, during the Iraqi parliamentary elections and despite skirmishes near Kirkuk, they ostensibly operated as a united Kurdish bloc when filling the vacuum in June 2014.

Overall, the organizational behavior paradigm has interesting insights, but is unable to explain by itself strategic decision-making of ISIS and the KRI, regarding the filling of the vacuum. Only after ISIS had taken over Mosul, did it issue codes of conduct for governing by other

1305 "Iraq. Fixing security in Kirkuk," 6-9.

1306 "Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism," 21-24.

1307 "Bringing down the towns i." Also see: "Bringing down the towns iv."

1308 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 43.

1309 For example: Torelli, "Kurdistan and the Middle East," 18-43.

1310 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 19.

*dawawin*<sup>1311</sup>, which seemed more appropriate for this paradigm. This study found no evidence for bureaucratic struggles among ISIS' organizations, and no effect from the KRI's internal rivalries, as the organizational behavior paradigm suggests.

## 5.4 Governmental politics paradigm

The next three sections view ISIS' and the KRI's strategic decisions to advance into Iraqi state-held territory in June 2014 from a governmental politics paradigm perspective. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: which leaders play, what are their stands, what is their impact, and what is their action channel?

### 5.4.1 ISIS

Leadership within ISIS was both political and religious<sup>1312</sup>, illustrated by referring to Baghdadi as '*Amirul-Mu'minin*' (the commander of the believers)<sup>1313</sup>, a title used to designate the supreme Islamic leader. Baghdadi aimed to re-establish the caliphate, for which he – as the ISIS leader – was the preferred candidate to become the caliph, based on his battlefield experiences, lineage, and doctorate.<sup>1314</sup> Re-establishing the caliphate would make Baghdadi the global jihadi-salafist leader, a position left vacant since bin Laden's death in 2011.<sup>1315</sup> Since Baghdadi had become the ISI leader, the organization regained momentum<sup>1316</sup>, which offered Baghdadi leverage among jihadi-salafists.

Despite his battlefield experience and applying a carefully constructed warrior-like image<sup>1317</sup>, Baghdadi delegated the conduct of operations to local commanders<sup>1318</sup>, while at the same time expecting total obedience of the fighters.<sup>1319</sup> A follower described Baghdadi's military style as 'robust and confrontational.'<sup>1320</sup> Yet, Baghdadi adopted pragmatism from studying *al-Qaeda's* foreign operations. He preferred avoiding costly battles, favoring hit-and-run strikes. As such,

1311 For example: "Code of conduct," *ISIS information office – Nineveh governorate*, June 12, 2014, transl. unknown. Cf. "Early ruling imposed in Mosul," *Islamic State*, June 18, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi. Also see: "Fatwa on playing billiards," *Islamic State*, November 25, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi; "Fatwa on playing table football," *Islamic State*, November 25, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1312 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 1, 13.

1313 "Khilafah declared," 7. Italics added.

1314 Fishman, *The master plan*, 152.

1315 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 17. For example: "In the hospitality of Amir al-Mu'mineen."

1316 For example: "Results of operations of the Islamic State during AH 1434 in Iraq."

1317 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 173. For example: "In the hospitality of Amir al-Mu'mineen"; Orton, "The reappearance of the caliph." Cf. "Image of Osama bin Laden."

1318 Cf. "Bringing down the towns i"; "Bringing down the towns iii"; "Bringing down the towns iv."

1319 "Bringing down the towns iv."

1320 Atwan, "A portrait of caliph Ibrahim," 69, 72.

Baghdadi likely favored expeditionary raids in Nineveh, not allowing raids if he expected negative consequences for ISIS. Thus, he applied Naji's advice that 'the development of the battle by employing a correct strategy is important so that the prolongation of the battle will not harm us more than the enemy, exhausting our patience before his (is exhausted).'<sup>1321</sup>

Differences exist on who was ISIS' military commander in northern Iraq in early 2014.<sup>1322</sup> Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi<sup>1323</sup> from January 2014 acted as the ISIS *emir* of the *diwan al-jund* and its military council, until his death on June 5, 2014. In this capacity he had planned the "Enter upon them through the gate" campaign.<sup>1324</sup> Some reports indicated that he was the ISIS coordinator between the Iraqi and Syrian battlefields.<sup>1325</sup> Bilawi had been an infantry captain in the Iraqi army during the *Ba'ath* regime. He had joined Zarqawi in 2003.<sup>1326</sup> For his AQI membership, he had been detained in Camp Bucca, after Baghdadi had been released from prison, though.<sup>1327</sup> Bilawi was transferred to Abu Ghraib prison and freed there on July 21, 2013, as part of ISIS' "Breaking the walls" campaign.<sup>1328</sup>

Documentary evidence suggested that Bilawi was a fanatic jihadi-salafist.<sup>1329</sup> Since ISIS freed Bilawi from prison, he became responsible for ISIS' military organization.<sup>1330</sup> Bilawi was said to have planned the conquest of Mosul<sup>1331</sup>, but allegedly killed himself with a suicide vest on June 5, during the ISIS attack on the city.<sup>1332</sup> When referred to by ISIS propaganda as an illustration of leading by example, the 'act [...] inflamed the already-overzealous fighters.'<sup>1333</sup> In Bilawi's honor, ISIS renamed its advance in Nineveh 'the campaign of *Asadullah* (lion of Allah) Al-Bilawi.'<sup>1334</sup>

1321 Naji, *The management of savagery*, 84. Also see: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 18.

1322 Blair, "ISIS"; Jennifer Cafarella & Valerie Szybala, "ISIS's second front in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 18, 2014. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 210. Blair mentioned Umar al-Shishani, who according to Cafarella and Szybala was ISIS' military commander in Syria, and who, according to Hashim, had taken over the military committee from early 2015 onwards.

1323 Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 124. Bilawi was the *kunya* of Adnan Ismael Najm, originating from from al-Khalidiya in Anbar.

1324 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 2; "The structure of khilafa"; Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy"; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 7-9.

1325 Salafi, in Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi."

1326 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 154; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 29.

1327 Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 124.

1328 Kyle Orton, "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's second speech as Islamic State leader," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, December 29, 2014. Also see: Baghdadi, "Allah will not allow."

1329 "ISIS announces conquest of Mosul."

1330 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 176; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 47-8.

1331 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 2; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 7.

1332 "ISIS announces conquest of Mosul." Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 51, 198; "ISIS spokesman: the real battle will be in Baghdad," Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 7.

1333 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 198.

1334 "Islamic State news," *Dabiq* 1, 47. Italics added.

It was Bilawi who – despite allegedly having planned to take the city’s two western districts<sup>1335</sup> – was credited for ISIS’s capture of Mosul.<sup>1336</sup> His sacrifice and example – at least as mentioned in ISIS propaganda – boosted ISIS’ morale and encouraged bravery<sup>1337</sup>, possibly overtaking Baghdadi’s usual caution. Still, this study found no evidence for internal powerplay, as the governmental politics paradigm suggests.

#### 5.4.2 The KRI

As the president of the KRI, Masoud Barzani was the supreme commander of the KRI.<sup>1338</sup> He was assumed to pursue leadership over all Kurds by establishing a Kurdish state during his lifetime.<sup>1339</sup> The ISF’s withdrawal created an opportunity to do so and within the KRI, he decided on military affairs. Masoud Barzani headed the General Command Staff, of which the other members performed advisory roles. These members were Jafar Mustafa, commander of the PUK’s *yekey* 70; Faruq Zirwan, commander of the KDP’s *yekey* 80; Mustafa Sayid Qadir, Minister of *Peshmerga* Affairs for the *Gorran* party; Karim Sinjar, Minister of Interior for the KDP; and Masrour Barzani, as head of the Security Council<sup>1340</sup>, who was Masoud Barzani’s son and also happened to be member of the KDP. In several media appearances, the KRI’s minister of Foreign Relations, Falah Bakir, explained the KRI’s decisions on filling the vacuum.<sup>1341</sup> Bakir’s role in the media suggested some involvement in the KRI’s foreign policy. His role in military matters seemed limited to explaining strategic decisions, though.

Perhaps as important for the analysis as the leaders involved, are leaders who explicitly are not involved, in this case, the PUK leader Jalal Talabani. As Middle Eastern affairs analysts Tanya Goudsouzian and Lara Fatah stated: ‘[m]any Iraqi Kurds, off the record, cite the absence of the pragmatic Kurdish President Jalal Talabani as the reason for the deterioration of relations between Iraq’s divided communities. They lament the lack of a suitable replacement for the Iraqi Kurdish leader, taken ill in December 2012, to troubleshoot and quell tensions.’<sup>1342</sup> Within the KRI, Talabani’s absence offered Masoud Barzani more political leverage, in particular for pursuing autonomy.<sup>1343</sup> In June 2014, Barzani announced an independence referendum to occur ‘within a few months.’<sup>1344</sup>

1335 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 51.

1336 “Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul,” 4; “Islamic State News,” *Dabiq* 1, 47; Whiteside *et al.*, “The ISIS files – The Islamic State’s Department of Soldiers,” 7.

1337 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 199.

1338 Gruber, “Revisiting civil-military relations theory,” 39.

1339 “Arming Iraq’s Kurds,” 7, 7-8n30.

1340 Gruber, “Revisiting civil-military relations theory,” 39; “President Barzani inaugurates the security council”; Wilgenburg & Fumerton, “Kurdistan’s political armies,” 9n28.

1341 For example: “Iraqi Kurds battle Sunni fighters in Kirkuk.”

1342 Goudsouzian & Fatah, “Fall of Mosul.”

1343 Mustafa, “Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum,” 902-7.

1344 Morris *et al.*, “The Future of Kirkuk,” 14.

Yet, an internal KDP power struggle over his political legacy and dependence on the PUK to provide security in the KRI's south limited Masoud Barzani's impact<sup>1345</sup>, despite having several action channels available. As the president of the KRI, his political exposure was significant and not limited to the KRI, reaching an international audience. Just after ISIS had captured Mosul, and the KRI Kirkuk, Barzani visited Kirkuk, 'highlighting the city's importance to the Kurds.'<sup>1346</sup> The visit indicated Barzani's intention to incorporate Kirkuk within the KRI and move towards autonomy. Barzani likely considered the ISF withdrawal an opportunity to seize the disputed areas from the Iraqi state and gain control over economically essential regions, notably the Kirkuk area, to maintain an autonomous Kurdish state. Barzani's Kirkuk visit and the announcement of the KRI's independence referendum might have offset international partners. Barzani gained confidence of Western countries by making the *peshmerga* the vanguard of the international coalition against IS.<sup>1347</sup>

### 5.4.3 Reflections

With its focus on key leaders' perceptions and assuming powerplay among those key leaders, the governmental politics paradigm observed strategic opportunities for the leaders on both sides. The usually cautious Baghdadi could become the global jihadi-salafist leader by re-establishing the caliphate. The KRI leader, Masoud Barzani, benefitted from Jalal Talabani's absence and could freely maneuver to establish an independent Kurdish state (politics, people, command, and decision-making process). Via its propaganda channels, ISIS benefitted from the alleged self-detonation of Bilawi (information and intelligence), which ignited the capture of Mosul (friction, chance, and uncertainty, symbolism).

The governmental politics paradigm's strength as an explanatory model lies in the powerplay-assumption, which involves a process among key leaders. However, the paradigm's explanations are highly speculative, due to a lack of reliable sources on strategic leaders' considerations on specific decisions, as well as reliable psychological profiles. Furthermore, propaganda links acts to consequences and intentions, for example Bilawi's death: was it self-detonation, or merely explained as such? Finally, the extent to which powerplay takes place is difficult to decide. ISIS promoted debate among leaders, but also emphasized the central role of ISIS' leader. The KRI's political leadership officially was elected, but its military leadership was centralized, focusing on Masoud Barzani and depending on party loyalties, not on merits.

Overall, the governmental politics paradigm has interesting insights, but is unable to explain by itself strategic decision-making of ISIS and the KRI, regarding the filling of the vacuum.

1345 "Iraq. Fixing security in Kirkuk," 6.

1346 Morris *et al.*, "The Future of Kirkuk," 14.

1347 Mustafa, "Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum," 903.

This study found no evidence for powerplay among ISIS' key leaders. For the KRI's key leaders, powerplay seemed limited to intra-party rivalries, overlapping with the organizational behavior paradigm.

## 5.5 Complexity theory

This paragraph applies complexity theory to ISIS' and the KRI's strategic decisions to advance into Iraqi state-held territory in June 2014. The paragraph adopts the structure along the elements of the paradigm: time-, space-, and case-specific factors and multi-level, multi-directional processes. Because of these processes, the structure of the paragraph is to jointly analyze ISIS and the KRI, instead of separately, as occurred in previous paragraphs in this chapter.

### 5.5.1 Time, space, context, and processes

Time-specific factors of importance traced back to 2011. ISI, and later ISIS, that year benefitted from the start of the Syrian Civil War and the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, thus gaining momentum.<sup>1348</sup> ISIS' strategy of exposure to support rapid growth proved successful.<sup>1349</sup> The Sunni protests from 2012 onwards, and the Iraqi state's responses, created an escalating cycle of violence.<sup>1350</sup> Sunni tribes eventually fought alongside ISIS against the ISF. When the ISF withdrew from Anbar, the governorate was left to ISIS.<sup>1351</sup> From Maliki's point of view, it may have seemed like a struggle between Sunnis and Shia. However, by proclaiming it as such, during the 2014 parliamentary elections<sup>1352</sup>, Maliki further alienated the Sunni tribes and further ignited ethnic tensions. Maliki's re-election<sup>1353</sup> confirmed to Sunnis that Shias agreed with Maliki's policies. For ISIS, the timing of the Mosul assault was the culmination point when it had sufficient popular support among the Sunni population, enough battlefield momentum to push through, and its preparations in order to attack the ISF.<sup>1354</sup> On June 4, ISIS started its advance in northern Iraq. While ISIS almost 'overstretched

1348 Fishman, *The master plan*, 143-4; Flood, "Breaking down borders"; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 185; "Islamic State ascendant"; Kiras, "Key concepts," 302; Matthews, "The surreal infographics"; Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris"; Renner, "Air power in the Battle of Mosul," 259. Cf. Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 69n26. Also see: Joseph Logan, "Last U.S. troops leave Iraq, ending war," *Reuters*, December 18, 2011.

1349 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 9; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 125. For example: "Militant seizure of Iraqi town"; Toivanen, *The Kobane generation*, 3-4.

1350 Boghani, "David Petraeus"; Hauser, "Iraq"; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,334; "Ten die as Iraq security forces dismantle Sunni camp."

1351 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 244-5; "Iraqi forces, tribesmen battle Qaeda-linked militants."

1352 Hassan, "More than ISIS."

1353 "Iraqi prime minister's re-election." Also see: Ali, "Iraq's 2014 national elections," 24; "Militant attacks likely to intensify."

1354 Lewis, "The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham captures Mosul."

its small units in the east<sup>1355</sup>, it was able to capture Mosul on June 10.<sup>1356</sup> Parallel to the rise of ISIS, tensions increased between the KRI and the Iraqi state during the first months of 2014.<sup>1357</sup> The ISF withdrawal from northern Iraq, provided the KRI the opportunity to seize the disputed territories.

Space-specific factors focused on northern Iraqi demography and geography. While tensions between ISIS and the ISF spread across other governorates<sup>1358</sup>, ISIS' culmination point remained the mainly Sunni-inhabited Nineveh.<sup>1359</sup> Mosul had been a power base for ISIS' predecessors, serving as a logistics hub for personnel and equipment from and to Syria. In addition, the Iraqi state was relatively uninterested in Mosul's Sunni population.<sup>1360</sup> For ISIS, Mosul was a symbol of caliphal power<sup>1361</sup> and the location for the Quranic story of Nuh's ark.<sup>1362</sup> The KRI primarily focused on Kirkuk. The Iraqi state recognized Kirkuk's value as a prerequisite for Kurdish autonomy<sup>1363</sup>, in particular because of Kirkuk's oil fields.<sup>1364</sup> Within the larger Kirkuk governorate, ISIS had a strong presence and threatened to take over the city after the ISF left.<sup>1365</sup> In a pre-emptive move, the KRI's *peshmerga* took control over Kirkuk and its direct surroundings<sup>1366</sup>, as well as the areas west, north, and east of Mosul.<sup>1367</sup> The KRI's territory eventually increased by more than forty percent<sup>1368</sup>, creating an approximately 1,050-kilometer-long border – or frontline – between ISIS and the KRI.<sup>1369</sup>

The case-specific factors include the situation in Iraq, that was reminiscent of Bull's new mediaevalism<sup>1370</sup>, or Hashim's description of 2003-2006 Iraq as a 'Hobbesian "warre of all against all"<sup>1371</sup>: Sunni militias fought each other and Shia militias, fighting overlapped with

1355 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 51.

1356 *Ibid.*, 51-2.

1357 For example: "Offensive manoeuvres"; "Oil sales obstacles."

1358 Lewis, "The Islamic State of Iraq returns to Diyala," 15.

1359 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 41. Cf. "Complex irregular warfare. The psychological component," *The Military Balance* 107:1 (2007), 420. Also see: "Gaining ground"; Milton, "Structure of a state," 11-2.

1360 Fishman, *The master plan*, 132-4, 199.

1361 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 1.

1362 Kināni, "It's either the Islamic State or the flood," 8.

1363 Morris *et al.*, "The Future of Kirkuk," 14.

1364 Charara, "Why Kirkuk matters," 2; Saeed, "The problem of Kirkuk."

1365 Gunes, "The IS factor," 83-4.

1366 Hawramy, "Kurdish peshmerga seize a chaotic victory in Kirkuk"; "Iraqi Kurdish regional government's territorial control set to boost oil export autonomy"; "Iraqi Kurds battle Sunni fighters in Kirkuk"; "Iraqi Kurds 'fully control Kirkuk' as army flees." Also see: Gunes, "The IS factor," 83-4; Morris *et al.*, "The Future of Kirkuk," 14; Pickerell *et al.*, "Iraq situation report. June 17, 2014"; Salman & al-Rubei'i, "Iraq's top Shi'ite cleric."

1367 Cf. Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1368 "Under attack."

1369 Gerges, *ISIS*, 2; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,336. Also see: "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 8, 27.

1370 Bull, *The anarchical society*, 254-66.

1371 Hashim, "The Iraq War, 2003-2006," 159-60.

the Syrian civil war<sup>1372</sup>, weaponry and tactics spread, as well as modern recruiting techniques via social media. In early 2014, Iraq had become a battlefield of ethnic and religious groups fighting one another, in which ISIS had momentum. According to Middle East scholar Gareth Stansfield, ISIS was able to do so due to a ‘combination of extreme unhappiness in Sunni Arab lands and outright hostility in the diplomatic relations between Erbil and Baghdad [that] gave ISIS – which had been building up its strength over the previous year – an opportunity in the form of a security vacuum in Sunni Arab regions and a political vacuum caused by governmental stagnation across Iraq as a whole.’<sup>1373</sup>

Multi-layered, multi-directional processes occurred within the new mediaeval situation sketched above. Iraq’s political leadership alienated Sunnis<sup>1374</sup>, who lacked moderate political leadership of their own, ruled out by Iraqi state measures. Under the capable command of Baghdadi – internally supported by jihadi-salafists with military, security, or governance experience in the *Ba’ath* regime, such as Bilawi – ISIS both caused and used these factors from 2011 onwards, uniting – or absorbing – Sunni groups against the Shia-dominated ISF.<sup>1375</sup> Maliki’s anti-Sunni campaign<sup>1376</sup> and his re-election during the April 2014 elections<sup>1377</sup> backfired as ISIS’ threat to the Iraqi state increased.<sup>1378</sup> A process reminiscent of emergence appeared with ISIS’ battlefield momentum.<sup>1379</sup> In the conquest of Mosul, ISIS’ propaganda presented Bilawi’s self-detonation<sup>1380</sup> as a pivotal event, that further strengthened ISIS’ existing momentum.<sup>1381</sup> ISIS’ strategic decision to attack Nineveh gained traction when local commanders recognized the opportunity to capture not just its western districts, but all of Mosul.<sup>1382</sup> Tactical occurrences created strategic effects.<sup>1383</sup> ISIS successes – neatly exploited by its propaganda – had effects too: more than 6,000 Arabs tried to join ISIS’ ranks in June 2014.<sup>1384</sup> Possibly, they were attracted by ISIS announcing ‘developing into a full-fledged state’<sup>1385</sup>, as the final step of an allegedly intentional strategy.<sup>1386</sup>

1372 Flood, “Breaking down borders”; Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 173; Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 13. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 39-40; Berge, “The instrumental use of terrorism”; Orton, “Provocation and the Islamic State.”

1373 Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,334.

1374 For example: Hassan, “More than ISIS.”

1375 Blair, “ISIS”; Chuang *et al.*, “Local alliances and rivalries,” 20,900; Gunes, “The IS factor,” 83-4; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 125; Matthews, “The surreal infographics.”

1376 Hassan, “More than ISIS.”

1377 “Iraqi prime minister’s re-election.”

1378 Cf. Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 45; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 14; Kenneth Waltz, “Nuclear myths and political realities,” *The use of force. Military power and international politics*, 5th ed., Robert Art & Kenneth Waltz (eds.) (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 108.

1379 Cf. Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 180-1; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 18.

1380 “ISIS announces conquest of Mosul.”

1381 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 198.

1382 “Bringing down the towns i.” Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 51.

1383 Cf. Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 244-5.

1384 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 123-4.

1385 “From hijrah to khilafa,” 38.

1386 “Bringing down the towns i.”

The Iraqi state also acted counter-productively towards the KRI. Since 2012, the KRI took a more active posture within the Iraqi insurgency, cooperating closely with Western states and hosting Western diplomatic, military, and economic representatives. The KRI officially declared the striving for more autonomy, although a call for independence existed only informally. To achieve that, the KRI required to control the Kirkuk oil and gas fields. The unsettled status of the disputed areas increased tensions with the Iraqi state. The *peshmerga* had not assisted the ISF against ISIS in Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014.<sup>1387</sup> The Iraqi state cut the budgets for the KRI<sup>1388</sup>, including that of the *peshmerga*. When some *peshmerga* commanders paid salaries from the party's budget or by themselves, it increased loyalties to the party and the commander, but further fragmented Kurdish society<sup>1389</sup> and further alienated the KRI from the Iraqi state. According to the KRI's narrative, strengthening its defensive posture against ISIS and the struggle with the Iraqi state were connected: 'Kurdish *peshmerga* forces have taken over two more northern oil fields, noting that they need their revenue stream because Baghdad [that is, the Iraqi state] is not paying them.'<sup>1390</sup>

### 5.5.2 Reflections

Complexity theory offers the most encompassing explanation of the four IR paradigms applied in this study, as it merges the other paradigms and adds elements. With its focus on time-, space-, and context-specific events, occurring with multi-level and multi-directional processes, complexity theory addresses strategic dimensions left unaddressed by the other paradigms.

On the strategic level, in line with the rational actor paradigm, the Iraqi state (adversary) was preoccupied with ISIS (military operations), which then created opportunities for the KRI when the ISF retreated (friction, chance, and uncertainty). Both aimed to establish an independent political entity (politics) in a territory (geography) with enough resources to sustain (people, economics and logistics). Jihadi-salafism guided ISIS' strategy (ideology, strategic theory and doctrine). Additionally, the KRI counted on support of its Western partners (allies). Internally, in line with the organizational behavior paradigm, ISIS and the KRI behaved according to cautious and pragmatic foreign policy *modi operandi* (politics, strategic theory and doctrine). ISIS operated via highly specialized units, whereas the KRI worked along the KDP's and the PUK's party-lines (organization), while both sides turned sudden opportunities into strategic effects (friction, chance, and uncertainty, culture). In ISIS' case, Baghdadi – eager to become the global jihadi-salafist leader after the death of bin Laden, by re-establishing the caliphate (people, symbolism, ideology) – delegated responsibilities to lower command levels, without much internal

1387 "Offensive manoeuvres."

1388 "Oil sales obstacles."

1389 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 43.

1390 Hussein & Bakir, "Iraq's crisis and the KRG." Italics added.

political powerplay, as suggested by the governmental politics paradigm (decision-making process, command). ISIS benefitted from its propaganda exploits (information and intelligence). Within the KRI, Masoud Barzani benefitted from Talabani's absence and could freely maneuver to establish an independent Kurdish state (people, politics, command).

Complexity theory underscores the importance of Maliki – confirmed during the April 2014 Iraqi parliament elections – in politically and security-wise alienating the Sunni and Kurdish populations (politics, exogenous pressure), thus creating popular support for ISIS and the KRI, respectively (people). This backfired on Maliki's power base, strengthened ISIS' battlefield momentum (emergence), created opportunities for the KRI to expand (friction, chance, and uncertainty), and led to harsher statements of Maliki, indicating that individual leaders impact strategic choices (interconnection).

Complexity theory assumes the strategic dimensions influence one another, and thus are non-linear. As such, complexity theory offers a solution to the strategic paradoxes, considering the time-, space-, and context-specific elements of events and strategic decisions. These elements limit complexity theory to reverse engineering strategic decision-making. Complexity theory is unable to forecast any actor's strategic decisions. That is also due to the complexity of complexity theory: if all strategic dimensions interact, where to stop the analysis? This study applied a rather abstract structure, based on time-, space-, and context-specifics, focusing on multi-level and multi-directional processes. Yet, such abstract structure might lead to analysis that is simply too complex to have scientific or societal value. The challenge for complexity theory is to narrow it down and to accept that an analysis will never be truly conclusive.

Overall, complexity theory offers the most encompassing explanation for strategic decision-making of ISIS and the KRI, regarding the filling of the vacuum. Complexity theory merges the other paradigms in this study and adds multi-level and multi-directional processes to the analysis, thus offering a solution how to analyze non-linearity.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In June 2014, ISIS and the KRI took the strategic decision to advance into territory previously held by the ISF. From a military strategic point of view, the advances of ISIS and the KRI seemed successful, despite increased mutual rivalries due to increased perceptions of insecurity.<sup>1391</sup>

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<sup>1391</sup> Cf. Biddle, "Coercion theory," 108-9.

This chapter focused on how to explain the strategic decisions of ISIS and the KRI to fill the vacuum. The chapter used four different IR paradigms, each offering different perspectives. The section below summarizes how to explain the strategic decision-making of both ANSAs in June 2014. The next section focuses on how useful the different paradigms proved in analyzing ISIS' and the KRI's strategic decisions. The last section looks forward, linking ISIS and the KRI filling the vacuum to this study's next case.

### 5.6.1 Explanations

ISIS' strategic decision to fill the vacuum can be explained by Maliki's self-fulfilling statements and behavior, which alienated Iraqi Sunnis in 2013-2014 and left them without moderate political leadership. A cycle of mutual alienation emerged, as Sunni support for ISIS increased, which threatened Maliki's powerbase. In response, Maliki took anti-Sunni measures, leading to more Sunni support for ISIS. The April 2014 Iraqi parliament elections confirmed Maliki's anti-Sunni stance. Another factor explaining ISIS' strategic decision-making was its battlefield momentum, made possible by its doctrine, which enabled the *diwan al-jund* to turn tactical or operational opportunities into strategic effects. Despite its violent jihadi-salafist ideology<sup>1392</sup>, ISIS' *diwan al-jund* operated cautiously and pragmatically, simultaneously using conventional and semi-conventional warfare<sup>1393</sup>, conducted by specialized units.<sup>1394</sup> Still, the weakness of the ISF and Federal Police in northern Iraq provided an opportunity, which was partly caused and cleverly exploited by ISIS. It resulted in the capture of Mosul, which eventually enabled ISIS to re-establish the caliphate and effectively making Baghdadi the global jihadi-salafist leader.

The KRI's strategic decision to enter the disputed territories in June 2014 marked a significant shift from a cautious, diplomacy-based foreign policy in 2003-2014, to an assertive foreign policy, which made use of the KRI's military instrument. The strategic decision can be explained by Maliki's increasingly anti-Kurdish statements and behavior throughout 2013-2014. Studying the KRI's foreign policy, Kurdish studies scholar David Romano concluded that '[w]hen the government in Baghdad refused to abide by the constitutional provisions of its federation with Kurdistan, when it refused to share control of oil production and revenues, and when it cut Kurdistan off from the national budget, it encouraged more risky behaviour from the KRG.'<sup>1395</sup> Whereas Romano focused on the KRI's 2017 independence referendum, his conclusion also applies to the KRI's strategic decision to enter the disputed territories. Yet, it was not Maliki's anti-Kurdish statements and behavior alone. A second factor was important to explain the KRI's strategic decision-making.

1392 "Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism," 21-4.

1393 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 236-7. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 103; Muhājir, "Advice for the leaders of the Islamic State," 15; "The Fallujah memorandum," 128-9.

1394 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 43.

1395 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 366.

The KRI recognized an opportunity, created by the ISF's withdrawal from northern Iraq, to seize the disputed territories, including Kirkuk. The KRI considered Kirkuk a prerequisite for independence. The KRI's unitary decision is remarkable here. Whereas the differences between the KDP and the PUK historically created intra-Kurdish struggles<sup>1396</sup>, they ostensibly operated as a united Kurdish bloc, when filling the vacuum. The absence of PUK-leader Talabani created the political freedom to maneuver for the KRI president and KDP leader Masoud Barzani.

### 5.6.2 Paradigms

The question how to analyze ISIS' and the KRI's strategic decision-making also implies assessing how suitable the used paradigms are for answering the research question. This section summarizes the findings of the findings for the case.

Although the rational actor paradigm provides a credible explanation for the case, the strategic decision-making paradoxes frustrate choosing between the identified alternatives, as lesser alternatives might be the best options, or the other way around, because adversaries do not anticipate the lesser alternatives.<sup>1397</sup> Thus, there is no best-rational decision. Still, in this case, ISIS and the KRI preferred options that allowed them to achieve their strategic goals in the short term. As such, they added value to the options. Compared to the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm provided an alternative explanation, based on internal doctrines. As such, the paradigm observed internal changes of those doctrines instead of competing SOPs. Illustrative was the change of the KRI's focus from diplomacy to military action and the cooperation between the KDP and the PUK when filling the vacuum, despite their historical intra-Kurdish struggles.<sup>1398</sup> Yet, this study found no evidence that different SOPs did not match among ISIS organizations, as the organizational behavior paradigm suggests. The governmental politics paradigm provides another alternative explanation. The lack of reliable resources regarding the leaders' decision-making lead to assumptions, such as Bilawi's alleged self-detonation, which ISIS' propaganda effectively used as leading by example. Complexity theory incorporates the elements of the other paradigms, as well as other relevant strategic dimensions, in a non-linear fashion. Therefore, complexity theory provides a solution to the strategic paradoxes, considering the time-, space-, and context-specific elements of events and strategic decisions. However, it also limits complexity theory to reverse engineering, which itself needs to be as narrow as possible.

The rational actor paradigm in this case explains strategic decision-making of ISIS and the KRI by the strategic dimensions of politics, geography, people, economics and logistics, military operations, adversary, and friction, chance, and uncertainty. For the KRI, allies

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1396 For example: Torelli, "Kurdistan and the Middle East," 18-43.

1397 Luttwak, *Strategy*, 3-5.

1398 For example: Torelli, "Kurdistan and the Middle East," 18-43.

were an important factor, while ISIS was heavily influenced by its ideology, which decided its strategic theory and doctrine. The rational actor paradigm overlooked strategic dimensions, such as culture and organization, which the organizational behavior paradigm, next to strategic decision-making, did address. As such, the organizational behavior paradigm added nuance to the strategic dimensions focused on by the rational actor paradigm. The governmental politics paradigm further added command, decision-making, symbolism, and information and intelligence. Finally, complexity theory added exogenous pressure, emergence, and interconnection. Table 5.1 indicates the factors identified per paradigm for filling the vacuum, showing complexity theory as the most encompassing.

**Table 5.1:** strategic dimensions identified in this study per paradigm regarding the filling of the vacuum.<sup>1399</sup>

Strategic dimension	Rational actor paradigm		Organizational behavior paradigm		Governmental politics paradigm		Complexity theory
	ISIS	KRI	ISIS	KRI	ISIS	KRI	ISIS/KRI
<i>politics</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>geography</i>	X	X					X
<i>people</i>	X	X			X	X	X
<i>economics and logistics</i>	X	X					X
<i>military operations</i>	X	X					X
<i>friction, chance and uncertainty</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>information and intelligence</i>					X		X
<i>strategic theory and doctrine</i>	X		X	X			X
<i>culture</i>			X	X			X
<i>organization</i>			X	X			X
<i>command</i>					X	X	X
<i>allies*</i>		X					X
<i>exogenous pressure*</i>							X
<i>interconnection*</i>							X
<i>ideology*</i>	X				X		X
<i>decision-making process*</i>					X		X
<i>symbolism*</i>					X		X

<sup>1399</sup> Cf. Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44. Strategic dimensions not mentioned by Gray are marked with an asterisk.

### 5.6.3 Next

During the capture of Nineveh, ISIS had seized ISF military equipment<sup>1400</sup>, as well as allegedly \$430 million worth in cash from Mosul's banks.<sup>1401</sup> On June 11, ISIS moved southwards, capturing the Baiji oil refinery and the city of Tikrit.<sup>1402</sup> On June 12, ISIS announced the next military campaign to be aimed at Baghdad: '[f]ollowing the recent victories that Allah granted ISIS, and the arrival of additional manpower, funds, weapons and military vehicles of all kinds, your brothers in the Baghdad province [...] in coordination with other [ISIS] provinces, announce the initiation of a new campaign that we have called "The March."<sup>1403</sup>

Furthermore, Syrian air attacks against ISIS targets in the Iraqi city of Qa'im on June 25, spurred feelings of sectarian strife between Sunni and Shia populations.<sup>1404</sup> The air attacks confirmed ISIS' claims that national borders were obsolete and that Iraq and Syria had become a single battlefield of sectarian conflict.

Baghdadi proclaimed the Islamic State caliphate from Mosul's grand mosque on the first day of Ramadan 1435H (June 28, 2014).<sup>1405</sup> IS rendered any other Islamic scholar or group obsolete – including *al-Qaeda* – by proclaiming the caliphate on behalf of the *ummah*.<sup>1406</sup> The proclamation indicated IS' aspirations and confirmed its status as a strategic entity: '[t]he decision of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to declare an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria in June 2014 is as much a statement of the confidence of the leadership of ISIS as it is the next perceived step by violent Islamic extremists to remake the political and social landscape of the region.'<sup>1407</sup>

Many analysts concluded that the situation in northern Iraq had become favorable to the KRI – perhaps even towards independent statehood –, based on its relatively easily established control over the disputed territories.<sup>1408</sup> On July 3, the KRI announced a referendum for independence.<sup>1409</sup> On July 9, Maliki accused the KRI of harboring Islamist militants,

1400 For example: Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, "My provision was placed for me in the shade of my spear," *Dabiq* 4 (1435H[2014]), 10-3.

1401 Fishman, *The master plan*, 200.

1402 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 20.

1403 "Following capture of Mosul, ISIS launches 'March on Baghdad' campaign," *ISIS Twitter*, June 12, 2014, transl. unknown.

1404 "Iraq and Syria increasingly becoming one battlefield"; "Syrian airstrikes will probably lead factions to perceive fighting in Syria and Iraq as a single sectarian conflict," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, June 25, 2014.

1405 "From hijrah to khilafa," 40; "Khilafah declared," 7; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.

1406 Flood, "Breaking down borders"; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 269; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 173.

1407 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 359.

1408 Eyan & Quintana, "Editor's note," v; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 8.

1409 "Iraqi PM's insistence on running for third term and Kurdish calls for independence will delay government formation," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, July 7, 2014. Also see: "Government formation likely to drag for months

causing Kurdish politicians to leave Baghdad.<sup>1410</sup> The Iraqi state canceled all cargo flights to the Erbil and Suleimaniyah airports the next day. The accusations and the sanctions reflected Iraqi ‘annoyance with what it sees as the Kurds’ exploitation of the security crisis [...] to simultaneously move into disputed Arab-Kurd territories and accelerate calls for independence.”<sup>1411</sup> The KRI’s attention remained mainly directed toward the Iraqi authorities, despite occasional reports of IS expelling Kurds from Nineveh. IS responded to these reports on July 25, claiming that ‘the Sunni Kurds are our brothers in God. [...] And we will not allow any one of them to be harmed so long as they remain on the principle of Islam and do not dress themselves in one of its nullifiers.’<sup>1412</sup>

In July 2014, IS and the KRI seemed to accept an uneasy status quo, with occasional clashes, in northern Iraq. Both ANSAs seemed focused on the Iraqi state as their main adversary. However, on August 1, 2014, IS advanced into the KRI. The strategic decisions made by IS and the KRI regarding that event are the subject of chapter 6.

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despite election of new Iraqi parliamentary speaker,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, July 16, 2014.

1410 “Offensive manoeuvres.”

1411 “KRG consolidation of disputed territories likely to prompt reprisals from central Iraqi government,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, July 14, 2014.

1412 “Denial of expelling Kurds from Ninawa province,” *Islamic State*, July 25, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.



## Chapter 6

### Battle (August 2014)

**A**n uneasy status quo had emerged in northern Iraq since ISIS and the KRI took over control there in June 2014. By July 2014, ISIS had become IS and had declared a caliphate. The KRI had announced an independence referendum. Iraq as a state seemed obsolete. IS and the KRI seemed the successor-states, behaving state-like. As part of their foreign policies, a war-like conflict occurred in August 2014, when IS invaded the KRI. Although these occurrences seem a given in hindsight, strategic decisions by IS to advance militarily into the KRI-controlled territories and strategic decisions by the KRI to defend its territories preceded the battle. This chapter explains the strategic decision-making by answering the question how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI regarding the battle for the KRI in 2014?

The attack on the KRI – for IS a war of choice and a remarkable choice, given its ongoing conflict with the Iraqi state – had a huge impact and academic attention focused primarily on the consequences of the attack, notably the formalization of the international anti-IS coalition<sup>1413</sup>, instead of the attack itself. For the KRI, forced into a war of necessity, the attack ‘represented the gravest security threat the KRI had faced.’<sup>1414</sup> Yet, Sadoon observed in 2023 that ‘[t]he number of academic works focusing specifically on the KRI as a *de facto* entity during the ISIS onslaught [...] is still very limited.’<sup>1415</sup> This chapter contributes to understanding the under-researched strategic decision-making with respect to a crucial phase in the conflict between IS and the KRI.

Applying four different paradigms, the rational actor paradigm – considering goals, perceived strategic threats and opportunities, alternative options, and cost-benefit calculations – expects IS’ decision to attack and the KRI’s decision to defend to be the result of cost-benefit calculations. The organizational behavior paradigm expects the strategic decisions to be the outcome of internal bureaucratic struggles, guided by different SOPs or doctrines. The governmental politics paradigm expects strategic decisions to be the result of key leaders’

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1413 For example: Watson, “The conflict with ISIS.”

1414 Sadoon, “The Islamic State and the independence referendum,” 8.

1415 *Ibid.*, 3. Italics in original.

political powerplay. Combining elements of the other paradigms, complexity theory expects the strategic decisions to be time-, space-, and context-specific, occurring through multi-level and multi-directional processes.

The first paragraph sketches the situation before and during the event, that is, IS attacking the KRI and the KRI defending its territories in August 2014. The subsequent paragraphs each apply the different paradigms to the strategic decision-making.

## 6.1 Setting

IS attacked the KRI on August 1, 2014. The origins of the attack traced back to June 2014, when IS – then ISIS – and the KRI took over northern Iraq from the Iraqi state. Hostilities increased between IS and the KRI along their approximately 1,050-kilometer-long shared border, which divided northern Iraq between the two ANSAs.<sup>1416</sup>

By late June 2014, ISIS had set up governing structures<sup>1417</sup>, had adopted the name IS<sup>1418</sup>, and had proclaimed a caliphate: '[t]he decision of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to declare an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria in June 2014 is as much a statement of the confidence of the leadership of ISIS as it is the next perceived step by violent Islamic extremists to remake the political and social landscape of the region.'<sup>1419</sup>

The Iraqi state proved unable to push back or contain IS, which undermined the re-elected Iraqi prime-minister Maliki's position. Maliki's anti-Sunni rhetoric and behavior caused Sunni members of parliament to leave Baghdad, which delayed appointing a speaker of parliament. Neither was the Iraqi parliament able to appoint a new Iraqi president to succeed the diseased Talabani. The KRI's announcement of an independence referendum on July 3 fueled expectations that Talabani's successor would not to be Kurdish.<sup>1420</sup> On July 9, Maliki accused the KRI of harboring Islamist militants, causing Kurdish politicians to leave Baghdad too.<sup>1421</sup> The next day, the Iraqi state cancelled all cargo flights to the Erbil and Suleimaniyah airports. The accusation and the sanctions reflected the Iraqi state's 'annoyance with what it

1416 Gerges, *ISIS*, 2; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,336; Wing, "Costs of Iraq's Kurds moving into the disputed territories." Also see: "Northern Iraq offensive (August 2014)," *Wikipedia*; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 28. The battle for the KRI is sometimes labeled the Northern Iraq offensive, which is also used for ISIS' advances in June 2014, elaborated on in chapter 5.

1417 Caris, "How does ISIS maintain control of large urban areas?"

1418 "From hijrah to khilafa," 40; "Khilafah declared," 7; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.

1419 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 359.

1420 "Government formation"; "Iraqi PM's insistence." On July 15, Sunni Salim al-Jabouri was appointed as the new speaker of parliament. On July 24, Kurdish PUK-politician Fuad Masum was elected as the president of Iraq.

1421 "Offensive manoeuvres."

sees as the Kurds' exploitation of the security crisis [...] to simultaneously move into disputed Arab-Kurd territories and accelerate calls for independence.<sup>1422</sup>

While the KRI externally struggled with the Iraqi state over oil prices and revenues, internally it struggled with fragmentation. Despite the KDP and the PUK, contrary to their historical rivalries<sup>1423</sup>, ostensibly had operated united when filling the power vacuum in northern Iraq in June 2014, '[i]n late July of 2014, [...] the Kurdish parliament instructed the KRG to unify all the *Peshmerga* forces in six months – that initiative remains unenacted.'<sup>1424</sup> Additionally, the KRI struggled with the influx of refugees and IDPs<sup>1425</sup>, fearing destabilization of the ethnic balance in the KRI.<sup>1426</sup>

Tensions between IS and the KRI increased. After IS attacked, analysts Jessica Lewis *et al.* remarked that 'ISIS has been setting an offensive against the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces in Sinjar and Mosul Dam areas [...] since June 11, 2014'<sup>1427</sup>, suggesting that ISIS had aimed for the KRI, immediately after seizing Mosul. Before August 2014, reports occasionally mentioned clashes between IS and the KRI.<sup>1428</sup> IS reported a battle with *peshmerga* over a medical industrial facility and its surrounding areas, north of Mosul on June 23, 2014.<sup>1429</sup> For July 2014, IS further reported advances in: 'the northWestern [sic] regions of *Wilāyat* [authority] Nīnawā (Sinjār, Zimmār, Rabī'ah, and Wānah). These areas were mostly occupied by the *Peshmerga*, who fled upon hearing of the Islamic State's approach.'<sup>1430</sup>

Analysts expected IS to attack *peshmerga* in the Arab-Kurd disputed territories, but not to open a second front against the KRI<sup>1431</sup>, as IS' main interest seemed Baghdad.<sup>1432</sup> Yet, ISIS had conducted attacks in the KRI in 2013-2014, indicating 'the potential and intention to destabilize the Kurdish region.'<sup>1433</sup> Furthermore, Iraqi-Kurdish ISIS leader Abu Harith al-

1422 "KRG consolidation."

1423 For example: Torelli, "Kurdistan and the Middle East," 18-43.

1424 Hadad & Wallace, "The Iraqi Kurdish security apparatus." Italics added.

1425 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 27-8.

1426 Mahmoud, "Iraqi Kurds worry about ethnic balance."

1427 Jessica Lewis *et al.*, "Iraq Situation Report. August 3, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 3, 2014. Italics added.

1428 Ahmed Ali *et al.*, "Iraq Situation Report. July 22, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, July 22, 2014; Pickerell *et al.*, "Iraq situation report. June 17, 2014"; Pollack, "Iraq." Also see: Diaa Hadid, "Iraqi Kurds dig frontier around disputed areas," *The Times of Israel*, July 2, 2014.

1429 "Islamic State news," *Dabiq* 2, 40.

1430 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 3 (1435H|2014), 18. Italics added.

1431 "Kurds' ability to hold Kirkuk." Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 217-8; "Islamic State's advance towards Kurdish-Iraqi border heightens risk of isolated attacks within Kurdistan Region," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, August 4, 2014.

1432 For example: "Gaining ground"; "Increasing involvement or regional players." Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 93.

1433 Gunes, "The IS Factor," 83. Also see: "Sectarian violence. Kurdistan struggles with militancy," *Jane's Islamic Affairs*, January 22, 2014; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

Kurdi in a November 2013 video threatened to ‘return to Kurdistan and we [ISIS] will kill all of the members of the KDP, PUK and security forces.’<sup>1434</sup> The attacks and the video indicated ISIS’ interest in the KRI. Nevertheless, Baghdadi had stated that ‘Baghdad is the heart of the battle of Sunni people’<sup>1435</sup>, suggesting that IS’ main target was the Iraqi capital.

The clashes of July served as a prequel for events on August 1, 2014. IS attacked the KRI and the border became a frontline.<sup>1436</sup> The attack surprised the KRI and international analysts alike.<sup>1437</sup> IS moved towards the KRI in two directions from Mosul on August 3: westwards towards Sinjar and eastwards towards Makhmour.<sup>1438</sup> The *peshmerga* left Sinjar without a fight, out of fear for encirclement<sup>1439</sup>, or being outgunned.<sup>1440</sup> On August 4, reports appeared that Syrian Kurdish militias supported Iraqi Kurds in the area of Sinjar.<sup>1441</sup> Forces of the PKK and the PYD created a corridor, allowing the Yazidi inhabitants to escape from Sinjar.<sup>1442</sup> Coordination between the PKK and the PYD on the one hand and the KDP *peshmerga* – located in the western part of the KRI – on the other, hardly took place and was merely based on having the same interests, lacking a structural character.<sup>1443</sup> Nevertheless, Kurdish forces conducted a counter-offensive against IS in vicinity of Mosul on August 5, reportedly in close coordination with the ISF.<sup>1444</sup> The next day, media suggested that the KRI’s capital Erbil was in danger.<sup>1445</sup> On August 7, the KRI’s forces focused on defending Erbil, securing the Mosul Dam, and protecting the Sinjar-pocket. Despite the efforts to create an escape, many Yazidis remained trapped in Sinjar, leading to a humanitarian catastrophe<sup>1446</sup>, including IS enslaving Yazidis there.<sup>1447</sup> As IS control over contested areas increased, including the Mosul Dam, fears

1434 Abu Harith al-Kurdi, cited in “Sectarian violence.”

1435 Baghdadi, “Allah will not allow.” Also see: Barzani, “The Peshmerga,” 24-5. “Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul,” 4.

1436 Cheterian, “Turkey in 2017,” 142.

1437 Dexter Filkins, “The fight of their lives,” *The New Yorker*, September 22, 2014. Cf. Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,329, 1,337. Also see: Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan?” 17.

1438 “Arming Iraq’s Kurds,” 2.

1439 Cheterian, “Turkey in 2017,” 142.

1440 “Islamic State’s advance.”

1441 Bengio, “The Islamic State,” 3; Gunes, “The IS Factor,” 85; “Iraq situation report. August 4, 2014,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 4, 2014.

1442 Bengio, “The Islamic State,” 3; Cheterian, “Turkey in 2017,” 142; Isabel Coles, “Kurds’ battle for Kobani unites a people divided by borders,” *Reuters*, October 31, 2014.

1443 Local journalist, informal conversation by Wietse van den Berge, Ainkawa, September 14, 2014. Information taken from notes of the author, as no audio or video equipment was available during the conversation.

1444 “Kurdish offensive unlikely to weaken Islamic State significantly but increases likelihood of US military aid,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, August 7, 2014; Lauren Squires, *et al.*, “Iraq situation report. August 5, 2014,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 5, 2014.

1445 Jessica Lewis *et al.*, “Iraq situation report. August 6, 2014,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 6, 2014. Also see: “Arming Iraq’s Kurds,” 3, 3n13; Barzani, “Protecting Kurdistan,” 26.

1446 Valeria Cetorelli *et al.*, “ISIS’ Yazidi genocide. Demographic evidence of the killings and kidnappings,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 8, 2017; Eyal & Quintana. “Editor’s notes,” v; Lauren Squires *et al.*, “Iraq situation report. August 7, 2014,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 7, 2014. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 109.

1447 “The revival of slavery before the hour,” *Dabiq* 4 (1435|2014), 15. Also see: “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 6, 31n1.

increased of an attack on Erbil. That day, American fighter planes conducted the first bombing sorties against IS.<sup>1448</sup> Air support for the KRI by ISF fighter planes illustrated a response against IS coordinated between the KRI and the Iraqi state.<sup>1449</sup> With the help of these airstrikes, the KRI was able to counter IS attacks and push back IS.<sup>1450</sup> Heavy clashes between IS and a combination of *peshmerga* and PKK forces were reported near Makhmour on August 8.<sup>1451</sup> On August 16, *peshmerga* and the ISF, supported by coalition airstrikes, attacked IS positions near the Mosul dam. The next day, reports appeared that *peshmerga* controlled the dam, as well as villages just east of Mosul.<sup>1452</sup>

IS initially conducted large-scale attacks on the KRI. Later, IS conducted small-scale attacks that focused on the KRI's security organizations, in particular *peshmerga* and *asayesh*.<sup>1453</sup> Frequent IS attacks on KRI-positions kept occurring nevertheless, in particular near Kirkuk<sup>1454</sup>, occasionally in Erbil.<sup>1455</sup> Apart from the attacks, IS indirectly challenged the KRI as refugees from Syria and IDPs from Anbar and Nineveh pressured the KRI's economy and society.<sup>1456</sup> The situation also provided IS opportunities to infiltrate the KRI as refugees or IDP's.<sup>1457</sup>

On Iraq's national political level, Maliki resigned as the prime-minister on August 14, 2014, as he proved unable to bring solutions to Iraq's crisis. Shia Haider al-Abadi succeeded Maliki. Abadi had to decide whether to allow further reinforcements of the KRI's *peshmerga*, which would benefit the conflict against IS, but would probably also increase the call for independence within the KRI.<sup>1458</sup> During August, legal and political issues arose over the KRI selling crude oil, independent of Iraqi authorities, which would have huge political consequences in offering possibilities for the KRI to export oil and maintain its own economy.<sup>1459</sup>

1448 "Foreword," *Dabiq* 3, 3; Timothy Schultz, "Remote warfare. A new architecture of air power," in *Air power in the age of primacy. Air power since the Cold War*, Phil Haun et al. (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 49; Lauren Squires et al., "Control of terrain in Iraq. August 8, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 8, 2014; "US airstrikes in Iraq likely to prevent Islamic State militants' advance into Kurdistan Region or Baghdad," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, August 8, 2014; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 24-5.

1449 Lauren Squires et al., "Iraq situation report. August 9, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 9, 2014; Jessica Lewis et al., "Control of terrain in Iraq. August 10, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 10, 2014.

1450 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,329-30; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 81.

1451 Squires et al., "Control of terrain in Iraq. August 8, 2014."

1452 Lauren Squires et al., "Iraq situation report. August 16-17, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 17, 2014.

1453 *Asayesh* officers, interview by Wietse van den Berge, Suleimaniyah, April 7, 2015. Information taken from notes of the author, as no audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview.

1454 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 4, 25.

1455 Erin McClam & Richard Engel, "Erbil blast. Car bomb explodes outside U.S. consulate in Iraq, official says," *NBC*, April 17, 2015.

1456 Kulaksiz et al., "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 1-2; Mahmoud, "Iraqi Kurds worry"; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

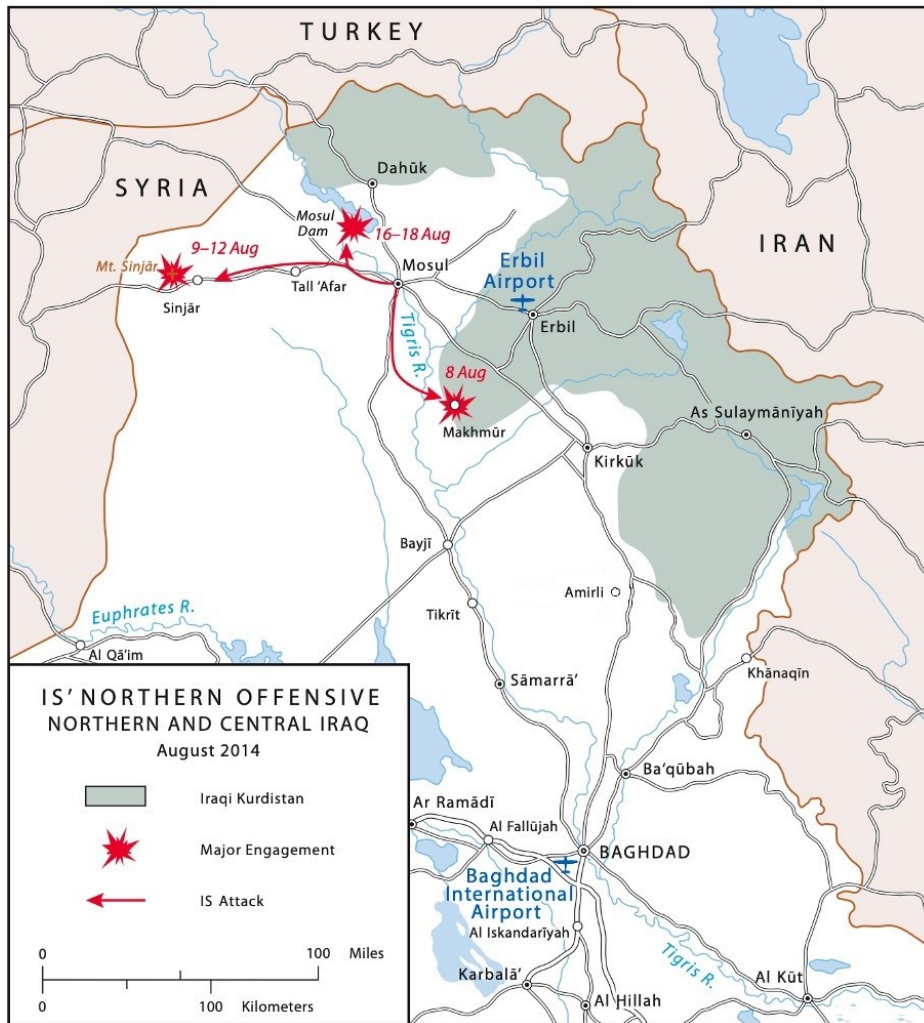
1457 UN security official, informal conversation by Wietse van den Berge, Erbil, November 13, 2014.

1458 "Iraqi government challenges arms shipments to Kurdish forces, complicating foreign military intervention against Islamic State," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, August 18, 2014. Also see: Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 138-9.

1459 "Uncertainty over legal repercussions of purchasing Kurdish oil likely to remain despite court ruling, inhibiting

IS had taken the risky endeavor to attack the KRI in August 2014, thus, creating an additional front, while it was already battling the ISF. The KRI decided to defend its territory against the IS incursion. The remainder of this chapter explores the strategic decision-making of IS to attack and of the KRI to defend. Figure 6.1 indicates IS' main lines of attack in the KRI in August 2014.

**Figure 6.1:** IS' main lines of attack in northern Iraq in August 2014.<sup>1460</sup> The KRI-controlled territory was in fact larger than indicated, including Kirkuk and areas near Mosul since June 2014.



oil sales," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, August 27, 2014.  
 1460 Based on: Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 28.

## 6.2 Rational actor paradigm<sup>1461</sup>

The next three sections apply the rational actor paradigm to IS and the KRI, when IS took the strategic decision to advance into the KRI in August 2014 and the KRI decided to defend. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: goals, perceived strategic opportunities and threats, alternative options, and consecutive cost-benefit calculations.

### 6.2.1 IS

ISIS achieved its primary goal of ‘the caliphate’s reestablishment’<sup>1462</sup> when it controlled a substantial and viable territory<sup>1463</sup> – that is, Mosul and its surroundings – and proclaimed the caliphate.<sup>1464</sup> Yet, IS retained the motto *dawlat al-islam bakiyya wa tattamaddad*<sup>1465</sup>, indicating that re-establishing the caliphate was not enough. IS wished to expand geographically and demographically. Thus, IS continued to conquer Sunni-inhabited territories. Furthermore, two days after re-establishing the caliphate, Baghdadi explained IS’ view that Sunni Muslims globally were under threat and IS aimed to protect them. Baghdadi argued that to provide protection, IS was allowed to use violence against potential threats. At the same time, Baghdadi requested Sunni Muslims around the world to help expand the caliphate by going there.<sup>1466</sup>

The KRI provided IS a nearby opportunity to expand the caliphate geographically and demographically.<sup>1467</sup> IS was aware that ‘Kurdistan is a region that is mostly home to a Sunni Kurdish population.’<sup>1468</sup> ISIS bomb attacks in the KRI in 2013-2014 and the November 2013 video statement by Kurdi were aimed against the KRI’s political parties and security organizations<sup>1469</sup>, later continued by IS:

1461 Parts of paragraph 6.2 appeared as: Berge, “Armed non-state actors and strategic decision-making,” 279-99.

1462 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 28, 233; Bahney & Johnston, “Who runs the Islamic State group?”

1463 Wood, “What ISIS really wants,” 81-6.

1464 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, untitled speech, July 4, 2014, transl. INSITE Blog on Terrorism and Extremism, in “The first appearance of the caliph,” Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, July 12, 2014. Cf. “From hijrah to khilafa,” 40; “Khilafah declared,” 7; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.

1465 Kyle Orton, “The announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, April 2, 2014, n7. Cf. Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 123; “Remaining and expanding,” 32-3.

1466 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “A message to the mujahideen and the Muslim umma in the month of Ramadan,” audio speech, July 1, 2014, transl. unknown, in “The leader of the Islamic State explains the caliphate’s vision,” Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, July 2, 2014; “Khilafah declared,” 7; Muhājir, “Come to a just word”; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.

1467 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens & Ranj Alaaldin. “The Kurds of ISIS. Why some join the terrorist group,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 8, 2016.

1468 “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 2, 13. Also see: Watson, “The conflict with ISIS,” 9.

1469 Gunes, “The IS Factor,” 83; “Sectarian violence”; Shapland, “Iraqi Kurds’ aim of statehood stays out of reach”; Speri, “Not all Kurds”

[o]ur war with Kurds is a religious war. [...] We do not fight Kurds because they are Kurds. Rather we fight the disbelievers amongst them, the allies of the crusaders and jews [sic] in their war against the Muslims. As for the Muslim Kurds, then they are our people and brothers wherever they may be. We spill our blood to save their blood. The Muslim Kurds in the ranks of the Islamic State are many. They are the toughest of fighters against the disbelievers amongst their people.<sup>1470</sup>

IS possibly counted on 'a history of Kurdish Islamist mobilisation [in Iraq].'<sup>1471</sup> IS provided a contemporary example in a *Dabiq* article on Kurdish-originating jihadi-salafist organization AaI, which pledged *bay'ah* to IS on July 26, 2014<sup>1472</sup>, despite earlier but recent conflicts between AaI and IS.<sup>1473</sup> Another *Dabiq* article claimed that over thirty Syrian-Kurdish villages near Aleppo pledged *bay'ah* to IS.<sup>1474</sup> Analysts estimated the actual number of Kurds that had joined IS by 2014-2015 between 240 and 500<sup>1475</sup>, depending on the definitions used. One analyst concluded that 'there appears to be little popular sympathy for the Islamic State in the Kurdistan Region'<sup>1476</sup>, based on the relatively small number of Kurds who had joined IS, and which declined after August 2014. Its unpopularity might explain why, on July 25, 2014, IS responded to claims that it had expelled Kurds from the Nineveh province. IS claimed it did not, as long as the Kurds were Sunni Muslims.<sup>1477</sup>

For IS, the Kurdish population was an opportunity and a threat alike. Some analysts argued that IS' *Ba'ath*-ist roots caused anti-Kurdish sentiments among IS' ranks, fueled by the KRI's support for the anti-*Ba'ath* coalition since 2003 and the Kurds' secular image.<sup>1478</sup> While the analysis seems awkward, given *Ba'ath*'s secular origins, IS' predecessors were indeed aware of Kurdish internal fragmentation and alleged suppressing of religious Kurds.<sup>1479</sup>

1470 Adnani, cited in "Indeed your lord is ever watchful," *Dabiq* 4 (1435H|2014), 9; Adnani, cited in "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 12; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 158. Also see: "Denial of expelling Kurds."

1471 Gunes, "The IS Factor," 74. Also see: Meleagrou-Hitchens & Alaaldin, "The Kurds of ISIS"; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 12.

1472 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 4, 21-2.

1473 Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar al Islam claims attacks against Iraqi military, police," *Long War Journal*, June 20, 2014. Also see: Thomas Joscelyn, "The Islamic State's curious cover story," *Long War Journal*, January 5, 2015.

1474 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 12.

1475 KRG official, interview by Wietse van den Berge, Suleimaniyah, April 8, 2015. Information taken from notes of the author, as no audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview. Also see: "250 Kurdish militants within Daesh ranks killed. Official," *Press TV*, October 1, 2015; Wietse van den Berge, "Countering violent extremism in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, May 10, 2016; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 104; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Alaaldin, "The Kurds of ISIS"; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 17; "Sectarian violence"; Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1476 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1477 "Denial of expelling Kurds."

1478 Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 20.

1479 Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Cf. Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37-54.

Geographically, proximity might be the reason that IS considered the KRI as a significant threat.<sup>1480</sup> Yet, IS may have seen the Kurdish mountains as potential IS strongholds, like they had historically been for the Kurds themselves.<sup>1481</sup> Zarqawi had complained about the terrain in Iraq for not having supportive geography or strategic depth.<sup>1482</sup> However, the Kurds' reputation with respect to the mountains and the ISF background of many IS leaders, thus with experience in fighting Kurds in the mountains, might have made IS reluctant of entering the Kurdish mountains.<sup>1483</sup>

IS potentially perceived Kurdish expansionism as a threat. The KRI's rejection of IS' presence in Syrian-Kurdish territory had already troubled IS.<sup>1484</sup> Just before the Iraqi parliamentary elections in April 2014, Nineveh governor Usama al-Nujaifi had announced an agreement with the KRI over crude oil exports from an oil field 35 kilometers east of Mosul, until then considered disputed territory.<sup>1485</sup> The agreement indicated the KRI's interest – and involvement – in Mosul. After capturing Mosul, IS was cautious of 'any possible *peshmerga* and PKK advances on both the Iraqi and Syrian "Kurdistan" fronts.'<sup>1486</sup> In July 2014, IS claimed '[t]here are presently a number of fronts in the Islamic State being defended against the Kurdish communists in both Iraq and Shām. The month of Ramadān [July 2014] saw numerous operations taking place against the PKK and their Iraqi counterparts, the *Peshmerga*.'<sup>1487</sup> Important in the quote above is the use of the word defended, emphasizing that IS deemed it necessary to protect the caliphate against Kurdish aggression, both in Iraq and Syria. Reports of Nujaifi requesting support of Kurdish officials and the KRI's maintaining relationships with local Arab tribal leaders<sup>1488</sup>, possibly fueled IS' fears.

Perhaps IS expected the Kurds to advance even further into IS-held territories.<sup>1489</sup> In June 2014, the KRI had become actively involved in Iraq's internal armed conflict, by entering and taking over the disputed territories. Since then, the KRI controlled more than half of the Nineveh province surrounding Mosul and about 70 percent of the oil-rich Kirkuk area<sup>1490</sup>, where most clashes between IS and the KRI occurred.<sup>1491</sup> The KRI also controlled Sinjar, which

1480 Chigudu, "Sectarianism and the ideology of the Islamic State," 5,153.

1481 Cf. Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,340-1n23.

1482 Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Cf. Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 39-40; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37-54.

1483 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,340-1n23.

1484 "Sectarian violence."

1485 "Deteriorating security will jeopardise growing co-operation between Iraq's Nineveh province and the Kurdistan government over coming year," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, April 22, 2014.

1486 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 3. Italics added.

1487 Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 2, 13. Italics added.

1488 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,340-1n23.

1489 *Ibid.*, 1,340.

1490 Nawzad Mahmoud, "Peshmerga control all Kurdish territories in Iraq," *Rûdaw*, June 17, 2014.

1491 Hawramy, "Kurdish peshmerga seize a chaotic victory in Kirkuk"; "Iraqi Kurdish regional government's territorial

was strategically located along the Iraqi-Syrian border, thus not only important for collecting revenue, but also for IS' supply lines between the Iraqi and Syrian battlefields.<sup>1492</sup>

Perhaps even more troublesome for IS, was the KRI's partnership with Western countries, most notably the United States.<sup>1493</sup> On several occasions, IS referred to American involvement in and support of the KRI<sup>1494</sup>: 'until they [the Americans] get their act together the *Peshmerga* can bear the brunt of the dying with the odd resupply from the air and some Special Forces help on the ground.'<sup>1495</sup> Western – that is, American – support enabled the KRI to maintain its position in northern Iraq and, thus, to threaten IS. Yet, by late July, Masrour Barzani acknowledged the *peshmerga's* vulnerability. Since filling the vacuum in June, Kurdish security forces were overstretched, controlling 40 percent more territory.<sup>1496</sup> When IS attacked the KRI – potentially to expose the weakness of the *peshmerga*, until then regarded the only ground force potentially capable of stopping IS<sup>1497</sup> –, the *peshmerga* initially could not withhold IS, lacking heavy weaponry and air support. Only when the American-led international coalition provided air support<sup>1498</sup>, were the *peshmerga* able to push back IS.

The political instability within Iraq and within the KRI provided opportunities for IS. The Iraqi parliament proved unable in forming an executive power, and tensions remained between the Iraqi state and the KRI.<sup>1499</sup> Societal unrest within the KRI followed after the KRI could no longer pay official's salaries – approximately 70 percent of its budget – due to the Iraqi state withholding oil revenues since December 2013.<sup>1500</sup> The KDP and the PUK paid their party-affiliated *peshmerga* themselves, thus contributing to the KRI's disunity.<sup>1501</sup>

While the KRI's economic growth had been at least 7 percent since 2005<sup>1502</sup>, the 2014 economic and societal situation was fragile.<sup>1503</sup> Despite its weak economy at the time, the KRI was an attractive region to capture for IS. In general, IS was keen to capture resources during combat,

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control set to boost oil export autonomy"; "Iraqi Kurds battle Sunni fighters in Kirkuk"; "Iraqi Kurds 'fully control Kirkuk' as army flees"; Morris *et al.*, "The future of Kirkuk," 14; Pickerell *et al.*, "Iraq situation report. June 17, 2014." Also see: "Kurds' ability to hold Kirkuk."

1492 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 128-9.

1493 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 185.

1494 "Foreword," *Dabiq* 3, 3; "The revival of slavery," 14.

1495 Cantlie, "If I were the US president today..." 39. Italics added.

1496 "Under attack."

1497 David Gardner, "ISIS"; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 105; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,337.

1498 Charles Lister, "A long way from success. Assessing the war on the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015), 3-13; Pollack, "Iraq."

1499 "Iraqi PM's insistence on running for third term."

1500 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1501 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 43.

1502 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1503 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 1-2.

in particular weaponry and ammunition, as long as it did not replace *jihad* and become a goal in itself.<sup>1504</sup> The KRI was a potential source for oil.<sup>1505</sup> Apart from potential new recruits, IS considered newly conquered areas for paying taxes<sup>1506</sup>, denying opponents those same financial resources.

Finally, IS may have considered timing as an opportunity, using its battlefield momentum after capturing Mosul. This seems in line with the analysis that IS used strategic surprise. In August 2014, many analysts expected IS to advance on Baghdad. Instead, IS attacked the relatively unprepared KRI<sup>1507</sup>, as the KRI seemed more concerned about the Iraqi state.<sup>1508</sup>

Considering the opportunities and threats, IS in essence could chose to hold, to attack or to delegate. The strategic costs to hold included a delay in expanding the caliphate.<sup>1509</sup> Then, IS remained, but – at least temporarily – would not expand. Furthermore, holding stalled IS’ battlefield momentum. To hold allowed the KRI an opportunity to reinforce<sup>1510</sup>, to enter alliances with Arab tribes<sup>1511</sup>, and Western allies<sup>1512</sup>, potentially preparing for invading IS territory.<sup>1513</sup> As such, IS would jeopardize the caliphate. To hold protected IS from overreach and enabled IS to create solid defensive positions.<sup>1514</sup> IS could use the lull in fighting to establish itself in the region as a potentially legitimate actor<sup>1515</sup> – perhaps enter allegiances<sup>1516</sup> –, seeking acceptance as an actual state.<sup>1517</sup>

To attack risked overreach<sup>1518</sup>, with conquests potentially turning into quagmires by attritional warfare.<sup>1519</sup> By attacking, IS could demographically and territorially expand the caliphate.<sup>1520</sup> IS’ jihadi-salafist ideology made fighting not only a means to fight – and conquer – infidels

1504 Al-Hanbalī, “My provision,” 10-3.

1505 “Kurds’ ability to hold Kirkuk”; “Sectarian violence.”

1506 “Islamic State news,” *Dabiq* 2, 36.

1507 Pollack, “Iraq.”

1508 “Arming Iraq’s Kurds,” 25-6; Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,334.

1509 “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 2, 12-13. Cf. Black, *The history of Islamic political thought*, 12; Lewis, *The crisis of Islam*, 29-38; Moussalli, “Wahhabism, salafism and Islamism,” 17-8.

1510 Cf. Kulaksiz *et al.*, “Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” 1-2; Mahmoud, “Peshmerga control.”

1511 Cf. Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,340-1n23.

1512 Cf. “Foreword,” *Dabiq* 3, 3; “The revival of slavery,” 14.

1513 Cf. Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,340.

1514 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 293-4. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 234; “The looming assault on Mosul.”

1515 Walt, “What should we do.” Cf. Coggins, “Rebel diplomacy,” 98.

1516 Cf. Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 20.

1517 Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, 11; “Convention on rights and duties of states”; Freedman, *The future of war*, 28.

1518 Gerges, *ISIS*, 43; Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 341.

1519 Cf. Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,340-1n23.

1520 “Indeed your lord is ever watchful,” 9; “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 1, 12; “Khilafah declared,” 11; “Remaining and expanding,” 32-3. Cf. Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 123.

and gain support<sup>1521</sup>, but an end in itself.<sup>1522</sup> To attack allowed IS to gain resources as war spoils<sup>1523</sup>, benefitting from its battlefield momentum. The large influx of refugees and IDP's that the KRI's experienced<sup>1524</sup> provided relatively easy opportunities for IS to infiltrate sleeper cells into the KRI, to prepare a surprise attack on the KRI.<sup>1525</sup> IS then could gain resources – in particular oil, but mountainous hide-outs too – by controlling Kurdish areas.<sup>1526</sup> IS might have hoped for more support among the Kurdish population, based on the Kurdish IS-members<sup>1527</sup>, that many Kurds were Sunnis, and the shared rival of the Shia-dominated Iraqi state. IS could benefit from overwhelming a potential rival in a surprise attack, using momentum and the KRI's focus on the Iraqi state.<sup>1528</sup>

To delegate the attack on the KRI to a proxy, left IS with some of the benefits of the hold and attack options, without much of the costs. IS did not have the best experiences with proxies, however. Early 2014, JaN not only pledged allegiance to *al-Qaeda*, becoming a rival in Syria<sup>1529</sup>, but also *al-Qaeda* in Kurdistan left IS' ranks.<sup>1530</sup> Instead, IS preferred incorporating groups that pledged *bay'ah*, such as AaI, though reluctantly.

IS' preferred option was to attack the KRI. To hold or to delegate would not lead to achieving IS' goal of expanding its caliphate. Equally important was IS' emphasis on its jihadi-salafist ideology, which argued that fighting is necessary in order to achieve goals.<sup>1531</sup> Nevertheless, earlier analyses on IS' strategic decision-making indicated that IS was reluctant in using its resources under threat<sup>1532</sup>, and acted rather pragmatically to ensure its own survival.<sup>1533</sup> IS' eventual strategic decision to attack the KRI and advance into the KRI-controlled territory functioned as a tactical offense within an allegedly defensive strategy to protect the caliphate from potential Kurdish expansionism.

1521 "The return of khilafah," 37.

1522 "Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism," 20-4.

1523 Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 21-4; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers," 19-20, 40n85.

1524 "Iraqi Kurdistan"; Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 1-2; Mahmoud, "Iraqi Kurds"; UN security official.

1525 Pollack, "Iraq"; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,334. Cf. Baghdadi, untitled speech, January 19, 2014.

1526 "Senior Kurdistan official."

1527 "The failed crusade," 9; "Remaining and expanding, 12.

1528 Pollack, "Iraq," 2; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,334.

1529 Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 13-4.

1530 Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda in Kurdistan' breaks ranks with ISIS over Syria," *Long War Journal*, May 1, 2014. Cf. Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 238-9.

1531 "Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism," 20-4.

1532 "The looming assault on Mosul."

1533 Noyes, "Pragmatic takfir." Cf. Naji, *The management of savagery*, 81.

### 6.2.2 The KRI

The KRI's autonomy undertone in its strategic communications since 2003 became semi-official on July 3, 2014, when the KRI initiated preparations for an independence referendum. This move seemed a reaction to the failing policy of the Iraqi state to deal with IS effectively<sup>1534</sup>, as well as ongoing disputes with the Iraqi state over oil revenues and territories.<sup>1535</sup> For an independence referendum to take place, the KRI needed to secure a viable territory. A July 2014 statement by the KRI's minister of Foreign Relations, Falah Bakir, and the advisor for the KRI's president, Fuad Hussein, explicitly stated that 'the first goal [of the KRI] is to defend our border. [...] The second goal is to protect the Kurdistan population.'<sup>1536</sup> The wording our border implicitly referred to the KRI as an independent state. Furthermore, protecting the Kurdistan population indicated regional aspirations, referring to Kurds beyond the KRI, spurred by Iraq's impotence to contain IS.<sup>1537</sup> The *peshmerga's* task was to 'prevent ISIS from advancing into Kurdish territory, to break up and disrupt their subversive strategies, to wear out their ability to carry out large scale military actions, and to slowly diminish and eradicate their power.'<sup>1538</sup> As IS had attacked on August 1, 2014, from then on, only disrupting IS' strategies and undermining IS' fighting capabilities remained.

Since August 1, 2014, IS posed an existential threat towards the KRI.<sup>1539</sup> IS attacked Kurdish territories, executed captured Kurds, and IS propaganda turned anti-Kurdish.<sup>1540</sup> Indirect threats included societal disruption within the KRI, either by the Kurds who joined the ranks of IS<sup>1541</sup>, or the refugees and IDPs within the KRI. The KRI struggled with funding and training the *peshmerga*, which had little experience in fighting in the flat desert areas, in which IS attacked.<sup>1542</sup>

Confronting IS could increase the foreign support for the KRI and the *peshmerga* in particular. Especially Western donors regarded the *peshmerga* as a vanguard to counter IS together with coalition air support.<sup>1543</sup> The KRI interpreted foreign support as international recognition of the KRI as a de facto independent entity. At least it provided the *peshmerga* an opportunity

1534 Caryl, "The world's next country."

1535 "KRG blocks dam over budget dispute with Iraq, but agreement remains likely," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, March 3, 2014; "KRG's fiscal dependency."

1536 Hussein & Bakir, "Iraq's crisis and the KRG."

1537 Caryl, "The world's next country."

1538 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 27.

1539 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,338.

1540 "From hijrah to khilafa," 37; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 2, 12-3; Wood, "What ISIS really wants," 83. Also see: "Indeed your lord is ever watchful," 9; "Reflections on the final crusade," 41-2.

1541 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 12; KRG official. Also see: "250 Kurdish militants"; Berge, "Countering violent extremism"; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 104; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 17; "Sectarian violence"; Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1542 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 28-9; "Iraqi Kurdistan"; UN security official.

1543 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 30; "Confidence in the future," *Invest in Group*.

of no longer being weakened by sanctions imposed by the Iraqi state.<sup>1544</sup> Locally, the PKK and the PYD were allies, supporting the KRI in Sinjar. However, the PKK and the PYD presence there was limited to approximately only tens of fighters.<sup>1545</sup>

Despite IS forcing the KRI into a war of necessity, the KRI could still chose to hold, to attack, or to delegate, which would translate here into surrender, counter-attack, or proxy-warfare, respectively. To hold delayed the actualization of an autonomous KRI. The KRI then lost areas it regarded as historically Kurdish. The KRI then left the tactical initiative with IS, which gave the KRI no other options than to react to IS' future moves. Even if the *peshmerga* withheld the initial attacks, IS' next attack could be anywhere along the frontline. Such a defensive posture costs great efforts and still ran the risk that many Kurds came under IS repressive control.<sup>1546</sup> IS became relatively stronger and the KRI relatively weaker. To hold might give the impression to regional and international actors that the KRI was weak, perhaps too weak to become autonomous, let alone be independent. Still, it might lead to sympathy from regional and international actors as the KRI was no aggressor – or at least not any more, as in June 2014. The KRI saved essential resources, compared to the attack-option. As such, there would not be an additional burden to the KRI's already hammered economic situation, while being no threat to its most important regional economic partner, Turkey.<sup>1547</sup>

To attack cost the KRI many resources, not only due to the attack itself, but also for controlling territory with potentially hostile inhabitants.<sup>1548</sup> To attack also created benefits. The KRI relied on the reputation of the *peshmerga* as fierce fighters to boost the KRI's own morale and lower that of rivals. The will to fight indicated that the Kurds were ready for independence<sup>1549</sup>, fighting for what the KRI perceived as Kurdish lands.<sup>1550</sup> Attacking acknowledged that the KRI had forces willing, and possibly capable, to fight IS.

To delegate implied that the KRI acted by proxy. Delegation denied the KRI possible gains, leaving essential resources like oil and gas under proxy control. More important, delegation declined the goal of an autonomous KRI, as the KRI seemed unable or unwilling to act. While regional and international actors might perceive the KRI as non-aggressive, the KRI then depended on proxies for self-defense. The KRI saved resources and the *peshmerga* could recuperate. Potential proxies, such as the PKK and the PYD, did not have sufficient capacities, however.<sup>1551</sup>

1544 "Confidence in the future."

1545 Academic, informal conversation by Wietse van den Berge, Ainkawa, August 20, 2014.

1546 "From hijrah to khilafa," 37.

1547 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 21, 111-3.

1548 *Ibid.*, 111-113.

1549 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,336.

1550 Pollack, "Iraq," 2.

1551 Academic.

The KRI's best choice was to attack, in this case to counter-attack. Foremost, the KRI had to survive. Surrender, or retreat, would endanger the KRI's existence. Proxies powerful enough were not available. This left counter-attacking IS as the only realistic option. Additionally, if successful, the KRI would secure the disputed territories.

### 6.2.3 Reflections

With its focus on strategic goals, the rational actor paradigm in this case found that the strategic dimensions of politics, geography, people, economics and logistics, and military operations explain strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI. Whereas IS aimed to expand to create strategic depth, the KRI intended to defend its territory (geography, military operations), to maintain or to establish an independent political entity, respectively (politics). Therefore, both required sufficient resources (people, economics and logistics). In IS' case, jihadi-salafism guided strategy (strategic theory and doctrine, ideology). The rational actor paradigm's analysis of threats and opportunities, where one actor's threats usually are the other actor's opportunities and vice versa, indicates that IS and the KRI feared the other (adversary, military operations), but IS could benefit from proximity and surprise (friction, chance, and uncertainty) and its battlefield momentum (emergence). Additionally, IS seemed wary of the KRI's Western partners (allies), which had announced an anti-IS coalition (time).

Out of the options offered – that is, to hold, to attack, or to delegate – IS and the KRI preferred the option that most likely achieved the actors' strategic goals in the short term. IS preferred to attack to expand the caliphate and the KRI preferred to counter-attack IS in order to survive as a political entity, a prerequisite to achieving its strategic goal of independence. As such, the rational actor paradigm provides solid explanations for the decisions taken.

Yet, the analysis seems incomplete and some analytical weaknesses emerge within the rational actor paradigm. The costs and benefits that are mentioned for the options typically are not qualified. The paradigm intuitively ranks the arguments.<sup>1552</sup> Still, some arguments are more important than others. Here, the paradigm does not provide guidance, other than the analysts' intuition. In the case above, IS achieving its strategic goal of expanding the caliphate seemed more important than being able to create strong defensive positions. The paradigm simplifies the strategic dimensions by considering them linear, instead of non-linear, thus overlooking how they influence one another, for example the threat that IS perceived by the KRI's allies' announcement of an anti-IS coalition, which was established due to IS' political power. Furthermore, the rational actor paradigm struggles with analytical ambivalence. The

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<sup>1552</sup> Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 25. Also see: Calabretta *et al.*, "The interplay between intuition and rationality," 365-9.

paradigm assumes the research subject is a unitary actor – thus neglecting identity or internal fragmentation. Still, IS as an external enemy potentially strengthened the fragmented KRI by reinforcing Kurdish identity.<sup>1553</sup> Yet, IS as a unitary entity benefitted from disunity within the KRI. Similarly, IS comprised different specialized organizations, sometimes unaware of the overall picture<sup>1554</sup>, and up to 500 Kurds joined the ranks of IS.<sup>1555</sup> Therefore, it seems that the rational actor paradigm overlaps with the organizational behavior paradigm, which considers that other actors comprise multiple organizations.

Overall, the rational actor paradigm is helpful to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI, regarding the battle for the KRI in August 2014. Yet, the findings above suggest analytical discrepancies and overlap with the organizational behavior paradigm. Thus, in this case, the rational actor paradigm is insufficient to fully explain strategic decision-making.

### 6.3 Organizational behavior paradigm

The next three sections view IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS' attack on the KRI in August 2014 from an organizational behavior paradigm-perspective. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: decision-making organizations, SOPs' capabilities and constraints, options, and implementation.

#### 6.3.1 IS

The decision-making organizations within IS on the strategic level were the caliph and the *shura* council, as was the case in June 2014. Yet, on the military strategic level, since June 2014, organizational changes had occurred: '[f]rom one hybrid army in Syria and a guerrilla army in Iraq in 2013, the department [*diwan al-jund*] expanded its force structure to four distinct entities after the conquest of Mosul, each with a different purpose.'<sup>1556</sup> These four entities were: (1) the caliphate army, a conventional force protecting IS' territorial integrity across Iraq and Syria; (2) the Dabiq army, loosely organized foreign fighters, grouped into ethnic/common language-centric units and dispersed among different fronts as 'highly motivated shock troops defending key nodes of the caliphate'<sup>1557</sup>; (3) the *al-Uhra* army, a special operations force for defending Mosul; and, (4) the army of the provinces, which were all forces under control of

1553 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,346. Also see: Hanbali, "My provision," 9.

1554 IS *emir*.

1555 "250 Kurdish militants"; Berge, "Countering violent extremism"; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 104; Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1556 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 8.

1557 *Ibid.*, 8. Also see: Husham al-Hashimi, "ISIS 2020. New structures and leaders in Iraq revealed," *New Lines Institute*, May 19, 2020.

a particular *wali*.<sup>1558</sup> As historian Mason Watson observed, IS' capture of large urban areas during the first months of 2014, forced IS to establish and maintain defensive positions there. Thus, IS formalized its semi-conventional armed forces and 'forfeited its ability to use its most-favored style of warfare [that is, raids] and was forced to switch to one in which its opponents – particularly the Iraqi government and the United States – held many advantages.<sup>1559</sup> Still, like in June, the *diwan al-jund* used specialized units<sup>1560</sup> to conduct simultaneously irregular and semi-conventional warfare<sup>1561</sup> in small-scale and large-scale attacks.

For the attack on the KRI, IS' small-scale attacks focused on the KRI's security apparatus, in particular the *peshmerga* and the *asayesh*. For these focused attacks, IS made use of sleeper cells that operated covertly in order to avoid detection by *asayesh*. The sleeper cells comprised Kurdish jihadists, or Arab jihadists who spoke Kurdish, and they proved hard to eliminate as they maintained strict operational security.<sup>1562</sup> A captured IS *emir*, who had led a unit that conducted attacks behind Kurdish lines, explained that issues like attacking the KRI – fellow Sunni Muslims – was not under any discussion within IS' ranks.<sup>1563</sup> A captured, low-rank IS-member explained, when asked about attacking the KRI: '[w]e don't know what is the policy. Others decide on the policy.'<sup>1564</sup> The *emir* and low-rank IS-member indicated a strict compartmentalization, which created organizational resilience by making IS hard to infiltrate.<sup>1565</sup> Additionally, all prospective IS members were thoroughly vetted. Trusted Kurdish IS members vetted Kurdish prospects.<sup>1566</sup> Although the members of the sleeper cells seemed unaware of the overall picture<sup>1567</sup>, the presence of sleeper cells within the KRI indicated that the IS attack on the KRI was well-prepared and planned long before.

IS stated that, before the attack, IS' religious scholars had studied what to do with the Yazidi-minority.<sup>1568</sup> The prior involvement of IS' religious scholars suggests meticulous preparations. Yet, this study found no evidence of direct involvement of IS' religious scholars in the strategic decision-making whether or not to attack the KRI. The IS' religious scholars did provide input for courses of action on what to do after capturing Yazidi-inhabited territories. In general, IS

1558 *Ibid.*, 8. Also see: Hashimi, "ISIS 2020." The *al-Usra* army was named after the last campaign ordered by the prophet Muhammad.

1559 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 80.

1560 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 43.

1561 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 236-7. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 103; Muhājir, "Advice for the leaders of the Islamic State," 15; "The Fallujah memorandum," 128-9.

1562 *Asayesh* officers; IS *emir*.

1563 IS *emir*.

1564 Low-rank IS-member 1, interview by Wietse van den Berge & Mark Dechesne, Kirkuk, November 11, 2015.

Information taken from notes of the author, as no audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview.

1565 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 15.

1566 *Asayesh* officers.

1567 IS *emir*.

1568 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 6, 31n1; "The revival of slavery," 15.

was reluctant in building and maintaining relations with tribes in captured regions, limiting relations to requesting *zakah* (religious donation), men, and materiel in return for support and security.<sup>1569</sup> After IS' August setbacks, IS proclaimed a more repressive posture towards the tribes<sup>1570</sup>, including collective punishment. Furthermore, IS initiated *da'wah* (religious education) in conquered territories, as well as monitoring by the *bisbah* (religious police).<sup>1571</sup>

IS propaganda increasingly focused on Kurdish secularism.<sup>1572</sup> A content analysis of IS' *Dabiq* magazine found that Kurds were referred to 391 times, 86.46 percent of which were unfavorably.<sup>1573</sup> The ground for IS' animosity against the Kurds was their supposed involvement in suppressing the Sunni population by denying Sunnis a state-like political entity, which the Kurds and Shia did have.<sup>1574</sup> Still, by mentioning Kurds, IS implicitly recognized the Kurdish people, their identity, and Kurdistan as the homeland of Kurds.<sup>1575</sup> Internally, IS had had its share of Kurdish secessionist tendencies, when a group called *al-Qaeda* in Kurdistan had left its ranks.<sup>1576</sup> Other analyses stressed Sunni ideology's Arabic roots, which would inherently imply non-Arabs being seen as potential threats<sup>1577</sup>, while downplaying the Kurdish IS members.<sup>1578</sup>

IS had taken the strategic decision to attack the KRI. The organizational behavior paradigm falls short in providing a conclusion that SOPs of different bureaucratic entities significantly influenced the decision. What the paradigm does indicate, however, were the changes since the first half of 2014. IS needed to defend large urban areas, whereas beforehand IS mainly conducted raids and, thus, had altered its organization and doctrine. The introduction of static defenses did not influence generating alternative courses of action, though.

### 6.3.2 The KRI

While the General Command Staff, headed by Masoud Barzani, was in charge of the military decisions in the KRI<sup>1579</sup>, the KDP and the PUK maintained their own chains of command within

1569 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 1, 12-4.

1570 "The Islamic State before al-malhamah," *Dabiq* 3 (1435H|2014), 6.

1571 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 3, 12-7.

1572 Cf. Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Also see: Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37-54.

1573 Qaraman, "The representation of Kurds," 12-3. For example: "Indeed your lord is ever watchful," 9; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 4, 12.

1574 Masri, "Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology." Also see: Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 12.

1575 Salih, "The Islamic State's visions of political community," 14.

1576 Roggio, "Al Qaeda in Kurdistan' breaks ranks." Also see: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 238-9.

1577 Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 6-7, 17.

1578 "250 Kurdish militants"; Berge, "Countering violent extremism"; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 104; KRG official; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Alaaldin, "The Kurds of ISIS; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 17; "Sectarian violence"; Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1579 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 39.

their zones of influence.<sup>1580</sup> Therefore, the parties remained the military strategic decision-making organizations in the KRI in August 2014, despite operating united when filling the vacuum in northern Iraq in June. According to a 2015 study of the International Crisis Group, within the KRI '[d]ecision-making about the IS threat has become as much a partisan as military matter, subject to factions' complex domestic and regional agendas.<sup>1581</sup> The study concluded that:

[c]ompetition between and within the parties [the KDP and the PUK] strongly affects professionalism and performance, undermining the Kurdish region's security. Party intelligence services enjoy separate sources of information, have developed privileged ties to different regional partners and share information selectively. Some view this as a primary factor behind the defeat in Sinjar in August, which resulted from inability or unwillingness to share evidence indicating that IS was about to attack.<sup>1582</sup>

The abovementioned separate sources and lack of shared intelligence led the PUK to think that IS 'was a terrorist group that had to be fought,' whereas the KDP 'saw the group as an anti-Baghdad force and was ready to accept IS as its new neighbour, confident that it would not attack Kurdish territory.'<sup>1583</sup> Instead of considering IS a threat towards the KRI, the KDP considered IS as an opportunity to acquire the disputed territories and, thus, establish autonomy.<sup>1584</sup> Yet, the existential threat posed by IS, from August 1 onwards, brought the KDP and the PUK together. Within the *peshmerga*, a KDP-affiliated commander noted 'the ability of the commanders on the ground to liaise with each other, despite owing allegiance to different political parties in Kurdistan.'<sup>1585</sup> Still, the internal divisions had caused sub-optimal distribution of equipment across the *peshmerga*. As some *peshmerga* units were better equipped than others, highly mobile opponents such as IS, could 'exploit weak points across the long front line.'<sup>1586</sup>

A PUK general, based at Kirkuk's southern front, in 2015 illustrated the sub-optimization and the challenges his units faced during the fight against IS. Weapons deliveries from Western countries, that should have contributed to fight IS, allegedly disappeared after arriving on Kurdish airports, possibly towards the extensive Kurdish black markets. Sometimes, units turned to the black markets to purchase the weapons that were intended for the units in the first place.<sup>1587</sup> Sometimes, weapons were claimed by other units. As most weapon deliveries

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1580 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10.

1581 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 8.

1582 *Ibid.*, 11.

1583 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 17.

1584 *Ibid.*, 17.

1585 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 31.

1586 "Kurdish peshmerga." Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 219.

1587 PUK general, interview by Wietse van den Berge & Mark Dechesne, Kirkuk, November 11, 2015. Information taken from notes of the author, as no audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview. Also see: Jonathan Brown, "The rise of the Kurdish gun market," *Al-Jazeera*, November 1, 2015.

ran through the KDP-controlled Erbil International Airport, KDP units confiscated goods before the *Gorran* controlled Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs could allocate them.<sup>1588</sup> It does not seem too farfetched to suppose that the transfer of weapons from a KDP-controlled airport to a PUK *peshmerga* unit is problematic.<sup>1589</sup> Due to mistrust between the KDP and the PUK, a unit might be reluctant to transfer weapons, fearing that these weapons one day might be used against themselves.<sup>1590</sup> Thus, rather than coordinating efforts, units competed over resources.<sup>1591</sup>

Additionally, scapegoating along party political lines after setbacks potentially frustrated much needed intra-Kurdish solidarity.<sup>1592</sup> The IS attack and the PKK's counterattack in Sinjar provoked divisions between Iraqi Kurds and Yazidis. Many Yazidis felt abandoned by the KRI, while they appreciated the PKK's efforts.<sup>1593</sup> IS probably speculated on Kurdish historical disunity<sup>1594</sup>, likely a PKK-PYD-PUK-alliance quarreling with the KDP.<sup>1595</sup> External actors used the parties as proxies to become involved in the KRI's affairs. Sadoon explained that 'it seems while the West mostly assisted the KRG through the KDP, the PUK was receiving aid through weapons, advisers, and instructions supplied by Iran and its non-state allies such as the PKK and PYD.'<sup>1596</sup> In general, the KDP benefitted most from Western coalition support, as it had been empowered through weapons, training, air support, and political legitimization. Western partners remained silent on the KDP – and the PUK, for that matter – confiscating the disputed territories. Apart from competing over resources, the parties competed over foreign policy. One such occasion happened in August 2014. The KDP politburo negotiated with a Sunni Arab tribal leader for the KDP forces taking over areas around Rabiya in the Nineveh governorate – over which the KDP had long claimed Kurdish control. The aim of the negotiations was to secure an alliance that would provide the KDP future influence over the area, located on the border between Iraq's and Syria's Kurdish inhabited areas.<sup>1597</sup> Here, party interests superseded the KRI's interests.

Still, geographical spreading along party lines avoided problems. The PUK *peshmerga* fought close to the areas of Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah, whereas the KDP *peshmerga* from Erbil to Zakho. Both party-affiliated *peshmerga* benefitted from short supply lines and rapid

1588 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 22. Also see: "President Barzani inaugurates the security council."

1589 Also see: Layla Mohammed, "Political powers split over Kirkuk asayesh," *Iraqi News*, December 14, 2008.

1590 Cf. Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 210-7.

1591 Cf. Freedman, *Command*, 502.

1592 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 18.

1593 Cheterian, "Turkey in 2017," 142.

1594 Winston Harris, "Chaos in Iraq. Are the Kurds truly set to win?" *Small Wars Journal*, August 28, 2014.

1595 Local journalist. Also see: "From hijrah to khilafa," 37; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 2, 12-3.

1596 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10.

1597 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 11, 19-22.

mobilization opportunities. Furthermore, party affiliation created close unit bonds with unique strategic cultures.<sup>1598</sup>

The KDP and the PUK needed to defend the KRI against the IS attack, which they did. Yet, the defense could have been more efficient and, thus, more effective, when conducted in a centralized manner. Despite some advantages of party-militia, the decentralized *peshmerga* could not withhold IS by itself.

### 6.3.3 Reflections

With its focus on how an actor is organized, assuming internal bureaucratic struggle, and an emphasis on doctrine, the organizational behavior paradigm in this case found that IS' modus operandi of combining conventional and unconventional warfare remained largely unchanged, compared to ISIS attacking Nineveh in June 2014. IS remained cautious and when the attack on the KRI failed – due to Western airstrikes – IS withdrew, while the IS attack forced the KRI again to change its foreign policy from independence-driven to survival-driven (strategic theory and doctrine, culture). IS' formalization of conventional-style army units did not change its conduct of warfighting, in the KRI's case, the defense against IS was not as effective as could have been, as the KDP and the PUK fought separate wars against IS<sup>1599</sup> (organization), leading to different estimates of IS' threat (information and intelligence). While recognizing that the KRI was forced into a war of necessity by IS (military operations, adversary) and struggled for mere survival, the organizational behavior paradigm explains the strategic decision to change the KRI's foreign policy doctrine. From an opportunity for independence, the KRI switched to a more cooperative stance, in search for foreign support (allies). The organizational behavior paradigm simplifies the strategic dimensions mentioned above, by considering them linear, instead of non-linear, thus overlooking how they influence one another, for example how the threat of IS adapted the KRI's foreign policy doctrine to become more directed at allies. Furthermore, the organizational behavior paradigm cannot fully explain IS' strategic decision-making, as IS largely acted as a unitary actor.

Overall, the organizational behavior paradigm has interesting insights, but is unable to fully explain by itself the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI regarding the battle for the KRI.

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1598 "Kurdish peshmerga." Cf. Berge, "Muitertij in Frankrijk," 12. Also see: Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 18-9.  
1599 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 18.

## 6.4 Governmental politics paradigm

The next three sections apply the governmental politics paradigm to IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS' advance into the KRI in August 2014. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: which leaders play, what are their stands, what is their impact, and what is their action channel?

### 6.4.1 IS

The re-establishment of the caliphate in late June 2014, and the consequential role as the caliph, confirmed Baghdadi's reputation and prestige.<sup>1600</sup> Given the tasks IS assumed to be the caliph's, in particular the preparation of the armies<sup>1601</sup>, it seems reasonable to assume the involvement of Baghdadi in deciding to attack the KRI. Yet, in line with Naji's suggestion to use 'separate, disparate organizations'<sup>1602</sup>, Baghdadi, probably urging for pragmatism and to avoid costly battles, likely delegated execution to his lower commanders.<sup>1603</sup> That approach can be expected to have increased with the establishment of the caliphate, including its governance, and the exposure since.

Turkmani acted as the governor of conquered territories in Iraq<sup>1604</sup> and the overall deputy of Baghdadi. Turkmani was skilled in operational security and counterintelligence due to his service as a lieutenant-colonel in the *Ba'ath* security apparatus. Furthermore, he had a background in special operations within Saddam Hussein's elite Republican Guard.<sup>1605</sup> The available documentary evidence on Turkmani described a harsh, fanatic jihadi-salafist, who was anti-American and sought revenge for Sunnis killed by American bombings. Documentary evidence also described Turkmani entering the competition among IS senior commanders over trophy women who were kept as sex slaves.<sup>1606</sup> He was also accused of ordering the killing of people from captured areas, even after they repented.<sup>1607</sup>

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1600 Cf. Fishman, *The master plan*, 152.

1601 "The structure of khilafa."

1602 Naji, *The management of savagery*, 12. Also see: Asbridge, *The crusades*, 343-61; Hassan; "ISIS has reached new depths of depravity"; Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 950; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 152-3; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 74, 88.

1603 Atwan, "A portrait of caliph Ibrahim," 69, 72. Cf. "Bringing down the towns i"; "Bringing down the towns iii"; "Bringing down the towns iv"; Naji, *The management of savagery*, 84.

1604 Cf. Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 109.

1605 Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy"; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers," 7.

1606 Paul Wood, "US hostage Kayla Mueller 'killed by IS' say ex-slaves," *BBC*, September 10, 2015.

1607 Qardash, in "Captured senior ISIS commander."

Since the death of Bilawi in early June, Suwaydawi had become the *emir* of the military council, which he remained until his death in May 2015.<sup>1608</sup> Suwaydawi had been childhood friends with Bilawi and under Saddam Hussein he had served in the same intelligence unit as Haji Bakr, who had been IS' first *emir* of the military council. Like Bilawi and Haji Bakr, Suwaydawi had joined JTJ and became a close associate of Zarqawi. Suwaydawi had been imprisoned from 2007 to 2010.<sup>1609</sup> When Suwaydawi died, Turkmani succeeded him as the *emir* of IS' military council.<sup>1610</sup>

The *Ba'ath*-ist background of Turkmani and Suwaydawi explained why IS conducted large-scale attacks on the KRI as outlined in Soviet-inspired *Ba'ath* doctrine. Turkmani's experience in special operations contributed to integrating small-scale military operations into larger campaigns. Suwaydawi's intelligence background contributed to IS' strict internal security, including vetting of prospect IS-members and infiltrating the *asayesh*.<sup>1611</sup> The *Ba'ath*-like operations fitted the newly established caliphate that aimed to expand, but that also had to defend urban areas against external threats.<sup>1612</sup> Yet, the profiles of Turkmani and Suwaydawi do not explain strategic decision-making as the result of political struggles, as this study found no documentary evidence of political powerplay among IS' leadership.

#### 6.4.2 The KRI

Within the KRI, Masoud Barzani took the strategic decisions on military affairs within the General Command Staff.<sup>1613</sup> What had changed since June, was the proclamation of the KRI's independence referendum by Barzani. Some analysts saw in the proclamation a reaction to Turkey refusing to assist the KDP, while Iran supported the PUK.<sup>1614</sup>

Yet, the IS attack forced the KRI into a war of necessity. The center of gravity of the IS attack was in the KRI's west. This concerned *peshmerga* border sector 6 in vicinity of Gwer and Makhmur and border sector 8 for Sinjar. The *peshmerga* commander in sector 6 was major-general Sirwan Barzani, who was also a member of the KDP central committee and was advisor to Masoud Barzani. Masoud Barzani himself was commander-in-chief of the KRI *peshmerga*, but also

1608 Salafi, in Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi." Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 124.

1609 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 17, 29, 37.

1610 "Abu Muslim al-Turkmani. From Iraqi officer to slain ISIS deputy," *Al Arabiya*, December 19, 2014; Bill Roggio, "US kills Islamic State deputy emir, 2 senior commanders in recent airstrikes," *Long War Journal*, December 19, 2014.

1611 Cf. *Asayesh* officers.

1612 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 80.

1613 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 39; "President Barzani inaugurates the security council"; Wilgenburg & Fumerton, "Kurdistan's political armies," 9n28.

1614 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10.

leading *peshmerga* operations against IS from a base in border sector 8. From their sectors, both commanders aimed to stop the IS advance and conduct a counter-offensive against IS.<sup>1615</sup>

The KRI's defenses were geographically organized along party lines. PUK *peshmerga* fought close to the areas of Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah, whereas the KDP *peshmerga* from Erbil to Zakho. Party affiliation created close unit bonds with unique strategic cultures<sup>1616</sup>, which increased when the KDP and the PUK paid their *peshmerga* salaries from the parties' budgets, in response to the budget cut by the Iraq state.<sup>1617</sup> Potentially, the individual *peshmerga* fighters increasingly became dependent on the parties and the commanding officers that were appointed by the parties, which created politicians with militias.

### 6.4.3 Reflections

With its focus on key leaders' perceptions and assuming powerplay among those key leaders, the governmental politics paradigm expects seizing opportunities by the leaders on both sides. Baghdadi, as IS' caliph, left the Iraqi affairs to his deputy for Iraq, and the military affairs to the *emir* of the military council, the fanatic jihadi-salafists Turkmani and Suwaydawi, respectively, whereas on the KRI's side Masoud Barzani, as the KRI's leader, found the military commander in IS' center of gravity also to be his advisor and member of the KDP central committee (people, command). While IS' military leaders were capable in military and security affairs (military administration), together with their jihadi-salafist beliefs (ideology), the KRI's military leaders held their commanding positions via political affiliations (politics). The governmental politics paradigm's strength as an explanatory model lies in the powerplay-assumption, which involves a process among key leaders. The lack of reliable sources with such level of detail undermines the paradigm's explanatory power. In the case here, no documentary evidence suggested political powerplay among IS' or the KRI's leaders.

Overall, the governmental politics paradigm offers insights into IS' and the KRI's strategic leadership, but the paradigm fails to provide an explanation based on political powerplay. This study found no indications of powerplay among IS' or the KRI's leaders. To explain the KRI's strategic decision-making, party affiliation – the subject of inquiry of the organizational behavior paradigm – seems more suitable than powerplay by individual leaders.

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1615 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 26-7.

1616 "Kurdish peshmerga." Cf. Berge, "Muitertij in Frankrijk," 12.

1617 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 43.

## 6.5 Complexity theory

This paragraph applies complexity theory to IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS' advance into the KRI in August 2014. The paragraph adopts the structure along the elements of the paradigm: time-, space-, and case-specific factors and multi-level, multi-directional processes. Because of the focus on processes, the structure of the paragraph is to jointly analyze ISIS and the KRI, instead of separately, as occurred in previous paragraphs of this chapter.

### 6.5.1 Time, space, context, and processes

Time-specific factors in this case trace back to ISIS capturing Mosul on June 10, 2014, and its immediate advance southwards, towards the Baiji oil refinery and Tikrit.<sup>1618</sup> On June 12, ISIS acknowledged its next military campaign towards Baghdad.<sup>1619</sup> On June 28, ISIS proclaimed the caliphate and turned into IS. The KRI announced the preparations for its independence referendum on July 3<sup>1620</sup>, potentially creating an independent, ambitious rival for IS in northern Iraq. The Iraqi state responded by accusing the KRI of conspiring with jihadi-salafists and closing the KRI's airports for cargo flights, on July 9 and 10, respectively.<sup>1621</sup> The tensions between the KRI and the Iraqi state and their preoccupation with each other, rendered themselves ineffective and made coordinated military action against IS highly unlikely. Still, IS needed to attack before the start of the anti-IS "Inherent Resolve" campaign, which the United States announced mid-June 2014.<sup>1622</sup> As the KRI had been a known ally of the United States since 2003<sup>1623</sup> and a likely participant of "Inherent Resolve", attacking the KRI in July or August was an attractive option for IS.

Although ISIS' announcement of a campaign towards Baghdad was sometimes regarded a distraction maneuver, ISIS did advance in that direction, only to be stopped by a combination of the ISF and Shia militias. The suggestion that 'the Kurds stood in the way of the ISIS march south toward Anbar province and Baghdad,' seems plausible. IS then needed to 'weaken the Kurds and push them back from their forward positions close to ISIS's path of advance southward.'<sup>1624</sup> Still, IS also advanced on Sinjar, which was not towards the south. Thus, the attack also seems connected to the geographical and demographical expansion that IS

1618 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 20.

1619 "Following capture of Mosul." Also see: Lewis, "The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham captures Mosul."

1620 "Iraqi PM's insistence on running for third term." Also see: "Government formation."

1621 "KRG consolidation of disputed territories"; "Offensive manoeuvres."

1622 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 7.

1623 Fishman, *The master plan*, 29; Noi, "The Arab spring," 22; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10.

1624 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 217.

sought.<sup>1625</sup> Sinjar strategically connected the Iraqi and Syrian battlefields, whereas the natural resources and infrastructure of Kirkuk were attractive aims<sup>1626</sup>, where IS had relatively strong presence<sup>1627</sup>, and perhaps hoped for popular support. Yet, proximity may also have played a role, causing the KRI for IS to be simultaneously an opportunity and a threat.

Multi-directional processes occurred, taking the form of interconnection, considering that IS had benefitted from the increased tensions between the Iraqi state and the KRI since June, but also contributed to those tensions by defeating the ISF in northern Iraq. IS was able to maintain its battlefield momentum until August 2014. The threat that IS posed, got external actors involved, notably the United States as the leader of the “Inherent Resolve” campaign. Rather paradoxically, the KRI’s probable participation in “Inherent Resolve” as a known local ally of the United States, made it a threat – and thus, a target – for IS. Still, based on IS’ long-term preparations for the attack, it seems likely that the KRI advancing into the disputed territories in June, had already fueled IS’ fears of the KRI’s expansionism. The KRI’s vulnerable position since August 1, 2014, fighting for its survival, made it more accommodating towards international partners, compared to the situation in June 2014, when it focused on independence. Multi-level processes occurred too, as IS operated mainly as a unitary actor, while the KRI was fragmented with the KDP and the PUK fighting two separate wars against IS.

### 6.5.2 Reflections

Complexity theory merges the other paradigms in this study and adds elements, focusing on time-, space-, and context-specific events with multi-level and multi-directional processes.

On the strategic level, following the rational actor paradigm, in this case IS aimed to create strategic depth and the KRI intended to defend its territory (geography, military operations), to expand and protect their political entity, respectively (politics), for which both required resources (people, economics and logistics). IS adopted jihadi-salafist guidance (ideology, strategic theory and doctrine) and benefitted from proximity, and surprise (friction, chance, and uncertainty, information and intelligence), using its battlefield momentum (emergence). Additionally, IS seemed wary of the KRI (adversary, military operations) and its Western partners (allies), which had announced an anti-IS coalition (time). In line with the organizational behavior paradigm, IS maintained its cautious foreign policy, whereas the KRI switched to a survival-driven foreign policy, once under attack (strategic theory and doctrine, culture, allies). IS’ doctrine remained largely unchanged, despite formalizing conventional-style operations into organizational

1625 Orton, “The leader of the Islamic State explains the caliphate’s vision.” Also see: “Khilafah declared,” 7; Muhājir, “Come to a just word”; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.

1626 Saeed, “The problem of Kirkuk,”

1627 Gunes, “The IS factor,” 83-4.

structures. The KRI remained highly fragmented (organization), causing different intelligence estimates on IS' threat towards the KRI (information and intelligence, military operations, adversary). The governmental politics paradigm observed capable jihadi-salafist (ideology) military commanders within IS (people, command, military administration), while the KRI's commanders held their commanding positions via political affiliations (politics).

Complexity theory acknowledges that IS primarily acted as a unitary actor, while the KRI responded along party level (interconnection). Within the case, the why-then-question of IS attacking the KRI on August 1, can be explained by the announcement in mid-June (time) of the anti-IS operation "Inherent Resolve" (exogenous pressure), and the KRI's independence referendum on July 3 (adversary).

Recognizing that strategy can change<sup>1628</sup>, the time-specific element proved important. Taking a non-linear approach towards the strategic paradoxes, IS' surprise attack on the KRI illustrates the limitations of complexity theory to forecast future strategic decisions. Only in hindsight can analysts narrow down the infinite number of variables leading to strategic decision-making.

Overall, complexity theory offers the most encompassing explanation for strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI, regarding the battle for the KRI. Complexity theory merges the other paradigms in this study and adds multi-level and multi-directional processes to the analysis, thus offering a solution how to analyze non-linearity.

## 6.6 Conclusion

In August 2014, IS took the strategic decision to attack the KRI. The KRI decided to defend. From a military strategic level point of view, the IS attack initially seemed successful, despite the *peshmerga* putting up a dogged defense. However, with the benefit of hindsight, on the policy level, IS' strategic decision to attack proved a misjudgment, whereas the KRI's strategic decision to stand its ground turned out successful. The IS attack accelerated the establishment of an international anti-IS coalition, which eventually existed of 86 partners that committed to defeating IS.<sup>1629</sup> The KRI gained support of regional and global actors, including air support, and eventually was able to push back IS.

This chapter focused on how to explain the strategic decisions of IS to attack and the KRI to defend. The chapter used four different IR paradigms, each offering different perspectives. The

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1628 Freedman, *Strategy*, xi.

1629 "Our mission," *The global coalition*.

section below summarizes the different approaches of how to explain the strategic decision-making of both ANSAs in August 2014. Section 6.6.2 focuses on how useful the different paradigms proved in analyzing IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions. The last section looks forward, linking the battle that IS and the KRI fought over the KRI to this study's next case.

### 6.6.1 Explanations

Since IS and the KRI came in close proximity of one another in June, IS observed the KRI take over land in the vicinity of Kirkuk and the IS-bulwark Mosul. While minor skirmishes occurred between IS and KRI before August 2014, IS' attack on the KRI fitted in the perception of defending the *ummah*.<sup>1630</sup> In this case IS presented perceived Kurdish expansionism by an operational offense in light of a defensive strategy.<sup>1631</sup> Analysts have described IS as merely an aggressive actor.<sup>1632</sup> However, despite aggressive tactics, the analysis indicates that a calculated strategic defensive posture should be taken in consideration for understanding IS' strategic decisions.<sup>1633</sup> This explains why IS chose to attack the KRI as a measure against a perceived threat posed by KRI. Instead of setting up solid defenses along its borders, IS risked overreach and accelerated the formation of the anti-IS coalition<sup>1634</sup>, which eventually limited IS' operational possibilities.<sup>1635</sup> Earlier analyses on IS' strategic decision-making pointed out that IS was reluctant in using its resources under threat.<sup>1636</sup> The two relevant IS leaders – Turkmani, as the deputy of Baghdadi for Iraq, and Suwaydawi, as the *emir* of the military council – had complementary experience in incorporating small-scale operations in large-scale campaigns, as well as intelligence operations. Finally, the announcement in mid-June of operation “Inherent Resolve”<sup>1637</sup> and the KRI's independence referendum on July 3<sup>1638</sup> influenced the timing of the attack.

The KRI's best response – basically its only option – was to defend. Apart from existential survival, ‘the KRI needed to align its goals with those of the United States and its allies which requested the KRI not to further disintegrate Iraq.’<sup>1639</sup> The KRI changed from an assertive foreign policy in June 2014<sup>1640</sup> – entering the disputed territories with its military instrument

1630 “Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism,” 20-4.

1631 “Purpose of jihad.” Also see: Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 2.

1632 Cf. Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 234-5; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 238-9, 242.

1633 Noyes, “Pragmatic takfiris.” Cf. Naji, *The management of savagery*, 81.

1634 Fishman, *The master plan*, 234. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 10; “Our mission,” *The global coalition*.

1635 For example: “General notification. Ban on GPS and Apple devices,” *Islamic State*, December 14, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1636 “The looming assault on Mosul.”

1637 Watson, “The conflict with ISIS,” 7.

1638 “Iraqi PM's insistence on running for third term.” Also see: “Government formation.”

1639 Sadoon, “The Islamic State and the independence referendum,” 9.

1640 Cf. Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 366.

and aspiring independence – to a foreign policy prepared to compromise for mere survival.<sup>1641</sup> Still, strategic decisions took place on the party level, despite its seemingly concerted efforts in June 2014. Division led to sub-optimal, and sometimes counter-productive, decisions. Whereas IS acted as a unitary actor, the KRI responded along party level and, basically, fought two separate wars against IS.<sup>1642</sup>

## 6.6.2 Paradigms

The rational actor paradigm considers strategy static. Yet, as the case of the KRI indicated, strategy can change.<sup>1643</sup> On August 1, the KRI's goal changed from autonomy to survival.<sup>1644</sup> The strategic decision-making seems to prefer options that quickly achieve goals, as in the case of IS. The rational actor paradigm does not explicitly consider the time-specific factor in its explanation. Furthermore, the paradigm does not explain issues like internal fragmentation and creates analytical ambivalence, such as when IS as a unitary actor attacked the fragmented Kurds. Arguably, the KRI seemed unified in the struggle against IS, but in fact remained fragmented.<sup>1645</sup> As such, the rational actor paradigm falls short in explaining why the KRI focused solely on the Iraqi state, and was surprised by IS' attack on August 1. The organizational behavior paradigm seems more suitable to explain internal fragmentation, in particular when institutionalized as in the case of the KRI. Thus, the paradigm explains why the KRI was surprised by IS' attack. The paradigm does not provide sufficient explanations for IS' strategic decision to attack the KRI, as IS seemed to operate as a unitary – rational actor paradigm-like – actor. The governmental politics paradigm failed to provide useful explanations for either IS' or the KRI's strategic decision-making. This was due to IS operating as a unitary actor and the KRI operating along political party-lines, the realms of the rational actor paradigm and the organizational behavior paradigm, respectively. The governmental politics paradigm provided insight in two relevant IS leaders, Turkmani and Suwaydawi, but did not explain strategic decisions. Complexity theory incorporates the elements of the other paradigms, as well as other relevant strategic dimensions, in a non-linear fashion. Therefore, complexity theory provides a solution to the strategic paradoxes, considering the time-, space-, and context-specific elements of events and strategic decisions. However, it also limits complexity theory to reverse engineering, which in itself needs to be approached as narrow as possible.

1641 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 14.

1642 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 18.

1643 Freedman, *Strategy*, xi.

1644 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 366; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 9, 14.

1645 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 18; Harris, "Chaos in Iraq." Also see: "250 Kurdish militants"; Berge, "Countering violent extremism"; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 104; Speri, "Not all Kurds."

The rational actor paradigm in this case explained the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI through the strategic dimensions of politics, geography, people, economics and logistics, military operations, strategic theory and doctrine, friction, chance, and uncertainty, adversary, and emergence. Additionally, the KRI depended on its allies. Via the announcement of the anti-IS coalition, those allies added time as a relevant strategic dimension. The organizational behavior paradigm added culture, ideology, and organization, as well as information and intelligence, which added nuance to the strategic dimensions focused on by the rational actor paradigm. The governmental politics paradigm further added command, military administration, and ideology. Finally, complexity theory added exogenous pressure and interconnection as relevant strategic dimensions. Table 6.1 indicates the factors identified per paradigm for the battle for the KRI, showing complexity theory as the most encompassing.

**Table 6.1:** strategic dimensions identified in this study per paradigm regarding the battle for the KRI.<sup>1646</sup>

Strategic dimension	Rational actor paradigm		Organizational behavior paradigm		Governmental politics paradigm		Complexity theory
	IS	KRI	IS	KRI	IS	KRI	IS/KRI
<i>politics</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>geography</i>	X	X					X
<i>people</i>	X	X			X	X	X
<i>economics and logistics</i>	X	X					X
<i>military operations</i>	X	X	X	X			X
<i>friction, chance and uncertainty</i>	X						X
<i>strategic theory and doctrine</i>	X		X	X			X
<i>ideology</i>	X				X		X
<i>culture</i>			X	X			X
<i>organization</i>			X	X			X
<i>information and intelligence</i>	X			X			X
<i>command</i>					X	X	X
<i>military administration</i>					X		X
<i>time</i>	X						X
<i>adversary</i>	X	X	X	X			X
<i>allies*</i>		X		X			X
<i>exogenous pressure*</i>							X
<i>interconnection*</i>							X
<i>emergence*</i>	X						X
<i>ideology*</i>	X				X		X

<sup>1646</sup> Cf. Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44. Strategic dimensions not mentioned by Gray are indicated with an asterisk.

### 6.6.3 Next

The IS attack on the KRI was a game changer in northern Iraq in 2014. The attack was not the decisive battle that concluded the conflict in the Clausewitzian sense. Yet, the attack accelerated the formation of the international coalition that fought IS. The coalition air strikes that started on August 7, eventually forced IS to withhold further large-scale attacks. As important as the coalition against IS, was Western support for the KRI. Forced by the existential threat of IS, the KRI had to compromise via diplomatic outreach, next to its military instrument. Via that diplomatic outreach, *peshmerga* efforts got recognized through the KRI's international visibility.<sup>1647</sup> For the time being, and under international pressure, the IS attack brought together the KRI and the Iraqi state.<sup>1648</sup> Halfway August, IS was pushed back to positions near Mosul. From October onwards, the KRI *peshmerga* and ISF conducted attacks to expel IS from Mosul<sup>1649</sup>, sometimes in joint operations.<sup>1650</sup> Eventually, it took until the summer of 2017 for the ISF – supported by the international coalition and the *peshmerga* – to recapture Mosul. The so-called Hawija-pocket, southwest of Kirkuk, remained IS' last area under control in Iraq. From the Hawija-pocket, IS occasionally conducted attacks in the KRI, in particular near Kirkuk.

Internally, the KRI's parliament passed a resolution in August 2014, urging unification and subordinating the *yekey* 70 and *yekey* 80 to the Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs.<sup>1651</sup> The threat of IS had also brought together Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. Despite different political affiliations and conflicts in the past, an agreement between the KRI and the Syrian Kurdish PYD was announced on October 25, 2014, to cooperate in defeating IS.<sup>1652</sup> The agreement was crucial in the KRI assisting Syrian Kurdish forces, besieged by IS, in the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobanî. The strategic decisions made by IS and the KRI regarding the Kobanî siege are the subject of chapter 7.

1647 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10-1.

1648 "Offensive manoeuvres."

1649 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 31; Michael Knights & Alexandre Mello, "The cult of the offensive. The Islamic State on defense," *CTC Sentinel* 8:4 (2015), 3.

1650 Bill Roggio, "US special forces, Kurdish troops raid Islamic State prison in Iraq," *The Long War Journal*, October 23, 2015.

1651 Mohammed Salih, "New units step toward reforming Kurdish peshmerga," *Al-Monitor*, July 2, 2015. Despite a six-month deadline, the forces remained under the parties' control.

1652 Wladimir van Wilgenburg & Vager Saadullah, "Syrian Kurdish factions unite over Islamic State threat," *Middle East Eye*, February 13, 2015. Also see: Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 105.



## Chapter 7

### Siege (October 2014-January 2015)

**A**fter the KRI had expelled IS from KRI territory in August 2014, the conflict between IS and the KRI continued nevertheless. This became most prominent during IS' siege of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobanî from September 2014 to January 2015. The KRI decided to support Syrian Kurdish forces trapped there by sending 150 *peshmerga*. IS had decided to attack Kobanî and decided to continue the siege after the international coalition against IS started conducting air attacks against IS, which turned the odds against IS. This chapter explains the strategic decision-making by answering the question how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI regarding the siege of Kobanî in 2014-2015?

While the siege of Kobanî at the time dominated international media headlines, the actual decision-making that led to these events lacks academic attention. This chapter contributes to understanding strategic decision-making with respect to a crucial, but under-researched, phase in the conflict between IS and the KRI. While the IS threat for the KRI largely had disappeared since August 2014 – although, occasionally and unsuccessfully, IS conducted incursions<sup>1653</sup> – the KRI fought an expeditionary war of choice against IS by supporting Syrian Kurds in Kobanî. IS fought a war of necessity in northern Syria, in which the KRI initially had no direct involvement. The siege of Kobanî shows how IS and the KRI took their strategic decisions in pursuit of their foreign policies.

The rational actor paradigm-approach – considering goals, perceived strategic threats and opportunities, alternative options, and cost-benefit calculations – expects IS attacking Kobanî and the KRI sending reinforcements to be the outcome of cost-benefit calculations. The organizational behavior paradigm expects the decisions to be the results of internal bureaucratic struggle between different SOPs or doctrine. The governmental politics paradigm expects the strategic decisions to have been the compromise of key leaders' political power play. Combining elements of the other paradigms, complexity theory offers the most encompassing explanation,

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<sup>1653</sup> Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 5.

which expects the strategic decisions to be time-, space-, and context-specific, occurring in multi-level and multi-directional processes.

The first paragraph sketches the situation before and during the event, that is, IS attacking Kobanî and the KRI supporting its Syrian Kurdish defenders. The following paragraphs each apply a different paradigm to the strategic decision-making.

## 7.1 Setting

While the shared conflict with IS moved Iraqi parliamentary disputes towards temporary solutions in the fall of 2014<sup>1654</sup> – including budget allocation and oil exports for the KRI<sup>1655</sup> – and reports indicated Sunni tribal opposition against IS in Iraq<sup>1656</sup>, global media attention focused on Kobanî.<sup>1657</sup> Kobanî is a Syrian Kurdish town, located along the border with Turkey and home to approximately 45,000 inhabitants, mostly Kurdish and Armenian, when the Syrian Civil War began.<sup>1658</sup> While reluctant to conduct expeditionary support for the ISF against ISIS in Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014<sup>1659</sup>, the KRI decided to send up to 200 – eventually 150 – *peshmerga* to Kobanî to support the besieged Syrian Kurdish forces.<sup>1660</sup> Despite such reinforcements and air strikes by the international coalition, IS continued the siege until January 2015.

Syrian Kurdish forces had controlled Kobanî since July 2012.<sup>1661</sup> The PYD dominated Syrian Kurdish politics and the PYD's affiliated militias YPG and *Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê* (Women's Protection Unit; YPJ) had expanded their control along the Turkish border in July 2013. The YPG/YPJ proved capable in expelling rival insurgent groups from predominantly Kurdish territories. Shortly afterwards, the PYD proclaimed the de facto autonomy of the Kurdish-majority cantons. On March 10, 2014, ISIS attacked the YPG in northern Aleppo and south of Kobanî. The latter allowed ISIS control over two major crossings north of the Euphrates river and to link its Aleppo area of operations to that in northern Raqqa. The YPG joined an attack

1654 "Iraq's new government lacks meaningful Sunni participation, but a compromise with the Kurds is more likely," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, September 9, 2014.

1655 "KRG-Baghdad oil deal reduces non-payment and fragmentation risks in Iraq but faces high risk of non-implementation," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, December 4, 2014.

1656 "Islamic State militants execute 220 Sunni tribal militiamen in Iraq's Anbar," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, October 31, 2014; "State of war. The Iraqi Sunni actors taking on the Islamic State," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, November 3, 2014.

1657 For example: Bashdar Ismaeel, "Kobane, transforming the regional dynamic," *Kurdish Globe*, November 3, 2014.

1658 Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained"; Rebecca Grant, "The siege of Kobani," *Air Force Magazine*, August 29, 2018.

1659 "Offensive manoeuvres."

1660 Ismaeel, "Kobane."

1661 Derek Flood, "Victory at any cost. Symbolism transcends strategy in battle for Kobanê," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, October 17, 2014; Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

of an Islamist insurgent group against an ISIS stronghold on March 14, 2014. The YPG, thus, posed a threat to ISIS in Aleppo. In response, ISIS increased its attacks on the YPG-controlled areas, compelling the YPG to concentrate forces and deter future aggression. On March 19, the YPG announced a general mobilization to reinforce Kobanî. Clashes between ISIS and the YPG continued on April 17, as ISIS tried to surround Kobanî. Yet, throughout April, ISIS ceased its advance. ISIS ‘failed to decisively punish and deter the YPG.’<sup>1662</sup> Instead, the YPG from April 25 onwards conducted counter-attacks against ISIS positions and continued its support of other insurgent groups that fought ISIS. Early May, ISIS conducted small-scale attacks along frontline positions in Kobanî, which the YPG quickly thwarted.<sup>1663</sup>

On June 23, ISIS renewed its offensive against Kobanî<sup>1664</sup>, empowered by resources seized in northern Iraq.<sup>1665</sup> The YPG recaptured a village on July 6. ISIS – IS by then – mentioned ‘successful advances made against the PKK on numerous fronts, [...] on the 11th of Ramadân [July 8, 2014], with the advance continuing towards ‘Ayn Al-‘Arab [Kobanî].’<sup>1666</sup> By July 9, IS had captured villages surrounding Kobanî. The YPG announced counterattacks on July 11. Reports appeared that the PYD considered compulsory service in the YPG to reinforce Kobanî. However, the plan for compulsory service was not implemented, possibly due to the arrival of 800 Turkish Kurds from PKK training camps in Turkey in mid-July. The PKK reinforcements ‘allowed the YPG to stabilize their defenses and begin to push ISIS forces back.’<sup>1667</sup> An intense battle erupted west of Kobanî on July 23, indicating that the YPG remained a significant threat for IS and hampered IS’ lines of communication. Occasionally, small-scale clashes occurred in August, with no significant changes of territories. By early September, IS had secured ‘critical locations on the eastern border of its declared Aleppo region. ISIS failed, however, to create a buffer zone [...] that would preclude subsequent YPG penetration into ISIS territory.’<sup>1668</sup>

IS increased its pressure on Kobanî from September 2014 onwards<sup>1669</sup>, illustrated by the redeployment in Kobanî of the *Liwa Dawud* (David Brigade).<sup>1670</sup> *Liwa Dawud* was famous for its fierce attacks on Menagh Airbase in August 2013, which enabled insurgents to capture the airbase from Syrian regime troops after a two-year siege.<sup>1671</sup> *Liwa Dawud* had pledged *bay’ah* to

1662 Joseph Sax, “YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria,” *Institute for the Study of War*, September 19, 2014.

1663 *Ibid.*

1664 *Ibid.*

1665 Cafarella & Szybala, “ISIS’s second front in Syria.”

1666 “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 2, 13. IS considered the PYD to be the PKK’s Syrian branch.

1667 Sax, “YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria.”

1668 *Ibid.*

1669 “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 5, 15; Toivanen, *The Kobane generation*, 4. Also see: “Notification for Kurds to leave Raqqa city,” *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Kareem Shaheen & Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1670 YPG commander, interview by Wietse van den Berge, email, January 2, 2024, transl. Google Translate.

1671 “Iraq. ISIL says Omar al-Shihani killed in air strike,” *Al-Jazeera*, July 14, 2016; Scott Lucas, “Syria analysis. The ‘true’ story of insurgent leader Abu Umar al-Shihani & what it means,” *EA Worldview*, November 21, 2013;

Baghdadi in early July 2014 and consisted of Caucasian foreign fighters, who acted as IS' shock troops.<sup>1672</sup> IS' increased pressure was possibly ignited by the proclamation of Syrian Kurdish and FSA groups to coordinate their efforts against IS.<sup>1673</sup> On September 16, IS captured a strategically important bridge over the Euphrates river, allowing IS to move artillery and tanks up to ten kilometers from Kobani on September 20. On September 24, IS shelled Kobani, causing approximately 130,000 Syrian Kurdish refugees there to flee to Turkey. Around 4,000 IS fighters advanced into the town and captured the strategically important Mishtenur Hill, which overlooks Kobani, on September 26.<sup>1674</sup> IS forces obtained a stronger grip on Kobani the next weeks, despite airstrikes from September 27 onwards by Western coalition partners.<sup>1675</sup> However, around October 10, Western coalition partners acknowledged that airstrikes alone would not stop IS.<sup>1676</sup> Eventually, IS controlled approximately 40 percent of Kobani<sup>1677</sup> and approached the town's center, applying suicide attacks to weaken Kurdish strongpoints. As air attacks increased, so did IS' commitment in capturing Kobani, sending reinforcements from Aleppo and Raqqa, including vehicle-borne suicide bombers.<sup>1678</sup> Quite remarkably, IS had also launched an advance on Ramadi in Iraq in October, which turned into a 'bruising slugfest between IS fighters and Iraqi military forces.'<sup>1679</sup>

On October 20, American aircraft dropped supplies to Syrian Kurdish forces, who were trapped in Kobani.<sup>1680</sup> Turkey had closed the border with Syria in an attempt to stop Kurdish reinforcements from joining Syrian Kurdish forces in Kobani.<sup>1681</sup> On October 27, IS claimed to control the town.<sup>1682</sup> Turkey allowed the KRI *peshmerga* to reinforce Syrian Kurdish forces on October 31.<sup>1683</sup> On November 2, 2014, 150 KRI *peshmerga* reached Kobani and joined Syrian Kurdish militias in the fight against IS.<sup>1684</sup> IS propaganda mentioned that 'the media

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Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 43; Mitchell Prothero, "'Star pupil.' Pied piper of ISIS recruits was trained by U.S.," *The Seattle Times*, September 15, 2015.

1672 Aaron Zelin, "Jihadi 'counterterrorism.' Hayat Tahrir al-Sham versus the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 16:2 (2023), 17. Also see: Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Where in the world is Abu Umar al-Shishani?" *EA Worldview*, January 7, 2014.

1673 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

1674 Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 34.

1675 Jennifer Cafarella *et al.*, "Syria update. September 24-October 2, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, October 2, 2014; Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; Gunes, "The IS Factor," 78.

1676 Hayden Cooper, "Islamic State. Militants capture Kurd headquarters in Syria's Kobane. UN warns of massacre if Kobane falls," *ABC News*, October 10, 2014.

1677 Jennifer Cafarella & Theodore Bell, "Syria update. October 2-October 10, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, October 10, 2014.

1678 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1679 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 221.

1680 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1681 Toivanen, *The Kobane generation*, 4.

1682 Catherine Shoichet, "Hostage in video claims Syrian city of Kobani is under ISIS control," *CNN*, October 27, 2014.

1683 Gunes, "The IS Factor," 78. Also see: Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; Ismael, "Kobane."

1684 Karouny & Berberoglu, "Heavy fighting in Kobani." Also see: Omar Berberoglu, "Peshmerga, Syrian rebels battle Islamic State in besieged Kobani," *Reuters*, November 3, 2014.

was abuzz with the news that the *Peshmerga* [...] *murtaddîn* [apostates] would be sending reinforcements.<sup>1685</sup> IS framed the reinforcements as proof that Syrian Kurdish forces could not withstand IS forces on their own. Air-ground coordination became more important as IS entered more urbanized areas in the inner-city of Kobanî.<sup>1686</sup> The *peshmerga* troops were experienced in air-ground coordination. With their input, coalition air attacks became more effective. The effective air attacks, together with supplies arriving through Turkey, caused IS to lose ground in Kobanî as of early November.<sup>1687</sup> Halfway through November, IS still believed it could capture Kobanî, though.<sup>1688</sup>

On November 13, IS and its onetime Syrian branch JaN reached a ceasefire.<sup>1689</sup> IS propaganda reported that fighters had joined IS from other jihadist groups, including from JaN.<sup>1690</sup> Yet, gradually the combined Kurdish forces gained battlefield momentum and recaptured the Mishtenur Hill on January 19, 2015. Syrian Kurdish forces declared Kobanî freed from IS on January 27, 2015<sup>1691</sup>, despite over 300 surrounding villages remained under control of IS.<sup>1692</sup>

Whether IS considered Kobanî lost is doubtful. IS cited journalist Patrick Cockburn in a *Dabiq* article: 'Isis [sic] is being squeezed militarily and economically, but there is no sign of it imploding. Even its loss of Kobani is not necessarily a sign of weakness, since it held on for months despite fighting ... (the) Syrian Kurds, backed by an intensive US air bombardment in a confined place.'<sup>1693</sup> In the same article, IS quoted the Washington Post editorial board drawing similar conclusions and added that 'perhaps the most significant fact about Kobane is that it consumed 75 percent of the nearly 1,000 airstrikes carried out by allied planes throughout Syria since September... In the rest of the Syrian territory it controls, including its capital of Raqqa, the Islamic State... is growing stronger rather than weaker.'<sup>1694</sup>

The merger of the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields by IS got Iraqi Kurdish parties involved in the Syrian Civil War: '[t]he PYD/YPG military advantage on the ground since 2011 spurred Iraq's Kurdish factions, particularly the KDP (encouraged by Turkey), to project political influence into Syria by hosting Syrian Kurdish party representatives in Erbil, and to recruit and train

1685 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 15. Italics added.

1686 "Interview with YPJ commander in Kobanê. Kobanê will not fall," *The Rojava Report*, October 9, 2014.

1687 Grant, "The siege of Kobani." Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 481-2.

1688 Abu al-Yaman al-Shami, Twitter, November 18, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, in Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The factions of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab)," *Syria Comment*, November 21, 2014.

1689 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 83.

1690 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 7 (1436H|2015), 38.

1691 Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; Gunes, "The IS Factor," 78. Also see: Toivanen, *The Kobane generation*, 4.

1692 Gunes, "The IS Factor," 78.

1693 Patrick Cockburn, cited in "In the words of the enemy," *Dabiq* 7 (1436H|2015), 53.

1694 Washington Post editorial board, cited in "In the words of the enemy," *Dabiq* 7, 53. Also see: "A message to the people in Kurdistan," *Dabiq* 8 (1436H|2015), 38; "Irjā," 39-56.

an alternative Syrian *peshmerga* force, while pressing for an agreement that would place YPG forces under overall KDP command.<sup>1695</sup> Despite the KDP pressure, the PYD held almost exclusive control over the Syrian Kurdish areas, not allowing the KDP affiliated forces into the areas and fighting IS successfully. To repel IS' siege of Kobani in September 2014, the PYD requested international support, though.<sup>1696</sup>

Although a member of the anti-IS coalition, Turkey was reluctant to support the PYD, considered by Turkey as allies of its archenemy the PKK. During October 2014, tensions increased between Turkey and the PKK.<sup>1697</sup> The American-led coalition did not want to harass Turkey and was reluctant to support the YPG, also due to the YPG's occasional cooperation with the Syrian regime. A work-around was found by supporting the YPG via the KRI, which was considered a partner of both Turkey and the United States. Eventually, Turkey – possibly pressured by the United States – allowed the KRI *peshmerga* passage to support Kobani.<sup>1698</sup> The YPG provided intelligence to the KDP, needed for coalition sorties, and received weapons through Turkey from the KDP *peshmerga* and the PUK *peshmerga* to be deployed in Syrian Kurdish areas. The arrangement for this intra-Kurdish cooperation was the Duhok Agreement that was announced on October 25, 2014, in which the 'KDP, PUK and PYD committed to shared governance in Syria'<sup>1699</sup> and to cooperate in defeating IS.<sup>1700</sup> According to some reports, the KRI *peshmerga* were limited to artillery support, not allowed to participate in frontline fighting<sup>1701</sup>, while other reports mentioned they would.<sup>1702</sup>

The Duhok Agreement allowed the PYD to maintain control over Syrian Kurdish areas and provided the KDP and the PUK a footprint there. Still, there appeared no significant improvement in intra-Kurdish strategic cooperation. According to the International Crisis Group, the YPG 'has been yoked into an arrangement with the KDP so as to benefit from U.S. airstrikes and with the PUK in order to receive weapons from Iran.'<sup>1703</sup> Furthermore,

1695 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 26. Italics added

1696 *Ibid.*, 27.

1697 Scott Lucas, "Turkey daily, Nov 4. Top Kurdish official warns of attacks amid stalled negotiations with PKK," *EA Worldview*, November 4, 2014; Scott Lucas, "Turkey daily, Oct 14. Ankara bombs Kurdish targets in southeast," *EA Worldview*, October 14, 2014; Scott Lucas, "Turkey daily, Oct 19. 'Erdogan policy on Kurds will drive country into chaos' – senior MP," *EA Worldview*, October 19, 2014; Scott Lucas, "Turkey daily, Oct 29. Kurdish PKK declares end of 'peace process,'" *EA Worldview*, October 29, 2014. Also see: Ali Yenidunya, "Turkey spotlight. The Kurds & Ankara's foreign policy dilemma," *EA Worldview*, November 18, 2014.

1698 "Islamic State. Turkey to let Iraq Kurds join Kobane fight," *BBC*, October 20, 2014.

1699 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 27; Ismael, "Kobane."

1700 Wilgenburg & Saadullah, "Syrian Kurdish factions unite." Also see: Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 105.

1701 Scott Lucas, "Syria daily, Oct 28. Insurgents attack Idlib in northwest, take checkpoints around city," *EA Worldview*, October 28, 2014.

1702 "More than 20 vehicles enter the city of Kobani," *Syria Observatory for Human Rights*, October 31, 2014.

1703 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 27-8.

the Duhok Agreement acknowledged Masoud Barzani's claim to be the Kurds' paramount leader. In practice, however, Masoud Barzani failed to win the support from the PUK's and the PKK's hard-liners, who assessed his efforts as an attempt to impose his family's and party's leadership.<sup>1704</sup>

In sum, IS attacked Kobanî and the KRI contributed to the fight by sending *peshmerga*. Some scholars argued that 'in the battle for Kobani in Syria in 2014, the IS fighters fled quickly after losing a few hundred men.'<sup>1705</sup> Yet, the opposite seemed true. Despite IS' usual modus operandi of withdrawing, when opposing an overwhelming enemy, 'IS stood and fought, throwing wave after wave of fighters into the PKK-held city as the International Coalition appeared in the skies.'<sup>1706</sup> IS lost hundreds of fighters<sup>1707</sup>, possibly over 1,000 fighters, during the siege.<sup>1708</sup> Why, then, was IS willing to make such a costly exception to its usual force-preserving approach? The KRI took a remarkable strategic decision too. Why did the KRI send *peshmerga* to help the besieged Syrian Kurds?<sup>1709</sup> The KRI potentially jeopardized its relations with Turkey by sending *peshmerga* to Kobanî through Turkey, to support an organization considered terrorist by Turkey.<sup>1710</sup> Up till then, Turkey prioritized weakening the PKK and its Syrian affiliates over defeating IS. Turkey had explicitly refused any Kurdish reinforcement of Kobanî. The KRI's president Masoud Barzani was reluctant too, as the PYD were considered affiliated with his political party's rival, the PUK.<sup>1711</sup>

Even though the effect of the support was disputed, the KRI would eventually send four consecutive contingents on two-month tours to Kobanî. The deployments ended on April 27, 2015.<sup>1712</sup> Late January 2015, IS ceased besieging Kobanî, only to return mid-2015.<sup>1713</sup> IS' return to Kobanî indicated the importance that IS attached to the area.

The remainder of this chapter explores IS' strategic decision-making to attack Kobanî, and to continue by besieging, when the odds turned against IS, as well as the KRI's strategic decision-making on supporting the Syrian Kurds besieged in Kobanî. To enhance readability, this chapter treats IS' decision to attack Kobanî and to continue the siege, as two phases within a single course of action.<sup>1714</sup> When applicable, the chapter focuses on either of these phases.

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1704 *Ibid.*, 27-9.

1705 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 186.

1706 Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency."

1707 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 266.

1708 Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency."

1709 Cf. Stansfield, "Iraq," 19.

1710 Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained."

1711 Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."

1712 "Peshmerga forces leave Kobani, having secured the town," *BGN News*, April 30, 2015.

1713 YPG commander.

1714 Cf. Warden "Smart strategy, smart airpower," 108.

## 7.2 Rational actor paradigm<sup>1715</sup>

The next three sections view IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS besieging Kobanî and the KRI supporting Syrian Kurds there in late 2014 from a rational actor paradigm perspective. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: goals, perceived strategic opportunities and threats, alternative options, and consecutive cost-benefit calculations.

### 7.2.1 IS

IS had expected to conquer Kobanî in 2014, before the international coalition's air attacks started.<sup>1716</sup> Kobanî was the middlemost of three Syrian Kurdish salients. By capturing Kobanî, IS took out the possibility of a contiguous Kurdish area within Syria, thus weakening the Syrian Kurds and potentially taking them out as a rival.<sup>1717</sup> Kobanî's location forced Syrian Kurds to overstretch in defending the area. IS expected the YPG/YPJ to be 'stretching themselves thin over vast extents of territory and attempting to cover so many frontlines while relying solely on crusader [that is, Western] airstrikes.'<sup>1718</sup> On November 13, 2014, Baghdadi claimed that the airstrikes had failed and fear had led the coalition not to send ground troops to fight IS, but instead to rely on proxies.<sup>1719</sup>

Syrian Kurdish militia were among the most powerful actors in the Syrian Civil War. As fierce opponents of IS, Syrian Kurds threatened IS positions in northern Syria, as acknowledged by IS: '[d]uring the course of the *jihad* in Shām [Syria], the PYD's armed wing, the YPG, became increasingly involved in clashes with the *mujabidin* as they attempted to control a number of towns and cities in the north with significant Kurdish populations.'<sup>1720</sup> IS blamed the PYD, of 'ethnic cleansing carried out against Arabs and Turkmen.'<sup>1721</sup> Still, IS propaganda seemed more concerned with rival jihadi-salafists. IS argued with *al-Qaeda* over how to wage *jihad*, blaming *al-Qaeda* for being too elitist, compared to IS.<sup>1722</sup> Additionally, IS referred to an anti-IS coalition of other jihadist groups and the PYD in the Syrian Kurdish canton Afrin.<sup>1723</sup>

1715 Parts of paragraph 7.2 appeared as: Berge, "Armed non-state actors and strategic decision-making," 279-99.

1716 Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency." Also see: Renner, "Air power in the Battle of Mosul," 262.

1717 Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained"; Gunes, "The IS Factor," 80; Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."

1718 "American Kurdistan," 32. Cf. Black, *Geopolitics*, 83; Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the great powers*, xvi; Naji, *The management of savagery*, 7.

1719 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Even if the disbelievers despise such," audio speech, November 13, 2014, transl. unknown, in "The Islamic State creates foreign 'provinces,'" Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton's Blog*, December 6, 2014. Also see: "American Kurdistan," 30; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 16.

1720 "The fight against the PKK," 13. Italics added.

1721 "American Kurdistan," 31n7.

1722 Shamālī, "Al-Qā'idah of Wazīristan," 41-51

1723 "The allies of al-Qā'idah in Sham," 8. Cf. Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 182. Also see: Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

The fight over Kobanî received international media attention, which provided IS an opportunity to present itself as the vanguard of traditionalism against the secular Syrian Kurdish forces.<sup>1724</sup> As such, IS presented the siege as a decisive battle against Western forces<sup>1725</sup>, possibly framing it as the foretold apocalyptic battle at Dabiq.<sup>1726</sup> Yet, international media attention was not guaranteed when IS started its advance on Kobanî. Therefore, other than IS' internal media outlets, media attention offered no plausible explanation for IS deciding to attack Kobanî. However, once IS was besieging Kobanî, the international media attention influenced IS' strategic decision to continue, despite the high numbers of casualties. To what extent media attention is worth such a loss in personnel is questionable.<sup>1727</sup> IS propaganda suggested that IS fought a moral fight in Kobanî, when it published photos of burning drugs and cigarettes – *haram* (forbidden) according to *shari'a* – from captured PKK compounds.<sup>1728</sup> Such propaganda re-emphasized IS' claims of Kurdish secularism.

Kobanî's importance followed from the corridor of oil pipelines there, through which around \$2 million worth of oil passed daily. As Kobanî is situated along the Syrian-Turkish border, controlling the town means controlling a border passage between Syria and Turkey, through which men and equipment can be transferred.<sup>1729</sup> IS potentially looked to Turkey as a potential ally, in particular sharing the Kurds as perceived enemies.<sup>1730</sup> IS claimed that '[i]n Turkey, the communists [PKK] began rioting, and even attacking and killing Muslims in anger over the course of events on the [Kobanî] battlefield.'<sup>1731</sup> Given IS' non-conformationist ideology, more likely is an intention to divide regional allies, in particular Turkey and the KRI. Forcing the KRI to support Syrian Kurds, whom Turkey considered terrorist, potentially jeopardized relations between Turkey and the KRI.<sup>1732</sup> Harm to its relations with Turkey would seriously damage the KRI's already battered economy.<sup>1733</sup>

Another opportunity for IS was northern Syria's flat landscape, which made attacking Kobanî easier compared to a city within a mountainous area. On the downside, the city – once taken – would be hard to defend. Apart from the strategic benefits, capturing Kobanî might pose a considerable symbolic opportunity. The Arab name for the town is 'Ayn al-Arab (Spring of

1724 Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency." Also see: Flood, "Victory at any cost."

1725 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1726 *Dabiq* 1-15 (2014-5), 2. Cf. Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 4. Also see: Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 12.

1727 Cf. Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1728 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 17.

1729 Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 20; Toivanen, *The Kobane generation*, 4; Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."

1730 Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 103, 106.

1731 "Islamic State report," *Dabiq* 5, 15.

1732 Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 13. Cf. Bengio, "The Islamic State," 3.

1733 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 18.

the Arabs) and IS had renamed it ‘Ayn al-Islām (Spring of Islam).<sup>1734</sup> As such, the town might be considered to be the focal point of the Islamic world in Syria.<sup>1735</sup>

Among its ranks, IS had a significant number of Kurdish fighters, who were allegedly deployed in Kobanî profiting from their acquaintance of local circumstances, language and culture. Some analysts suggested that IS used Kurdish IS-members to win over local Kurds, or at least to show that IS was open to accepting Kurds.<sup>1736</sup>

Considering the opportunities and threats, IS in essence could chose to hold, to attack, or to delegate. The strategic costs to hold included a delay in expanding the caliphate.<sup>1737</sup> Then, IS remained, but – at least temporarily – would not expand. More important, the YPG/YPJ continued to threaten IS’ lines of communication near Kobanî.<sup>1738</sup> To hold offered IS the opportunity to recuperate, and thus not risk overreach after fierce battles in northern Syria – including against the YPG/YPJ – and given the offensive IS started in Ramadi, Iraq, in October.<sup>1739</sup>

To attack, potentially led to IS control over territories, which needed governance and contained hostile inhabitants, thus risking overreach. With its limited resources, IS then had to fight too many battles on different fronts.<sup>1740</sup> Attacking expanded the caliphate geographically and demographically<sup>1741</sup>, allowed IS to continue gaining resources as war spoils<sup>1742</sup>, and confirmed IS’ claim as the jihadi-salafist vanguard against secularism.<sup>1743</sup>

To delegate the attack on Kobanî to a proxy, provided IS the benefits of the hold and attack options, without much of the costs. To delegate allowed IS to recuperate and avoid the risk of overreach, as IS saved resources, compared to the attack-option. However, IS had bad experiences with proxies. Early 2014, JaN pledged allegiance to *al-Qaeda*, becoming a rival

1734 “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 5, 15.

1735 “The Islamic State before al-malhamah,” 9-11.

1736 Speri, “Not all Kurds.”

1737 “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 2, 12-13. Cf. Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, 12; Lewis, *The crisis of Islam*, 29-38; Moussalli, “Wahhabism, salafism and Islamism,” 17-8.

1738 Sax, “YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria.”

1739 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 221.

1740 Gerges, *ISIS*, 43; Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 341. Cf. Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,340-1n23.

1741 “From hijrah to khilafah,” 37; “Indeed your lord is ever watchful,” 9; “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 1, 12; “Khilafah declared,” 11; “Remaining and expanding,” 32-3.

1742 Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 21-4; Whiteside *et al.*, “The ISIS files – The Islamic State’s Department of Soldiers,” 19-20, 40n85.

1743 For example: “Islamic State report,” *Dabiq* 5, 17.

in Syria.<sup>1744</sup> IS preferred incorporating groups by pledging *bay'ah* to Baghdadi.<sup>1745</sup> Arguably, acting by proxy, would not fit the goal of lasting and expanding.

Concerning Kobanî, IS' best option from a cost-benefit calculation was to attack Kobanî. At the time that IS advanced towards the town, external support for the Syrian Kurds was lacking. The isolated position of Syria's Kurds benefitted IS. IS choose to attack Kobanî, as it was the only option for achieving its strategic goal, according to its jihadi-salafist ideology. Inherent of attacking, was the risk of overreach. And that was exactly what happened.<sup>1746</sup> IS acknowledged it had expected to conquer Kobanî in 2014, before the international coalition's air attacks started.<sup>1747</sup> Although the air attacks initially seemed incapable of stopping IS, when the air attacks increased and repelled IS, IS continued attacking nevertheless. The rational actor paradigm did not provide solid explanations for continuing the attack, which turned into a siege.

### 7.2.2 The KRI

The KRI committed to defeating IS, together with the PYD, in the Duhok Agreement.<sup>1748</sup> Five days after signing the Duhok Agreement, Turkey allowed the KRI *peshmerga* to reinforce Syrian Kurdish forces in Kobanî.<sup>1749</sup> As IS' main threat against the KRI had disappeared before the Duhok Agreement was settled, why did the KRI choose to get involved in Kobanî?

Some analysts argued that the KRI chose to support fellow-Kurds in Kobanî from an identity perspective.<sup>1750</sup> Furthermore, next to protecting Kurdish territories, the KRI wanted to 'break up and disrupt their [IS] subversive strategies, to wear out their ability to carry out large scale military actions, and to slowly diminish and eradicate their power.'<sup>1751</sup> The KRI was reluctant to fight IS outside Kurdish territories, fearing backlash ramifications and disapproval among Arab populations. Thus, the KRI choose to support the coalition against IS, including the ISF. Supporting Syrian Kurds in Kobanî out of Kurdish unity<sup>1752</sup>, seems in line with that strategy, fighting IS, without harassing Iraqi – or Syrian – Arabs.

When IS attacked Kobanî in September 2014, the KRI was relatively secure. IS had been pushed back from the KRI and slowly the *peshmerga* advanced into IS-controlled territory in northern Iraq. IS continued to threaten the KRI by using terrorist tactics, in particular (suicide

1744 Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 13-4.

1745 For example: Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story."

1746 Cf. Fishman, *The master plan*, 234.

1747 Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency."

1748 Wilgenburg & Saadullah, "Syrian Kurdish factions unite." Also see: Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 105.

1749 Gunes, "The IS Factor," 78. Also see: Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1750 Abbaszadah, "KRG's military help to Kobane"; Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained."

1751 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 27.

1752 *Ibid.*, 27-30.

bomb attacks, mainly aimed at the KRI's governmental institutions and allies. Furthermore, the KRI feared an influx of refugees if IS captured Kobanî.<sup>1753</sup>

Facing IS increased the foreign support for the KRI, and its *peshmerga* forces in particular. Especially Western donors regarded the *peshmerga* the vanguard to counter IS in combination with coalition air support, as was acknowledged by Masoud Barzani. The KRI regarded foreign support as international recognition for a de facto independent entity. At least it provided the *peshmerga* an opportunity of no longer being weakened by sanctions imposed by the Iraqi regime.<sup>1754</sup>

Turkey remained skeptical on the issue of assisting Syrian Kurds in Kobanî, fearing Syrian Kurdish secession might ignite similar developments in Turkey.<sup>1755</sup> Still, Turkey had joined the coalition against IS on October 2, 2014.<sup>1756</sup> Turkey's coalition membership created opportunities for the PYD and the KRI. Secret meetings – apparently, not that secret – between the PYD and Turkish intelligence officials led to Turkey allowing support for the PYD, in return for the PYD dissolving self-rule for the cantons and joining the FSA.<sup>1757</sup> The compromise allowed reinforcements for Kobanî via Turkey. Supplies were no problem, but Western military involvement in Kobanî remained unacceptable for Turkey, fearing the enhancement of a Syrian Kurdish, PYD-dominated region. Thus, the KRI proved the only acceptable option for Turkey to reinforce Kobanî. As part of its zero-problems-with-neighbors policy, Turkey had established economic and political relations with the KRI.<sup>1758</sup> The Arab uprisings and ongoing PKK attacks in Turkey from Iraqi soil had cooled these relations.<sup>1759</sup>

Concerning Kobanî, the KRI had the options to hold, to attack, or to delegate. To hold, the KRI appeared weak, while at the same time, it led to sympathy from regional and international actors, as the KRI was not an aggressor as seen in June 2014. The KRI would save essential resources compared to the attack-option, not burdening the KRI's already hammered economic situation. Also, the KRI maintained its relations with Turkey.<sup>1760</sup> By holding, the KRI did not pressure IS, eventually running the risk of increased attacks in the KRI, if IS maintained or strengthened its position in northern Syria. The KRI ran the risk that its reputation might be that of self-interest, not showing interest in the suffering of fellow-Kurds, who did help the KRI when it was in need in August 2014.

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1753 Coles, "Kurds' battle for Kobani."

1754 "Confidence in the future." Also see: "American Kurdistan," 30.

1755 Barkey, "What's behind Turkey's u-turn"; Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 160.

1756 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1757 Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."

1758 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 21.

1759 Noi, "The Arab Spring," 15-29

1760 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 21, 111-3.

To attack – that is, joining the fight against IS in Kobanî – meant increasing pressure on IS, thus providing IS less options to conduct attacks in the KRI. Also, by showing solidarity with Syria’s Kurds, the KRI would greatly benefit internationally. The KRI proved not only to be capable of defending its own territory, but also a reliable and responsible international partner, able and willing to contribute to international coalitions and negotiate with international partners, such as Turkey.<sup>1761</sup> Perhaps a sentiment of returning solidarity played a role as well, as both Syrian Kurds and the PKK responded and fought IS during the August 2014 attack on the KRI. The downside of joining the fight in Kobanî, was that the KRI became a legitimate target for IS. Another risk would be overextension. Since IS’ attack on the KRI, the KRI suffered from economic decline, mostly due to halted investments.<sup>1762</sup> Also, the KRI jeopardized its relations with Turkey by supporting the PYD.<sup>1763</sup>

To delegate meant that the KRI was only indirectly involved in the conflict against IS in Kobanî. Costs would be limited to providing money, equipment, and training to Syrian Kurdish proxies. This potentially disrupted the KRI’s good relations with Turkey. Also, the extent of money, equipment, and training delivered burdened the KRI’s battered economy.<sup>1764</sup> To delegate, the KRI secured human resources, and avoided overstretch.

By joining the fight in Kobanî, the KRI showed solidarity with fellow Kurds, while, at the same time, it maintained relations with Turkey. The KRI’s assistance for the Syrian Kurds seemed brokered by the United States. The KRI appeared the only option acceptable for Turkey: “Turkey sees Iraq’s Kurds as more reliable and less threatening, coming from a semi-autonomous state with which it can do business.”<sup>1765</sup> The KRI provided the only reinforcement acceptable for all relevant parties. To hold or to delegate would damage the KRI’s reputation among fellow-Kurds and international actors alike.

### 7.2.3 Reflections

With its focus on strategic goals, the rational actor paradigm in this case found that the strategic dimensions of politics, geography, strategic theory and doctrine, ideology, adversary, friction, chance, and uncertainty, allies, and time explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI. To a lesser extent, economics and logistics played a role. IS aimed to control northern Syria and the KRI preferred Kurdish control over northern Syria (geography), to expand or to support an independent political entity, respectively (politics). While Kobanî was a border

1761 Abbaszadah, “KRG’s military help to Kobane.” Cf. Coggins, “Rebel diplomacy,” 98.

1762 Kulaksiz *et al.*, “Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” 18.

1763 Cf. Bengio, “The Islamic State,” 3.

1764 Kulaksiz *et al.*, “Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” 111-113.

1765 “Islamic State. Turkey to let Iraq Kurds join Kobane fight.”

town with oil pipelines to Turkey for resources (economics and logistics), IS' jihadi-salafism versus Kurdish secular nationalism (strategic theory and doctrine) seemed to prevail to the point that Kobanî became a goal by itself (ideology). The rational actor paradigm's analysis of threats and opportunities, where one actor's threats usually are the other actor's opportunities and vice versa, indicates that IS feared the Syrian Kurds. The other way around, the KRI feared an influx of more refugees from northern Syria, and during the siege, both sides feared losing the symbolic Kobanî (adversary). IS could benefit from resources acquired in northern Iraq<sup>1766</sup>, Kobanî's proximity, and its central location, while for the KRI, supporting the YPG and the YPJ meant that IS could be fought from a relative safe distance from the KRI, creating strategic depth (friction, chance, and uncertainty). The KRI and its Syrian Kurdish allies benefitted from Western partners, which actually had pushed the KRI to support Kobanî (allies), and were joined by Turkey (time). Out of the options offered – that is, to hold, to attack, or to delegate – IS and the KRI preferred the option that most likely achieved the actors' strategic goals in the short term. IS preferred to attack to expand the caliphate and the KRI preferred to attack IS by supporting the YPG/YPJ, pressured by its Western allies, though. As such, the rational actor paradigm provides solid explanations for the decisions taken.

Yet, the analysis seems incomplete and some analytical weaknesses emerge within the rational actor paradigm. The paradigm simplifies the strategic dimensions by considering them linear, instead of non-linear, thus overlooking how they influence one another, for example how ideology established symbolism, which created opportunities for both IS and the KRI. The costs and benefits that are mentioned for the options, typically are not qualified and the paradigm cannot explain IS' decision to continue the siege when the airstrikes increased. IS' cost-benefit analysis should have concluded that lifting the siege was its most beneficial option. The cost-benefit analysis also struggles with the KRI's solidarity: for the KRI, the most rational option might have been not to join the siege, or only to send weapons and munitions, instead of also sending manpower.<sup>1767</sup> Still, the KRI joined the Duhok Agreements and fulfilled its obligations, indicating bureaucratic constraints, reminiscent of the organizational behavior paradigm.

Overall, the rational actor paradigm is helpful to explain strategic decision-making of IS to attack Kobanî, but it cannot explain IS' continuation of the attack into a siege, nor fully explain the KRI's decision to support the YPG/YPJ. The findings above suggest analytical discrepancies and overlap with the organizational behavior paradigm. Thus, in this case, the paradigm is insufficient to fully explain strategic decision-making.

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<sup>1766</sup> Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

<sup>1767</sup> *Ibid.*

### 7.3 Organizational behavior paradigm

The next three sections apply the organizational behavior paradigm to IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS besieging Kobanî and the KRI supporting the Syrian Kurds there in late 2014. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: decision-making organizations, SOPs' capabilities and constraints, options, and implementation.

#### 7.3.1 IS

Since June 2014, the caliph and the *shura* council remained the decision-making organizations within IS on the strategic level. Within the *diwan al-jund*, on the military strategic level, the conventional force of the caliphate army protected IS' territorial integrity across Iraq and Syria, whereas the irregular Dabiq army functioned as shock troops.<sup>1768</sup> IS deployed Kurdish fighters in Kobanî in order to benefit from their knowledge of local circumstances, language and culture.<sup>1769</sup>

Whereas IS considered Iraq and Syria as one battlefield<sup>1770</sup>, analysts had noted differences between its Iraqi and its Syrian branch.<sup>1771</sup> IS' commitment in capturing Kobanî, sending in reinforcements from Aleppo and Raqqa<sup>1772</sup>, seemed ill coordinated with its Iraqi theatre of operations, where IS launched a vicious attack on Ramadi in October.<sup>1773</sup> Further reinforcements from Iraq to Kobanî thus seemed impossible, therefore constraining options for IS. Still, the relatively high level of autonomy that IS frontline commanders possessed, made that the different battlefields hardly affected one another.<sup>1774</sup> Orton explained that 'the broad strategic policy is already outlined, and its implementation is tasked to local leaders,' adding that the 'decentralisation of operational decisions is a key part of IS' military strategy, entrusting the execution of ordinances to local emirs who have better granular knowledge.'<sup>1775</sup> Decentralization of operations made IS resilient against internal threats and against another *sabwa* (awakening).<sup>1776</sup> Yet, analysts concluded that 'dissimilar ideologies and objectives seem to be pulling the Islamic State military operations

1768 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 8.

1769 Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1770 See: Eyal, "Introduction," 3-4; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 4, 205; Stephens, "The emergence of ISIS," 15.

1771 Bilger, "ISIS annual reports," 10-1.

1772 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1773 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 221-2. Nevertheless, IS was able to capture Ramadi on May 17, 2015.

1774 Stephens, "The emergence of ISIS," 14.

1775 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 14. For example: "Fighting alongside FSA factions"; "Negotiations and ceasefire agreement with the regime over the thermal plant and surrounding in Aleppo," *Islamic State*, June 2013, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1776 *Ibid.*, 15.

in different directions. Within the leadership there are Salafi ideologues, former *Baathist* [sic] military officers of considerable skill, and hybrids of the two.<sup>1777</sup>

The different factions within IS' ranks – notably the Caucasian faction, which dominated IS' Syrian branch – undermined 'the portrayal of a well-organized "foreign jihadist" effort which has systematically taken over the insurgency.'<sup>1778</sup> Instead, ad hoc circumstances and opportunities seemed to determine decision-making.<sup>1779</sup> Illustrative is the split of the northern Caucasian foreign fighter group *Jaish al-Muhajireen wal Ansar* (Army of Emigrants and Helpers; JMA) into two factions, of which, eventually, one joined IS and the other JaN.<sup>1780</sup> The *Liwa Dawud* faction – known for its ruthlessness and determination – that joined IS, took a prominent role in the siege of Kobani.<sup>1781</sup> Yet, a faction within *Liwa Dawud* emerged on August 15, 2014, when the *Katibat al-Aqsa* (The supreme brigade) faction separately pledged *bay'ah* to Baghdadi. The faction consisted of former JMA fighters. In October 2014, *Katibat al-Aqsa* was involved in IS's attack on Kobani<sup>1782</sup>, as a mobile, special operations forces-type unit.<sup>1783</sup> The Caucasian factions conducted fierce attacks, similar to attacks that had brought success at Menagh Airbase the year before.<sup>1784</sup>

Compared to a year earlier, anti-IS airstrikes, since August 2014, significantly constrained IS' opportunities.<sup>1785</sup> Watson concluded that IS' 'assault on Kobani was the Islamic State's last real attempt to launch a conventional attack on a ground force backed by coalition airpower.'<sup>1786</sup> IS could no longer move in convoys, but had to move in separate vehicles along oil pipelines, which were avoided by the coalition airstrikes.<sup>1787</sup> Next to a limited freedom of movement, the airstrikes forced IS to apply concealment.<sup>1788</sup> Thus, IS' jihadi-salafist ideology of '[s]preading the faith by the sword, killing infidels and purifying the Islamic world from foreign ideas and

1777 Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 2. Italics added. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 271.

1778 Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story."

1779 *Ibid.*; Prothero, "Star pupil."

1780 Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Video – Chechen amir Seyfullakh Shishani & Jaish Khilafatul Islamia join Jabhat al-Nusra," *EA Worldview*, December 30, 2013. Also see: Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. Insurgent split – the dispute between Abu Umar al-Shishani & his deputy, Seyfullakh the Chechen," *EA Worldview*, November 23, 2013; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. Some north Caucasian militants swear allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," *EA Worldview*, November 21, 2013.

1781 YPG commander.

1782 Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story." Also see: Maciej Falkowski & Józef Lang, "Homo jihadicus. Islam in the former USSR and the phenomemon of post-Soviet militants in Syria and Iraq" (Warsaw: *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich*, 2015), 42-7.

1783 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 43.

1784 "Iraq. ISIL says Omar al-Shishani killed"; Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story." Also see: Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 43; Prothero, "Star pupil."

1785 "Bringing down the towns iv."

1786 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 81.

1787 *Asayesh* officers.

1788 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

lifestyles<sup>1789</sup>, changed into a doctrine of ‘surprising the enemy forces in weak areas, in which the *mujahideen* can be secure in their superiority in force,’ to ‘strike or neutralize the force of the enemy’ while avoiding ‘losses in the ranks of the *mujahideen* as far as possible.’<sup>1790</sup>

IS’ jihadi-salafist ideology was a constraint, which made fighting not only a means – to conquer territories, defeat infidels, and gain support – but an end in itself.<sup>1791</sup> However, IS did not waste its resources easily.<sup>1792</sup> According to IS’ doctrine to avoid unnecessary casualties among its ranks, IS should have withdrawn once it realized it was unable to conquer Kobanî and suffered many – too many – casualties.<sup>1793</sup> It did not. ‘When it [IS] faltered militarily, it would launch tenacious operational counteroffensives, and then shift its strategies and adjust or innovate its tactics accordingly.’<sup>1794</sup> Yet, analysts observed that ‘when outnumbered the Islamic State frequently relinquishes terrain to suit its own operational needs and often signals an awareness that they will be forced from attacked areas in short order. Though the Islamic State frequently holds out until the last possible moment before withdrawing, they have a track record of draining their main forces from areas that are about to be attacked.’<sup>1795</sup> Noteworthy here, is that IS ideology included an Islamic prophecy, foreseeing an all-decisive battle between believers and non-believers in the Syrian town of Dabiq, roughly one hundred kilometers from Kobanî. As the siege evolved and the anti-IS coalition entered, IS may have seen Kobanî as the prophetic battle.

Beyond the ideological factor, by continuing the siege, even when the odds turned against IS, IS behaved according to the social psychology phenomenon of the sunk cost fallacy, to ‘persist with the option which they have already invested in and resist changing to another option that might be more suitable regarding the future requirements of the situation.’<sup>1796</sup> IS had taken the strategic decision to attack Kobanî and, in a counter-productive manner, decided to continue the attack, thus risking and sacrificing too many resources.

The organizational behavior paradigm provides an image of different sub-organizations, notably the Caucasian factions, which applied ad hoc decision-making and relied on fierce attacks, which had delivered success in the past. Yet, the coalition airstrikes significantly limited IS’ opportunities. Despite the attacks, IS’ ideology seemed more important than its

1789 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 10.

1790 “Bringing down the towns i.” Italics added. Also see: “Bringing down the towns iv.”

1791 “Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism,” 20-4.

1792 “The looming assault on Mosul.”

1793 Cf. Orton, “Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency.”

1794 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 209.

1795 Knights & Mello, “The cult of the offensive,” 3.

1796 Markus Domeier *et al.*, “Motivational reasons for biased decisions. The sunk cost effect’s instrumental rationality,” *Frontiers in psychology* 9 (2018), 4. Cf. Fukuyama, *Identity*, 85; Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 275; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 23-4. Also see: Ariely, *Predictably irrational*, 243-4; Kahneman, *Ons feilbare denken*, 287-8.

doctrine. Possibly, the Dabiq-prophecy played a role here. It resulted in a counter-productive continuation of the siege of Kobanî.

### 7.3.2 The KRI

Members of the KRI's parliament discussed aiding Kobanî in early October 2014 and agreed that help was needed. They disagreed on the role of the PYD. As Kobanî was surrounded by IS in the east, south, and west, the town could only be reached via Turkey, which considered the PYD as an ally of its archenemy the PKK.<sup>1797</sup> The discussions reflected the differences between the KDP and the PUK, of which the latter maintained an ideological partnership with the PYD. Internally, some reports on the PYD's YPG and YPJ militias suggested that the achievements of the all-female YPJ sparked disagreements with its male equivalent, the YPG, and criticism from Kurdish society in general.<sup>1798</sup>

The KDP could gain popularity among Kurdish populations by joining the fight, as the PYD and the PKK had done in August.<sup>1799</sup> The support mostly seemed symbolic and partly served domestic interests: '[s]upportive sentiments among the Iraqi Kurds have been assuaged by gestures such as the dispatch of a modest number of *Peshmerga* to fight alongside the PYD forces in Kobanê in late 2014.'<sup>1800</sup> The KRI support also had an external element: '[a]fter thwarting the immediate danger, the KRI intensified its public relations campaign using the Kurdistan Region Security Council, the KRG Department of Foreign Relations, its representative offices abroad, lobbying firms, friendly ex-officials, and political allies to solicit Western support, arms, and equipment.'<sup>1801</sup> The main message was that 'the *Peshmerga* are on the frontline; the war is costly, we have given huge sacrifices with the *Peshmerga* giving the ultimate sacrifice, the war is not over yet, and we need your support.'<sup>1802</sup> The external message explains why the KRI were eager to send the *peshmerga*, whereas the YPG and the YPJ requested weapons and munitions, not extra manpower.<sup>1803</sup>

The rivalry between the KDP and the PUK caused differences on how to effectuate assistance. The KDP had established beneficial economic ties with Turkey and was reluctant towards the PYD, an affiliate of its domestic rival, the PUK. The PUK supported the PYD unequivocally,

1797 "Kurdistan MPs debate hurdles to aiding Kobane," *Rûdaw*, October 5, 2014.

1798 Gareth Platt, "A Kurdish female fighter's war story: 'I don't know how many I've killed in Kobani - I don't see Isis as human,'" *International Business Times*, October 23, 2014.

1799 Coles, "Kurds' battle for Kobani." Cf. Cheterian, "Turkey in 2017," 142.

1800 Ismaeel, "Kobane." Italics added.

1801 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 9.

1802 Falah Bakhtiar, in Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 9. Italics added.

1803 "Interview with YPJ commander in Kobanê"; "Islamic State. Turkey to let Iraq Kurds join Kobane fight."

but – associated as an affiliate of the PKK – struggled with how to gain Turkish consent to support the Syrian Kurds in Kobanî.

### 7.3.3 Reflections

With its focus on how an actor is organized, assuming internal bureaucratic struggle and an emphasis on doctrine, the organizational behavior paradigm in this case found that IS' modus operandi of combining conventional and unconventional warfare remained largely unchanged, compared to IS attacking Nineveh in June 2014. Yet, *Liwa Dawud's* preferred fierce attacks to break sieges and the simultaneous offensives in Kobanî and Ramadi – risking overreach –, deviated from IS' usual cautious modus operandi (politics, strategic theory and doctrine, culture). In 2015, analysts observed that 'at the operational level they [IS] lack strategic coherence,' adding that 'the Islamic State seems to be effectively led at the strategic level by some genuinely capable planners, but at the operational level there is seemingly much less opportunity for centralized control. Instead, the Islamic State's military operations have become gradually more disjointed and localized in their scope and scale since the fall of Mosul.'<sup>1804</sup> For the KRI, the deployment of *peshmerga* beyond the KRI's borders, was a deviation from its earlier foreign policy (politics, strategic theory and doctrine, culture). Within the KRI, the split between the KDP and the PUK caused differences on how to effectuate assistance of the Syrian Kurds in Kobanî (organization, command, politics). The differences focused on maintaining relations with Turkey versus supporting the PYD (allies). Eventually, a compromise emerged. Additionally, and unverified by this study<sup>1805</sup>, some analysts suggested that IS' jihadi-salafism was inherently anti-Kurdish<sup>1806</sup>, whereas the KRI showed solidarity with Syrian Kurds (identity, ideology).

The organizational behavior paradigm simplifies the strategic dimensions mentioned above, by considering them linear, instead of non-linear, thus overlooking how they influence one another, for example how the KRI's solidarity with the Syrian Kurds led to adapting its foreign policy. Furthermore, the organizational behavior paradigm cannot fully explain IS' strategic decision-making, as IS was fragmented but largely acted as a unitary actor.

Overall, as the actors involved in Kobanî were highly fragmented, the organizational behavior paradigm is helpful to explain strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI. Yet, in this case,

1804 Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 2.

1805 For example: "Kurdish language shar'i session, Raqqa province," *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi;

"Notice to soldiers of Raqqa on vacated Kurds' homes," *Islamic State*, June 26, 2015, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi;

"Prohibition on attacking Kurdish property in Raqqa," *Islamic State*, July 18, 2015, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1806 Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 6-7, 17. For example: "Notification for Kurds to leave Raqqa city."

overlooking the interactions between the strategic dimensions, the paradigm is insufficient to fully explain strategic decision-making.

## 7.4 Governmental politics paradigm

The next three sections apply the governmental politics paradigm to IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS besieging Kobani and the KRI supporting Syrian Kurds there in late 2014. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: which leaders play, what are their stands, what is their impact, and what is their action channel?

### 7.4.1 IS

Baghdadi's reputation and prestige remained unchallenged among IS' ranks, despite the first setbacks in August 2014. While his military style was described as 'robust and confrontational'<sup>1807</sup>, Baghdadi left the conduct of operations to local commanders.<sup>1808</sup> That approach can be expected to have increased with the establishment of the caliphate, including its governance, and the exposure since.

Late 2014, Anbari was the governor for Syria.<sup>1809</sup> He was responsible for IS' Syrian affairs and intelligence cells.<sup>1810</sup> Anbari had become involved in several jihadi-salafist groups during the time of JTJ and had assisted transferring JTJ into AQL. He was arrested and detained twice, but released early 2012. ISI tasked him to establish lines of communication with *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates. He was closely involved in the decision to dissolve JaN and establish ISIS. Later, Anbari became responsible for the *shari'a* council and joined the delegated committee in Syria.

After ISIS had captured Mosul in June 2014, Anbari requested to join the jihad in Iraq, participating in battles against the PKK and the KRI *peshmerga* in Sinjar. Yet, ISIS summoned him to assume a governance position, which he did. Anbari died at age sixty, during a coalition raid, allegedly by igniting his explosives belt when almost arrested.<sup>1811</sup> Anbari's biographic obituary and other descriptions sketch a fanatic jihadi-salafist who built and maintained relations among like-minded organizations and their leaders and held great authority. He believed in jihad, joining fights near Sinjar despite fulfilling leadership positions. Anbari's

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1807 Atwan, "A portrait of caliph Ibrahim," 69, 72.

1808 Cf. "Bringing down the towns i"; "Bringing down the towns iii"; "Bringing down the towns iv."

1809 Orton, "The Islamic State's official biography of the caliph's deputy," n9, n12.

1810 *Ibid.* Also see: Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 29.

1811 "Der Gelehrte," 10-5. Also see: Orton, "The Islamic State's official biography of the caliph's deputy," n10; Starr *et al.*, "Pentagon."

obituary mentioned that he was asked or tasked to perform specific duties within IS, which might have contributed to his authority as a suitable man for the job.

Sources mentioned Abu Umar al-Shishani as the IS military commander in northern Syria in 2014.<sup>1812</sup> Born in 1988 and raised as a shepherd boy by a Christian father and a Muslim mother, Shishani had participated in Chechen rebel operations against Russian forces during the 1990s. He joined Georgia's military in 2006 and was selected for its American-trained special forces.<sup>1813</sup> Shishani served during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, but was discharged from the army due to tuberculosis in June 2010. In September 2010, he was sentenced to three years in a Georgian prison for illegally buying and storing weapons. Shishani was released after sixteen months, because his health deteriorated. Allegedly, it was during his time in prison Shishani became religious and learned the principles of Islam.<sup>1814</sup> During his military service Shishani had shown no dedication to Islam or jihadist tendencies.<sup>1815</sup>

As the *emir* of JMA, Shishani had acted as the leader of ISIS in northern Syria since the summer of 2013, fighting Syrian regime forces, rival jihadist groups, and Kurdish militias. Shishani gained prominence when insurgents, after a two-year siege, captured Menagh Airbase from Syrian regime troops in August 2013.<sup>1816</sup> Shishani was known to apply large-scale assaults that included suicide attacks<sup>1817</sup>, as well as small raids to free prisoners or gain resources.<sup>1818</sup> Additionally, his training and experience offered Shishani insights in American-style<sup>1819</sup> and Russian-style doctrine<sup>1820</sup>, respectively.

Probably triggered by a decision of *al-Qaeda* leader Zawahiri to disband ISIS<sup>1821</sup>, Shishani pledged allegiance to Baghdadi in November 2013, officially joining ISIS.<sup>1822</sup> According to

1812 Baghdadi, untitled speech, January 19, 2014; Cafarella & Szybala, "ISIS's second front in Syria"; Salafi, in Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi." Also see: Prothero, "Star pupil." Shishani was the *kunya* of Tarkhan Batirashvili.

1813 Blair, "ISIS"; Lucas, "Syria analysis: The 'true' story"; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 38-9; Prothero, "Star pupil."

1814 Lucas, "Syria analysis: The 'true' story"; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Chechen fighter Abu Umar al-Shishani 'likes to spend time in jacuzzi in his Aleppo villa,'" *EA Worldview*, December 19, 2013.

1815 Prothero, "Star pupil."

1816 "Iraq. ISIL says Omar al-Shishani killed"; Lucas, "Syria analysis: The 'true' story"; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 43; Prothero, "Star pupil."

1817 For example: Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar Shishani shown planning major attack in new ISIS propaganda video," *EA Worldview*, March 10, 2014.

1818 For example: *FiSyria*, no date, transl. unknown, in Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar al-Shishani & ISIS claim advance from Al-Bab to Manbij, capture base," *EA Worldview*, January 20, 2014; *FiSyria*, no date, transl. unknown, in Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Video – Abu Umar al-Shishani & Abu Jihad al-Shishani talk of ISIS battles in Al Bab, Aleppo," *EA Worldview*, January 14, 2014.

1819 Blair, "ISIS."

1820 Lucas, "Syria analysis: The 'true' story."

1821 Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. Some north Caucasian militants."

1822 Paraszczuk, "Syria. Where in the world." Also see: Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 41; Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. Insurgent split."

Shishani, 80 percent of his fighters joined ISIS with him. Pledging *bay'ah* to Baghdadi probably was a way for Shishani to consolidate his increasing power as the ISIS *emir* of northern Syria.<sup>1823</sup> The extent of his power remains disputed, though<sup>1824</sup>, as well as his leadership skills.<sup>1825</sup>

Shishani expressed no clear vision for Syria's future, apart from establishing an Islamic state and *shari'a*.<sup>1826</sup> Described as a 'relatively poor public speaker'<sup>1827</sup>, Shishani, nevertheless, had much exposure via social media. Together with his second-in-command, he released videos discussing battles, jihadi-salafism, jihadi infighting, and the *bay'ah* to Baghdadi.<sup>1828</sup> One video mentioned the expectation to unite the territories under ISIS control 'from Raqqa to ad-Dana in Idlib Province'<sup>1829</sup>, thus indicating intentions to control all of northern Syria. In a 2013 interview, Shishani presented his perceptions of Kurds, following fights with the YPG. Shishani mentioned incidents in which the YPG – referred to by Shishani as the PKK – behaved aggressive towards Sunni Muslims and shot jihadi fighters in the back. Also, Shishani saw the female Kurdish fighters among the YPG as proof of the PKK rigidly demanding families to supply fighters for the PKK.<sup>1830</sup>

1823 For example: *FiSyria*, no date, transl. unknown, in Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria, Site close to Abu Umar al-Shishani 'today they want to get rid of ISIS, tomorrow other mujahideen,'" *EA Worldview*, January 10, 2014; *FiSyria*, in Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar al-Shishani & ISIS claim advance"; *FiSyria*, in Paraszczuk, "Syria. Video – Abu Umar al-Shishani & Abu Jihad al-Shishani talk of ISIS battles"; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar Shishani's right-hand man explains ISIS-insurgent conflict," *EA Worldview*, February 6, 2014. Also see: Paraszczuk, "Syria. Chechen fighter Abu Umar al-Shishani."

1824 For example: Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria video feature. The Chechen jihadists & the Islamic State of Iraq," *EA Worldview*, September 11, 2013; Umar al-Shishani & Abu Khalid al-Suri, agreement between ISIS and AaS, no date, transl. unknown, in "Syria. Truce between ISIS's Abu Umar al-Shishani & Ahrar ash-Sham on eastern front in Aleppo province," Joanna Paraszczuk, *EA Worldview*, January 8, 2014.

1825 For example: Paraszczuk, "Syria. Where in the world?"; Umar al-Shishani, "Note from Omar al-Shishani," *Islamic State*, early 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1826 Paraszczuk, "Syria. Where in the world?" Also see: Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story"; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 41; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. ISIS Chechen leader Abu Umar al-Shishani – 'Dokka Umarov financed us,'" *EA Worldview*, December 10, 2013.

1827 Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story"; Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar Shishani's right-hand man."

1828 Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. ISIS military leader Umar Shishani to Syrian people – 'we didn't come to fight you,'" *EA Worldview*, January 21, 2014. Also see: *FiSyria*, in Paraszczuk, "Syria. Site close to Abu Umar al-Shishani"; *FiSyria*, in Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar al-Shishani & ISIS claim advance"; *FiSyria*, in Paraszczuk, "Syria. Video – Abu Umar al-Shishani & Abu Jihad al-Shishani talk of ISIS battles"; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Abu Umar al-Shishani – 'Jaish al-Muhajireen wal Ansar joined ISIS after al-Baghdadi oath,'" *EA Worldview*, December 14, 2013; Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar Shishani's right-hand man."

1829 Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar al-Shishani of ISIS on need for unity, & of spoils according to rules of jihad," *EA Worldview*, December 19, 2013.

1830 *FiSyria*, no date, transl. unknown, in "Syria spotlight. Chechen jihad leader Abu Umar Al Shishani on clashes with Kurds," Joanna Paraszczuk, *EA Worldview*, October 12, 2013. Also see: Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. Jihadist sources describe border-region fighting between Kurds, ISIS near Atmeh village," *EA Worldview*, October 6, 2013; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. More border-region clashes between ISIS, FSA & Kurdish YPG," *EA Worldview*, October 5, 2013.

On January 22, 2014, a group under command of Shishani successfully participated in an attack on Manbij, approximately sixty kilometers to the southwest of Kobanî.<sup>1831</sup> ISIS did not push through to Kobanî, however.<sup>1832</sup> When IS finally attacked, in September-October 2014, Shishani's whereabouts remained unclear. Reports mentioned him being in western Iraq, as well as in northern Syria. Both could be true, as *Katibat al-Aqsa* operated as a mobile, special operations forces-type unit. Shishani led an IS counter-offensive against the ISF near Fallujah in September 2014.<sup>1833</sup> On October 26, Kurdish media reported that IS ordered Shishani to leave Ramadi for Kobanî.<sup>1834</sup>

Shishani's subordinate for Kobanî was Abu Khattab al-Kurdi, a Kurd himself, originating from Halabja in the KRI. Kurdi had been a member of AaI before joining IS and allegedly was an expert in mountainous areas.<sup>1835</sup> Little documentary evidence exists regarding Kurdi.

The profiles of IS' strategic leadership regarding Kobanî, show fanatic jihadi-salafists, of whom in particular Shishani had military experience. Shishani's military experience explained IS' recognition of the YPG and the YPJ as threats to IS' lines of communication. Their common ideology and fanaticism, together with past results, such as at Menagh Airbase, explained continuing the attack – although circumstantial, as documentary evidence is lacking – even when the odds turned against IS.

#### 7.4.2 The KRI

Within the KRI, Masoud Barzani took the strategic decisions on military affairs within the General Command Staff.<sup>1836</sup> Early August 2014, the KRI's position changed from aiming for independence to self-preservation in an existential conflict. The changed situation for the KRI confronted Barzani with IS as the KRI's main enemy, instead of the Iraqi state. The situation further showed the KRI's dependence on Western military support for the KRI's survival.<sup>1837</sup> However, late August, the IS threat towards the KRI had disappeared.

1831 *FiSyria*, January 23, 2014, transl. unknown, in Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Details of Umar al-Shishani & ISIS attack on Manbij," *EA Worldview*, January 25, 2014.

1832 Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story."

1833 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 43.

1834 "ISIS sends Chechen commander to Kobane," *Rûdaw*, October 26, 2014.

1835 Speri, "Not all Kurds"; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 158. According to Weiss and Hassan, Kurdi was joined by Kurds from the Syrian cities Aleppo, Hasaka and Raqqa. Kurdi being an expert in mountainous areas seemed utterly irrelevant due to a lack of mountains in northern Syria.

1836 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 39; "President Barzani inaugurates the security council"; Wilgenburg & Fumerton, "Kurdistan's political armies," 9n28.

1837 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 14.

Despite the emphasis on the KRI's survival a month earlier, Masoud Barzani's statement of September 19, 2014, illustrated his stand on supporting Syrian Kurds in Kobanî: '[t]he Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's brutal attacks against our brothers and sisters in Kobane are part of a larger plan perpetrated by the terrorists against the people of Kurdistan. The barbaric and terrorist attacks of ISIS on Kobane and the Western part of Kurdistan threaten the whole entirety of the Kurdish nation and it has targeted the honor, dignity and existence of our people.'<sup>1838</sup> In the statement, Masoud Barzani requested unity among and contributions of 'all the political entities of Kurdistan'<sup>1839</sup>, prioritizing the defense of Kurdistan. References of Masoud Barzani to a Kurdish nation under threat by a common adversary acknowledged suggestions that identity influenced strategic decision-making.<sup>1840</sup> Apart from identity, he mentioned cultural factors, such as honor and dignity, as well as a perceived existential threat, indicating urgency and necessity. Thus, Masoud Barzani – as his preferred course of action – urged to defend all Kurdish territories against IS and eliminate IS as a threat.

Remarkably, it might have been the situation in Sinjar, which had led to Masoud Barzani supporting the Syrian Kurds in Kobanî. Domestically and externally, Masoud Barzani received criticism for not acutely reacting to the Sinjar crisis in August 2014, which the PKK had done. He might have been eager to repair his image as a leader for all Kurds.<sup>1841</sup> The 800 Turkish Kurds from the PKK who came to Kobanî in July, responded to a request by the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan<sup>1842</sup>, with whom Masoud Barzani competed over pan-Kurdish leadership.

While Masoud Barzani framed Kobanî as a symbol of Kurdish identity under threat of IS, Nechirvan Barzani later emphasized that Kobanî was 'a strong symbol of resistance and defiance to the IS terrorist organization.'<sup>1843</sup> Nechirvan Barzani explicitly thanked Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, for allowing *peşmerga* to reinforce Kurdish forces in Kobanî. Despite Nechirvan Barzani's more precarious stance – possibly also due to the fact that the siege was finished by the time he made his statement –, he explicitly congratulated Masoud Barzani 'who treated Kobane the same as Sinjar and other parts of Kurdistan'<sup>1844</sup>, thus indicating ideas of a greater Kurdistan.

1838 Masoud Barzani, "A statement from the president of the Kurdistan Region on terrorist attacks on Kobane," *Kurdistan Regional Government-Iraq Representation in Austria*, September 23, 2014.

1839 *Ibid.*

1840 Abbaszadah, "KRG's military help to Kobane"; Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained."

1841 Wilkens "A Kurdish Alamo."

1842 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

1843 Nechirvan Barzani, "KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani lauds Kobane liberation," *Kurdistan Regional Government-Iraq Representation in Austria*, January 26, 2015.

1844 *Ibid.*

A former YPG commander from Kobanî stated that he only later learned that Lahour Talabani, a prominent PUK leader and the head of the PUK's intelligence service 'was the coordinator and initiator'<sup>1845</sup> of the KRI's assistance to Kobanî. Lahour Talabani played a prominent role in the coalition against IS.<sup>1846</sup> The former YPG commander remarked that the KDP, nor the PUK, corrected the existing image by explicitly mentioning Lahour Talabani's involvement.<sup>1847</sup>

According to KDP-affiliated news agency *Rûdaw*, Turkey accepted a proposal by Masoud Barzani to allow KRI *peshmerga* pass through Turkish territory to relieve YPG fighters in Kobanî. Barzani further coordinated the proposal in the Duhok Agreement, with the Minister of *Peshmerga* Affairs Qader, the PYD leader Salih Muslem, and YPG commanders.<sup>1848</sup> Muslem warned of attritional warfare in Kobanî and urged for international support.<sup>1849</sup> Despite being wary of Masoud Barzani attempting to exercise influence over the Syrian Kurds<sup>1850</sup>, Muslem called for unity among the Kurds.<sup>1851</sup>

Noteworthy was the role of women fighters among Syrian Kurdish ranks. In particular the military commander of the all-female YPJ, Meysa Ebdo<sup>1852</sup>, gained global media attention. Ebdo, at the time, was around forty years old<sup>1853</sup> and originated from the Afrin region.<sup>1854</sup> She had been at Kobanî for about a year and a half, after approximately twenty years of fighting among the PKK ranks.<sup>1855</sup> During her time with the PKK, Ebdo met Öcalan and received ideological training from him. Ebdo was known for her bravery and intellect in defending Kobani. She was described as 'a humanist and a realist and also very courageous.'<sup>1856</sup>

In 2014, Ebdo shared command over the YPG and the YPJ in Kobane with the YPG commander, Mahmud Barkhodan.<sup>1857</sup> In an early October 2014 interview, Ebdo explained that 'our goal is protect our people and our land,' but also that the 'politics of denial and extermination have been broken and a system for a free life has been founded. The Kobanê

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1845 YPG commander.

1846 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1847 YPG commander.

1848 "Turkey gives Peshmerga forces passage to Kobane," *Rûdaw*, October 20, 2014.

1849 Scott Lucas, "Syria daily, Oct 26. Kurdish leader warns of 'war of attrition,'" *EA Worldview*, October 26, 2014.

1850 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1851 Ismaeel, "Kobane."

1852 Bejan Ciyayi, in Platt, "A Kurdish female fighter's war story"; Samuel Smith, "ISIS militants fear being killed by woman and losing 72 virgins for martyrdom; Kurdish co-commander defending Kobane is female," *The Christian Post*, October 15, 2014. Ebdo was also known under the *kunya*'s Narin Afrin and Narin Engizek.

1853 Uzay Bulut, "Frontline Isis. The real story of Narin Afrini and the Kurdish female 'Lions' terrorising Islamic State," *International Business Times*, October 15, 2014.

1854 Platt, "A Kurdish female fighter's war story."

1855 Bulut, "Frontline Isis."

1856 Bejan Ciyayi, in Platt, "A Kurdish female fighter's war story."

1857 "Interview with YPJ commander in Kobanê"; Smith, "ISIS militants fear being killed by woman."

resistance is for the Kurds the name of free life.<sup>1858</sup> Ebdo further explained that the YPG and the YPJ applied ‘ambushes and traps, creative defence tactics and a sacrificial determination.’<sup>1859</sup> An example of the sacrificial determination, mentioned in media reports was the YPJ fighter Arin Mirkan, who reportedly killed tens of IS fighters on October 5 in a suicide bombing outside of Kobanî.<sup>1860</sup> Still, suicide attacks were no *modus operandi* of the YPG and the YPJ, but individual actions.<sup>1861</sup> The occurrence of such individual acts do indicate a lack of control among the YPG and the YPJ fighters, as individual acts can have strategic effects. Allegedly, IS avoided attacking positions with female fighters. According to some accounts, IS fighters killed by women were no martyrs and, thus, would not go to heaven. Other accounts emphasized the ferocity with which female fighters fought IS, possibly because these women were extra motivated, as IS saw women as sex objects.<sup>1862</sup> More broadly, the YPJ were considered as role models for women’s rights in the Middle East<sup>1863</sup> and symbols against the misogynistic IS.

By brokering a deal between the PYD and Turkey, Masoud Barzani renewed his position as the paramount leader of Kurds. Given Lahour Talabani’s role in the coalition against IS, his involvement seems plausible. Downplaying his role seems plausible too. Lahour Talabani, as a prominent leader of the PUK – considered an affiliate of the PYD and the PKK by Turkey –, coordinating assistance by *peshmerga* along the Turkish border, could potentially stir up Turkish domestic concerns. The demands of the YPG and the YPJ – requesting weapons and munitions, instead of manpower – seemed ignored, which suggests that the Syrian Kurdish leaders were only indirectly involved in the KRI’s support for Kobanî. Symbolism seemed important, not only for the KRI to address Kurdish identity, but also for Kurdish secularism – emphasized by the role of women fighters, such as Ebdo and Mirkan – against fanatic jihadi-salafism.

### 7.4.3 Reflections

With its focus on key leaders’ perceptions and assuming powerplay among those key leaders, the governmental politics paradigm observed strategic opportunities for the leaders on both sides. Baghdadi as IS’ caliph left the Syrian affairs to his deputy for Syria, and the military affairs to the *emir* for northern Syria, the fanatic jihadi-salafists Anbari and Shishani, respectively, whereas on the KRI’s side Masoud Barzani, as the KRI’s leader, worked closely together with the PUK’s Lahour Talabani (people, command). The military leaders on both sides were capable in military and security affairs (military administration). On IS’ side, jihadi-

1858 Meysa Ebdo, cited in “Interview with YPJ commander in Kobanê.”

1859 *Ibid.*

1860 Platt, “A Kurdish female fighter’s war story”; Smith, “ISIS militants fear being killed by woman.” Also see: Meysa Ebdo, in “Interview with YPJ commander in Kobanê.”

1861 Platt, “A Kurdish female fighter’s war story.”

1862 *Ibid.*

1863 Bulut, “Frontline Isis.”

salafist beliefs seemed important, perhaps too much, as an IS internal evaluation allegedly – and unsurprisingly – found that ‘the fanatics in the Islamic State had the upper hand’<sup>1864</sup> (ideology), indicating flawed internal processes (decision-making). The KRI’s military leaders involved, represented the two dominant political parties (politics), and seemed wary of too much exposure for Talabani, possibly because of Turkish reluctance (allies).

The governmental politics paradigm’s strength as an explanatory model lies in the powerplay-assumption, which involves a process among key leaders. The lack of reliable sources with such a level of detail undermines the paradigm’s explanatory power, as most explanations are circumstantial.

Overall, the governmental politics paradigm offers insights into IS’ and the KRI’s strategic leadership, the paradigm provides explanations, based on political powerplay, but is unable to explain by itself strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI, regarding the siege of Kobanî. The differences among the KRI’s key leaders occurred along party lines, suggesting an overlap with the organizational behavior paradigm. The demands of its coalition partners made the KRI’s *peshmerga* the only acceptable reinforcement for Kobanî and the leaders of the KRI paused their powerplay for this greater interest.

## 7.5 Complexity theory

This paragraph applies complexity theory to IS’ and the KRI’s strategic decisions regarding IS besieging Kobanî and the KRI supporting Syrian Kurds there late 2014. The paragraph adopts the structure along the elements of the paradigm: time-, space- and case-specific factors and multi-level, multi-directional processes. Because of the focus on processes, the structure of the paragraph is to jointly analyze IS and the KRI, instead of separately, as in the previous paragraphs in this chapter.

### 7.5.1 Time, space, context, and processes

The time-specific element of IS’ decision to attack Kobanî is partly the sequential outcome of earlier developments on the northern Syrian battlefield. The proclamation of Syrian Kurdish and FSA groups to coordinate their efforts against IS<sup>1865</sup> possibly influenced IS’ strategic decision to attack Kobanî. The KRI’s decision to support the PYD followed from IS besieging Kobanî and Turkey joining the coalition against IS on October 2, 2014, which created the opportunity for reinforcing Kobanî via Turkey.

<sup>1864</sup> Qardash, in “Captured senior ISIS commander.”

<sup>1865</sup> Sax, “YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria.”

Kobani's strategic location was another critical element. The town was located along the Syrian-Turkish border – offering a potential gateway to and from Europe –, but also along crucial lines of communication. For IS, the lines of communication concerned the connection between Raqqa in northeastern Syria and Aleppo in northwestern Syria. For the PYD, Kobani was important for connecting the western and eastern Syrian-Kurdish cantons.

The context was the third complexity element. While ISIS had tried to capture Kobani since March 2014, it had suffered setbacks by Syrian Kurds. In August 2014, IS suffered another setback while conquering Kurdish territories, in Iraq. IS propaganda increasingly spurred animosity against Kurds, by focusing on Kurdish secularism<sup>1866</sup> and potentially attracting new groups to join IS, such as JMA and *Liwa Dawud*. On the Kurdish side, the conflict increasingly became a symbolic fight, as illustrated by the 800 Turkish Kurds from the PKK who came to Kobani in July.<sup>1867</sup> The KRI's decision to send 150 *peshmerga* is sometimes depicted as merely symbolic, as the impact was disputed.<sup>1868</sup> The KRI's *peshmerga*, despite intra-Kurdish disputes over the PYD's political system and relations with Turkey, seemed the only possible reinforcements acceptable for Turkey.<sup>1869</sup> Yet, for the KRI, it created an opportunity to regain its position as the vanguard of pan-Kurdish nationalism, of which Masoud Barzani longed to be the leader.<sup>1870</sup> The PUK security chief Lahour Talabani seemed to accept a less prominent role<sup>1871</sup>, potentially not to disturb domestic Turkish politics. The context indicated a complexity feedback loop, in which the interests over Kobani increased, as well as the perceived, symbolic interests. The interests potentially dragged both sides in an attritional conflict.

Regarding Kobani, multi-directional and multi-level processes occurred, starting with the mutual threats experienced by IS and the YPG/YPJ, where the adversary threatened the other actor's lines of communication. As the fight over Kobani dragged on, it increasingly received media attention. The increased media attention turned Kobani into symbols for both sides, possibly believing that the attritional character of the siege would wear out the adversary. Key figures and their acts became part of the symbolism – Anbari and his alleged suicide and Shishani on IS' side, Mirkan and her alleged suicide and Ebdoo on the Syrian Kurdish side –, seemingly created and emerged, and used by propaganda. The symbolism potentially made it important for external actors to support their proxies. Turkish domestic reluctance limited

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1866 Masri, "Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology"; Qaraman, "The representation of Kurds," 12-3. For example: "Indeed your lord is ever watchful," 9; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 4, 12. Cf. Zargawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Also see: Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37-54; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 6-17; Salih, "The Islamic State's visions of political community," 14.

1867 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

1868 "Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; "Interview with YPJ commander"; "Islamic State. Turkey to let Iraq Kurds join Kobane fight."

1869 "Turkey gives Peshmerga forces passage to Kobane"; Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."

1870 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 7, 7-8n30.

1871 YPG commander.

the international coalition in options for supporting the Syrian Kurds. Agreements between the PYD and Turkish intelligence and between the PYD, the KDP, and the PUK created the necessary preconditions to do so.

### 7.5.2 Reflections

Complexity theory merges the other paradigms in this study and adds elements, focusing on time-, space-, and context-specific events with multi-level and multi-directional processes.

On the strategic level, following the rational actor paradigm, in this case IS aimed to control northern Syria and the KRI preferred Kurdish control over northern Syria (geography), to expand or to support an independent political entity, respectively (politics). Kobanî offered a border town with oil infrastructure (economics and logistics). IS' jihadi-salafism versus Kurdish secular nationalism prevailed to the point that Kobanî became a goal by itself (ideology). Thus, besides IS fearing the Syrian Kurds and the other way around, and the KRI fearing the influx of more refugees, both sides feared losing the eventually symbolic Kobanî (adversary, symbolism). IS benefitted from Iraqi war spoils, Kobanî's proximity, and its central location, while for the KRI, Kobanî created strategic depth (friction, chance, and uncertainty). The KRI and its Syrian Kurdish allies benefitted from Western partners, which pushed the KRI to support Kobanî (allies), and were joined by Turkey (time). Following the organizational behavior paradigm, IS' factions took strategic decisions, as the KRI's fragmentation influenced theirs (organization). Thus, IS' factions and the KRI's parties, each with their own *modus operandi*, influenced strategic decision-making (strategic theory and doctrine), causing IS to become more reckless and the KRI to become expeditionary in character (culture). It also indicated a lack of 'strategic coherence'<sup>1872</sup> within IS (command) and an outcome of political debate within the KRI (politics), where differences focused on maintaining relations with Turkey versus supporting the PYD (allies), the latter out of solidarity with Syrian Kurds (identity, ideology). The governmental politics paradigm, on IS' side, adds fanatic jihadi-salafi beliefs among its key leaders<sup>1873</sup> (ideology), although in military affairs they seemed capable, as were the leaders on the KRI's side (people, command, military administration). Still, indications exist pointing out flawed internal processes within IS, whereas the KRI seemed well aware only to expose Masoud Barzani (decision-making processes), to avoid Turkish objections to supporting Kobanî (politics, allies).

Complexity theory added to the analysis the likely pressure by the United States (exogenous pressure), on the KRI as the only acceptable reinforcement for Kobanî, according to Turkey, as

<sup>1872</sup> Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 2.

<sup>1873</sup> Qardash, in "Captured senior ISIS commander."

long as the KRI did not pose a threat south of the Turkish border. For that precondition, the KDP and the PUK ceased their differences and acted pragmatically, limiting the number of *peshmerga* to 150, only allowing artillery and air-ground directing activities (interconnection). Both IS and the Kurdish side played the media during the Kobanî siege (information and intelligence), to the point that Kobanî became a goal in itself (ideology, emergence).

Complexity theory's application of multi-level and multi-directional processes explain well the KRI's process of supporting Syrian Kurds in Kobanî. Also interesting, is the emergence of Kobanî's importance for both sides, which – through media-reports and propaganda – became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Only in hindsight would an analyst be able to narrow down the infinite number of variables leading to strategic decision-making and explain why IS continued a siege it could not win and why the KRI decided to send *peshmerga* to Kobanî.

Overall, complexity theory offers the most encompassing explanation for strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI, regarding the siege of Kobanî. Complexity theory merges the other paradigms in this study and adds multi-level and multi-directional processes to the analysis, thus offering a solution for how to analyze non-linearity.

## 7.6 Conclusion

In September 2014, IS took the strategic decision to renew its attack on Kobanî. The attack turned into a siege, which lasted from October 2014 to January 2015. Thus, after the strategic decision to attack Kobanî, IS took the strategic decision to continue the advance on Kobanî. From a military strategic level point of view, initially, the IS attack on Kobanî made sense for protecting IS' lines of communication. When the odds turned against IS, though, the siege of Kobanî turned out to be a 'significant defeat for ISIS,' losing 'personnel, territory, and its command and control safe haven.'<sup>1874</sup> On the policy level, the siege strengthened cooperation between the international coalition against IS and its local allies, in particular the Syrian Kurds.<sup>1875</sup>

Another local ally of the international coalition was the KRI, which took the strategic decision to assist the beleaguered Syrian Kurds in Kobanî. From a military strategic point of view, the decision to send 150 *peshmerga* – despite their expertise in air-ground coordination – seemed marginal. From a policy point of view, the decision seemed important as the KRI appeared

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1874 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1875 *Ibid.*

the only reinforcements acceptable to all coalition partners. As such, the KRI's assistance confirmed its pivotal regional role in the fight against IS.

This chapter focused on how to explain the strategic decisions of IS to attack Kobanî and to continue, and the KRI's strategic decision to assist the Syrian Kurds besieged in Kobanî. The chapter used four paradigms, each offering different perspectives. The section below combines the approaches of different IR paradigms on how to explain the strategic decision-making of both ANSAs concerning Kobanî. Section 7.6.2 focuses on the different paradigms themselves. The last section looks forward.

### 7.6.1 Explanations

The siege of Kobanî started from IS' interests that were threatened by a rival. In this case, the conflict was about lines of communication between east and west in northern Syria.<sup>1876</sup> When the conflict escalated, local, regional, and global actors – each with their own interests – got involved. Thus, the Kobanî siege also illustrates that events in international relations do not occur isolated. Turkey's role proved pivotal. Turkey was possibly pressured by the United States to continue the pushback of IS, despite disagreements among American allies.<sup>1877</sup> The PYD's dominant position in Syrian Kurdish politics caused reluctance.<sup>1878</sup> Turkey likely allowed the KRI's *peshmerga* to go to Kobanî to increase the KRI's influence and decrease that of the PKK and the PYD.<sup>1879</sup> Thus, it makes sense to assume that Turkey aimed at suppressing Kurdish nationalism, instead of IS extremism.<sup>1880</sup>

The KRI – next to the FSA<sup>1881</sup> – was one of the local actors that responded to fight IS and which had their own interests, such as re-enforcing international support. The KRI proclaimed to react out of solidarity and identity<sup>1882</sup>, which became part of a cost-benefit equation. Kobanî's proximity to the Turkish border – enabling observers from relative safe positions to monitor the siege – brought disproportionately high media attention to the battle, in which symbolism eventually overtook strategic objectives.<sup>1883</sup> Symbolism became a strategic objective.

1876 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

1877 Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."

1878 "Kurdistan MPs debate hurdles to aiding Kobane."

1879 John Saleh, "The battle for Kobane is also political," *Fikra Forum*, December 5, 2014.

1880 Eyal, "Introduction," 5.

1881 Tamimi, "The factions of Kobani."

1882 Abbaszadah, "KRG's military help to Kobane"; Barzani, "A statement from the president"; Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained."

1883 Flood, "Victory at any cost"; Tamimi, "The factions of Kobani."

While IS' decision to attack Kobanî seems rational, given the interests at stake, the decision to continue what eventually became a siege – despite overwhelming enemy capabilities – was not rational<sup>1884</sup>, especially taking into consideration that IS conducted two large-scale offensives at the same time – that is, Kobanî and Ramadi – with the danger of overreach. Despite strategic coordination, 'at the operational level there is seemingly much less opportunity for centralized control.'<sup>1885</sup> Apart from suffering casualties, IS suffered recruitment problems since the second half of 2014.<sup>1886</sup> Yet, IS continued to grow. Sometimes battle-hardened and well-equipped groups pledged allegiance to Baghdadi, for example *Liwa Dawud* in July and JMA in August. Despite their *bay'ah*, these groups largely maintained their own identities, which explained internal discrepancies among IS' units. The jihadi-salafist fanatics among IS' key leadership were dominant<sup>1887</sup>, of whom Shishani was perhaps most prominent.<sup>1888</sup> The fanaticism likely contributed to the decision to continue the siege of Kobanî, even when the odds changed against IS.

Differences also occurred among the KRI's entities. While the KRI wanted to help the Syrian Kurds in Kobanî, the split between the KDP and the PUK caused differences on how to effectuate assistance. The KDP had established beneficial economic ties with Turkey and was reluctant towards the PYD, an affiliate of its domestic rival, the PUK. The PUK supported the PYD unequivocally, but – associated as an affiliate of the PKK – struggled with how to gain Turkish consent to support the Syrian Kurds in Kobanî. Masoud Barzani could renew his position as the pan-Kurdish leader. He was acceptable for Turkey. The downplayed role of PUK intelligence service chief Lahour Talabani might be explained as a way to avoid Turkish domestic concerns. Supporting fellow-Kurdish groups in Kobanî was only possible if Turkey allowed passage to Kobanî, which was complex, given Turkey's animosity towards the PYD, as an affiliate of the PKK.

## 7.6.2 Paradigms

Whereas the rational actor paradigm explained the initial combat between ISIS and the PYD over lines of communication, the paradigm falls short in explaining the strategic decision of IS to continue the siege. Strategy can change.<sup>1889</sup> As the situation changed – for example, the international coalition increased its efforts against IS – IS should have changed its strategy. The KRI, acting out of solidarity or identity<sup>1890</sup>, created analytical ambivalence within

1884 Cf. Welch, "The organizational process," 117.

1885 Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 2.

1886 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 269.

1887 Qardash, in "Captured senior ISIS commander."

1888 Saleh, "The battle for Kobane is also political."

1889 For example: Freedman, *Strategy*, xi.

1890 Abbaszadah, "KRG's military help to Kobane"; Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained."

the rational actor paradigm. Although solidarity and identity can be part of a cost-benefit equation, the overlap illustrates that the rational actor paradigm indeed needs to be merged with the organizational behavior paradigm and the governmental politics paradigm. The organizational behavior paradigm seems more suitable to explain strategic decision-making in case of the siege of Kobani, as both sides were fragmented. IS consisted of different fighting factions, such as JMA and *Liwa Dawud*. The jihadi-salafist fanaticism among these factions explained the strategic decision of IS to continue the siege, despite large enemy capabilities. The fragmentation among IS' groups – by themselves operating on the operational level – explained the lack of an overarching, strategic approach. The Kurdish side was fragmented too. The PYD was affiliated with the PUK, which made the KDP initially reluctant to help out, as long as the PYD remained in power in Syrian Kurdistan. Parallel to the organizational behavior paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm explained the strategic decision-making from the political powerplay among the key leaders of the sub-organizations that constituted the actors. For IS, the fanaticism among the key leaders explained the outcome. For the KRI, the political bargaining within the political realm. Complexity theory combines the explanations of the other paradigms and adds the time-specific element, as well as the feedback loops, that the other paradigms generally lack. Here, the timing followed from previous occurrences, but also from other decisions, such as Turkey's decision to join the coalition against IS, which created the opportunity for the KRI to support Kobani.

The rational actor paradigm in this case found the relevance of the strategic dimensions of politics, geography, strategic theory and doctrine, ideology, adversary, friction, chance, and uncertainty, allies, and time. To a lesser extent economics and logistics played a role. The organizational behavior paradigm in this case added organization, culture, command, identity, and ideology. These strategic dimensions overlapped with the governmental politics paradigms' emphasis on command, which further added military administration, and decision-making. Finally, complexity theory added exogenous pressure and interconnection regarding the KRI, as well as the role of information and intelligence and emergence, in Kobani becoming a pivotal symbol. Table 7.1 indicates the factors identified per paradigm for the siege of Kobani, showing complexity theory as the most encompassing.

**Table 7.1:** strategic dimensions identified in this study per paradigm regarding the siege of Kobanî.<sup>1891</sup>

Strategic dimension	Rational actor paradigm		Organizational behavior paradigm		Governmental politics paradigm		Complexity theory
	IS	KRI	IS	KRI	IS	KRI	IS/KRI
<i>politics</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>geography</i>	X	X					X
<i>people</i>		X			X	X	X
<i>economics and logistics</i>	X	X					X
<i>military operations</i>	X	X					X
<i>friction, chance and uncertainty</i>	X						X
<i>strategic theory and doctrine</i>	X		X	X			X
<i>culture</i>			X	X			X
<i>organization</i>			X	X			X
<i>information and intelligence</i>			X	X			X
<i>command</i>			X		X	X	X
<i>military administration</i>					X		X
<i>time</i>	X						X
<i>adversary</i>	X	X					X
<i>allies*</i>		X		X		X	X
<i>exogenous pressure*</i>	X	X					X
<i>interconnection*</i>							X
<i>emergence*</i>	X						X
<i>ideology*</i>	X	X	X	X	X		X
<i>identity*</i>				X			X
<i>decision-making processes*</i>					X	X	X
<i>symbolism*</i>	X	X			X	X	X

### 7.6.3 Next

IS overreached in Kobanî. It issued a document in the Iraqi-Syrian border town of Abu Kamal on January 15, 2015, offering repentance to former adversaries on the condition that these individuals would head ‘to the military/training camps and from there to the fighting fronts.’<sup>1892</sup> Although IS offered repentance to (former) adversaries, the timing of the document was striking given IS’ struggle in Kobanî, leading to the question whether IS leadership worried

<sup>1891</sup> Cf. Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44. Strategic dimensions not mentioned by Gray are indicated with an asterisk.

<sup>1892</sup> “Invitation to repentance. Euphrates province,” *Islamic State*, January 8, 2015, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

about the shortage of personnel. By March 2015, reports indicated that IS had overstretched and faced setbacks.<sup>1893</sup> IS issued a more desperate offer of repentance, aimed at a more general audience, on April 27, 2015.<sup>1894</sup> IS had not succeeded in unifying Sunnis in a sectarian conflict against Shia or Kurds.<sup>1895</sup> Still, fragmentation amongst its opponents created new opportunities.<sup>1896</sup> After its defeat in Kobani, IS succeeded on the offensive only when it either targeted the Syrian regime or took advantage of adverse weather conditions that limited the effectiveness of air support. Otherwise, it shifted over to the strategic defensive, undertaking only limited counterattacks.<sup>1897</sup> Nevertheless, despite less recruits, compared to July 2014<sup>1898</sup>, IS continued to attract jihadi-salafists worldwide and Baghdadi openly acknowledged *bay'ah* of groups outside of Iraq and Syria.<sup>1899</sup>

The KRI remained politically fragmented after supporting the Syrian Kurds. In January 2015, the KDP conducted military operations in Sinjar, aimed to harass IS's Syria-Mosul supply line and to create a connection to the KDP-affiliated Syrian Kurds to counterbalance the PYD. In response, the YPG increased its activities in Iraq, supported by the PUK. The YPG urged for a self-administered canton in Sinjar and supported the establishment of a Yazidi-militia there. As such, the YPG prevented the KDP taking over the area. It led the International Crisis Group to conclude that, since Kobani, instead of rapprochement, the 'KDP, PUK and PYD/YPG have spread their rivalry across Iraq and Syria.'<sup>1900</sup>

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1893 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 163-4.

1894 "Call for reinforcements from Aleppo province to Anbar and Salah ad-Din provinces," *Islamic State*, April 27, 2015, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1895 Meda al-Rowas, "Request by Nineveh tribes to join KRG indicates ineffective Iraqi Sunni leadership and hinders reconciliation with Baghdad," *Jane's Country Risk Daily Report*, March 19, 2015.

1896 Firas Ali, "Iraqi Sunni participation in fighting against the Islamic State likely to fail, strengthening the group," *Jane's Country Risk Daily Report*, March 13, 2015.

1897 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 81.

1898 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 269.

1899 Baghdadi, "Even if the disbelievers despise such," in Orton, "The Islamic State creates foreign 'provinces.'"

1900 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 28.



## Chapter 8

# Conclusion

**T**his study explained the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during their mutual conflict in 2014. No methodological objections exist to apply well-established IR paradigms to ANSAs. The paradigms – especially when combined – offer insight into IS’ and the KRI’s strategic decisions. As such, this study contributes to understanding the under-researched subject of ANSAs’ strategic decision-making within IR. This chapter links the theoretical and the empirical parts of the study, and answers the main research question: how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during three key events in their mutual conflict in 2014? Furthermore, the chapter reflects on the study’s methodological findings, explores avenues for future research, suggests implications for future policy making, and describes IS’ and the KRI’s situation since 2014.

### 8.1 Explanations

The strategic decisions of ISIS and the KRI to fill the vacuum in northern Iraq can be largely explained by Iraqi prime-minister Nouri al-Maliki’s self-fulfilling statements and behavior, which alienated Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds alike during 2013-2014. The outcome of the April 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections confirmed Maliki’s policies. Between the Iraqi state and Iraqi Sunnis, a cycle of mutual alienation emerged. Sunni support for ISIS increased, which threatened Maliki’s powerbase. In response, Maliki took anti-Sunni measures, leading to more Sunni support for ISIS. ISIS further benefitted from the ISF’s relative weakness in northern Iraq. Furthermore, the ISIS doctrine allowed its units to exploit unforeseen opportunities to achieve strategic effects. ISIS’ propaganda exploited the strategic effects of individual’s acts, thus contributing to its battlefield momentum and guiding the jihadi-salafist goal of re-establishing the caliphate.

The ISF’s weak position in northern Iraq – weakened further under ISIS’ pressure – created an opportunity for the KRI to gain control over disputed territories. The KRI’s strategic decision to enter the disputed territories in June 2014 marked a significant shift in approach from

reluctant, diplomacy-oriented in 2003-2014, to assertive, in which the KRI was willing to take risks via its *peshmerga*. The KRI in particular aimed for the oil-rich areas surrounding Kirkuk, considered by many Iraqi Kurds a precondition for establishing an autonomous Kurdish state. Whereas Kurdish studies scholar David Romano observed an assertive KRI in relation to its 2017 independence referendum<sup>1901</sup>, this study indicates that the KRI acted assertively in June 2014, when entering the disputed territories. The KRI's unitary decision was remarkable. Whereas the differences between the KDP and the PUK historically created intra-Kurdish struggles, they ostensibly operated as a united Kurdish bloc when filling the power vacuum in northern Iraq. The KRI leader Masoud Barzani – without his incapacitated political rival Jalal Talabani – was able to quickly mobilize the *peshmerga* to advance.

A new status quo seemed to have emerged in June 2014. Still, IS took the strategic decision to attack the KRI on August 1, 2014. The KRI decided to defend. IS' strategic decision to attack the KRI can be explained from a threat that IS perceived, acknowledged by the mid-June announcement of operation “Inherent Resolve” and the KRI's independence referendum on July 3. The IS attack, thus, was a tactical offensive in light of a defensive strategy – presented by IS propaganda as such – aimed to deter or defeat the *peshmerga*. Additionally, IS could gain natural resources, recruits, and strategic depth. Still, IS advanced towards Baghdad and perhaps the KRI was an intermediate goal. Nevertheless, IS conducted – and initially succeeded in – a surprise attack. Its two senior *emirs*, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Mohannad al-Suwaydawi, with experience in special operations forces and intelligence, were well equipped to achieve a surprise attack.

The KRI's focus on the Iraqi state, as well as the KRI's internal fragmentation – leading to two different intelligence estimates regarding the threat of IS towards the KRI – benefitted IS. The KRI again switched from striving assertively for autonomy to survival. To survive, the KRI had to cooperate with the Iraqi state, as well as international allies. Conducting the defense mainly occurred along party lines, though. The KDP and the PUK fought separately against IS. Still, the KRI succeeded. From August 7, 2014 onwards, the KRI – coordinated with the ISF and supported by coalition partners – gradually pushed back IS.

While the northern Iraqi battlefield was not yet fully secure, the KRI in October 2014 decided to assist Syrian Kurdish forces in Kobani, which had been under siege of IS since September 2014. Despite coalition air strikes, IS kept reinforcing. IS' strategic decision regarding Kobani can be explained from threats posed by the YPG/YPJ to its lines of communication, as IS had threatened theirs. When the air strikes increased, the odds turned. Still, IS continued the attack and brought in reinforcements, including groups that recently pledged allegiance to IS

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1901 Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 366.

leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. One of these groups, *Liwa Dawud* was prominent among IS' ranks, partly due to a reputation of successfully ending sieges by fierce attacks, partly because its *emir*, Abu Umar al-Shishani, was well-known. For IS, the fanatic jihadi-salafist IS *emirs* in Kobanî stressed the importance of ideology. Both sides used propaganda and Kobanî as a symbol became a strategic aim.

For the Syrian Kurds, Kobanî symbolized the fight for Kurdish nationalism. The KRI was unified in its wish to support Kobanî, but differed in its perceptions regarding the role of the PYD – associated with the PUK. Masoud Barzani was eager to play his part, to show that he was the pan-Kurdish leader. Also, the PUK's role in coordinating the assistance to Kobanî was downplayed, not to stir up Turkish domestic politics. Turkey considered the KRI *peshmerga* the only acceptable military reinforcements for Kobanî. Still, whereas the YPG/YPJ requested weapons and munitions, Kobanî received limited manpower, indicating that political concerns and symbolic support was more important than requirements in the field.

The findings above acknowledge Heuser and Duyvesteyn's observation of the importance of the strategic dimensions of geography, people, and economics and logistics, as well as allies, and decision-making processes.<sup>1902</sup> However, more strategic dimensions are involved and the dimensions are interconnected.<sup>1903</sup> The findings further indicate that successes at the operational or tactical levels do not necessarily translate into success at the strategic level. For example, benefiting from weaknesses of opponents in 2014, IS was doing well tactically and operationally, applying its jihadi-salafi ideology to military strategy, and making use of social media to spread information. Strategically, those successes brought opponents together into alliances against IS. Instead of provoking a Sunni revolt against the Shia and Kurdish populations, IS brought some Sunni tribes in Nineveh closer to the KRI. Some tribal leaders even requested annexation by the KRI. IS' preference for violence made it inherently suitable for winning conflicts, but inherently unsuitable for winning any peace. Considering the four elements of grand strategy – diplomacy, information, military, and economics – IS considered all, but preferred the military instrument, guided by its jihadi-salafist ideology. Armed conflict along multiple fronts at the same time consumed IS' resources in a scale and tempo it could not replenish. As such, this study underlines Hashim's finding that IS' economic strategy proved not viable to sustain a state that was in war continually, despite efforts to do so.<sup>1904</sup>

The KRI could not transfer its tactical and operational successes into strategic gains either. The KRI initially recognized the collapse of the ISF in northern Iraq in 2014 as an opportunity to gain independence. The *peshmerga* – together with the reinforced ISF – acted as the vanguard

1902 Heuser & Duyvesteyn, "Grand patterns of strategy," 20. Also see: Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44.

1903 Cf. Heuser, *The evolution of strategy*, 18. Also see: Snyder, "Anarchy and culture," 31-6.

1904 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 293.

of the international coalition against IS. However, the KRI did not benefit from these efforts. In the long-term, the KRI did not achieve independence. Internally, tensions between the KDP and the PUK remained, and the KRI remained highly dependent on Iraqi authorities.

## 8.2 Paradigms

In this study, the question how to analyze strategic decision-making also refers to methodology. This paragraph evaluates the different paradigms applied in this study, in line with what Blatter and Haverland described as congruence analysis.<sup>1905</sup> While the rational actor paradigm has its value when considering strategic goals, the paradigm cannot explain everything. The organizational behavior paradigm and the governmental politics paradigm provide additional or alternative explanations. Treating the paradigms separately, the question is then when to apply which paradigm? Or should every analysis include all three paradigms, reminiscent of the fourth paradigm, complexity theory?

### 8.2.1 Rational actor paradigm

The rational actor paradigm proved capable of explaining the strategic decisions taken by IS and the KRI from their respective strategic goals. But the rational actor paradigm is often too simple and does not provide conclusive explanations. The paradigm leaves some relevant strategic dimensions unaddressed. Additionally, the paradigm considers strategy static. Yet, strategy can change. For example, IS' August 2014 attack forced the KRI to change its goal from autonomy to survival. While besieging Kobani, IS failed to adapt to the changed situation – that is, the international coalition increased its efforts against IS. So, timing matters. Yet, the rational actor paradigm does not explicitly consider the time-specific factor in its explanation. In fact, the rational actor paradigm fell short in explaining IS' strategic decision to continue besieging Kobani. In general, the rational actor paradigm fell short in providing alternative options. The strategy paradoxes frustrate choosing between alternatives. According to the strategic paradoxes, lesser alternatives might be the best options, or the other way around, because adversaries do not anticipate the lesser alternatives. As such, there is no best-rational decision. Still, this study observed that IS and the KRI preferred the options in which they achieved their strategic goals as quickly as possible. That preference led to strategic decisions that eventually proved counter-productive. For example, the KRI's decision to capture disputed territories and IS' attack on the KRI. The KRI assisting the Syrian Kurds in Kobani out of solidarity or identity created analytical ambivalence within the rational actor paradigm. Although solidarity and identity can be part of a cost-benefit equation, the overlap illustrates that the rational actor

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1905 Blatter & Haverland, *Designing case studies*, 31, 144.

paradigm indeed can – or should – overlap with other paradigms. By treating actors as unitary and rational, policy makers using a rational actor paradigm approach limit themselves from more nuanced approaches in dealing with these actors. As within any actor, different factions existed within IS and the KRI, and they rarely operated as truly unitary actors.

### 8.2.2 Organizational behavior paradigm

The organizational behavior paradigm adds nuance to the rational actor paradigm, by focusing on organization and internal doctrines. Illustrative was the change, in June 2014, of the KRI's focus from diplomacy to military action and the cooperation between the KDP and the PUK when filling the vacuum, despite their historical intra-Kurdish struggles, as well as explaining the KRI's surprise by the IS attack. Furthermore, the organizational behavior paradigm seemed more appropriate to explain strategic decision-making in the case of the siege of Kobanî, as both sides were fragmented. IS consisted of different fighting factions, such as JMA and *Liwa Dawud*. The jihadi-salafist fanaticism among these factions explained the strategic decision of IS to continue the siege, despite sizeable enemy capabilities. The Kurdish side was fragmented too. The KRI joined the PYD, which was affiliated to the PUK. Yet, the organizational behavior paradigm, separately, was unable to provide sufficient explanations for actors that operate in a unitary way. For example, the KDP and the PUK closely cooperating in filling the vacuum, or IS' strategic decision to attack the KRI in August 2014. As such, Biddle's conclusion that '[i]ncreasingly, the best predictor of a combatant's military methods is not its status as a state as opposed to a nonstate actor, but its internal politics – and especially its institutional maturity and war aims'<sup>1906</sup> seems only part of the story. It is too simple to ignore the interaction with external and internal actors.

### 8.2.3 Governmental politics paradigm

On a more detailed level than the two paradigms above, the governmental politics paradigm explained the battlefield momentum ISIS experienced in capturing Mosul in June 2014. For example, the death of ISIS *emir* Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi on June 5, 2014, which – exploited by ISIS propaganda – provided a morale boost to ISIS' fighters and, thus, contributed to ISIS' momentum. The governmental politics paradigm provided insight in IS' strategic leaders perceptions and background. For example, Turkmani and Suwaydawi for the attack on the KRI and Abu Ali al-Anbari and Shishani for the siege of Kobanî. Their fanatic jihadi-salafist ideology, as well as for some their military or intelligence background, explained why they took specific decisions. Just like the organizational behavior paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm failed to provide explanations for the unitary strategic decision-making.

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<sup>1906</sup> Biddle, "The determinants of nonstate military methods," 714.

When IS attacked the KRI, the lack of explanatory power was due to a combination of the dominance of the KRI's political parties – the realm of the organizational behavior paradigm – and the fact that the KRI was fighting a war of necessity, in which political powerplay was subordinate to the overall goal of survival. That continued when the KRI supported Kobani and the coordinating role of the PUK's intelligence and security chief Lahour Talabani was downplayed, likely not to stir up Turkish domestic politics, which also indicated the overlap between different strategic levels, as well as paradigms.

#### 8.2.4 Complexity theory

The most complete explanation for IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions contain elements of the three paradigms mentioned above. Complexity theory incorporates elements of the other paradigms, as well as other relevant actors and factors. Complexity theory does so by combining different strategic levels into one paradigm. For example, the self-fulfilling statements and behavior of Maliki that alienated Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds alike during 2013-2014, were essential for explaining the strategic behavior of ISIS and the KRI in June 2014. Also, the alleged suicide of Bilawi indicated that a tactical occurrence can have a strategic effect. Perhaps more important than the observation that the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm, either separately or in combination, do not provide sufficient explanations, is that these paradigms assume linear explanations, while non-linear processes occur.<sup>1907</sup> Perhaps this explains why the paradigms do not suffice, as they provide at best partial explanations. An alternative is to adopt complexity theory, which assumes non-linearity, acknowledges time-, space-, and context-specific circumstances, and focuses on multi-level and multi-directional processes. As such, complexity theory is able to explain the battle for the KRI, fought between the unitary operating IS and the fragmented KRI, which fitted the realms of the rational actor paradigm and the organizational behavior paradigm, respectively. Applying complexity theory, allows an analyst to adopt a broad view of a research subject, instead of being guided, if not limited, by a narrow analytical framework, as with the traditional paradigms. Complexity theory offers a solution to strategic paradoxes, considering the time-, space-, and context-specific elements of events and strategic decisions. At the same time, this approach limits complexity theory to reverse engineering strategic decisions, though. Thus, complexity theory is unable to forecast.

Regarding complexity theory, this study underlined the difficulty with that paradigm in limiting the explanation to relevant aspects. As referred to in chapter 3, modeling complexity is difficult, if not impossible, unless the model is as complex as reality itself. This makes it almost impossible to reach conclusive answers using complexity theory, as new insights or new data

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<sup>1907</sup> Venable, "The result is never final," 122.

might emerge. When applying complexity theory, an analyst has to accept that the explanation in practice will never be complete. For this study, for example, the calculations by IS leaders are largely based on propaganda or assumption. Until new evidence emerges, which might lead to new conclusions, the propaganda or assumptions provide the best possible explanation, though. As not all IS documents are recovered, let alone translated, new evidence is likely to emerge. The same is true for the KRI's documents.

Osinga's criticism of fourth-generation warfare, which he described as having a jelly-like character, is partly avoided by offering a structure, albeit a rather abstract structure using time-, space-, and context-specific factors, as well as multi-layered and multi-directional processes. Still, the structure provided an analytical framework that enabled the merging of the traditional paradigms into a useful alternative paradigm. In this study, complexity theory provided an alternative paradigm – implicitly used in IR before –, which enabled elements of different paradigms, with a focus on different decision-making levels, to merge into an analytical framework. As complexity theory for different cases will vary in shape and substance, it will remain jelly-like. Still, adding structure – although abstract – will not only make it recognizable as jelly but might even be enough so that it can be nailed against the wall.

The complexity theory structure adopted in this study, offered points of reference to compare the three cases within this study. Although the cases were unique, the relevant strategic dimensions that influenced the strategic decision-making could be compared. Applying complexity theory to other cases is possible when adopting the same analytical framework. These concern historical cases, as complexity theory recognizes the fact that forecasting strategic decision-making is impossible, due to the time-, space-, and context-specific factors and the multi-level and multi-directional processes that occur when making such a decision.

The bounded rationality of decision-makers implies they cannot oversee all possible consequences of their actions, do not acquire a full information position, might have conflicting goals, and might sometimes reach a goal by accident. Several events studied here acknowledged this characteristic of complexity, for example, ISIS, which captured Mosul unforeseen, or the KDP and the PUK, which held different views on the threat posed by IS.

### 8.2.5 Reflections

Some authors, like Black and Gunter, in 2014 called for a new paradigm due to ANSAs' increasing influence.<sup>1908</sup> These scholars were right that traditional paradigms proved incapable of providing full explanations for ANSAs' strategic decision-making. Still, their calls for new

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<sup>1908</sup> Black, *Geopolitics*, 272; Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 78.

paradigms deserve nuance. The rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm each have their merits, be it in a limited scope. Complexity theory encompasses most strategic dimensions of the IR paradigms in this study, illustrated in table 8.1, which combines tables 5.1, 6.1, and 7.1 and shows the relevant strategic dimensions in each of this study's case studies. Complexity theory also recognizes that the strategic dimensions influence one another. Multi-level and multi-directional processes occur, sometimes simultaneously, across the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Such non-linearity makes complexity theory the most appropriate paradigm to analyze strategic decision-making. Taking a state-centric approach, Heuser observed a 'complex decision-making process within states and among states,' and added that '[d]ifferent "black boxes" in which Strategy is made produce such varied results that they can no longer be explained in the simple terms of old definitions of Strategy. Strategy-making becomes absorbed by all forms of political interplay, which can be distinguished from normal politics only in that the use of force or the threat of the use of force play a central role.'<sup>1909</sup> Assuming universal non-linearity, not only in Middle Eastern cases, or ANSAs, benefit from complexity theory analysis. Complexity theory seems applicable beyond that scope. In that respect, Black and Gunter were incorrect that the rise of ANSAs – IS and the KRI in particular – marked the need for a new paradigm. In fact, any strategic decision-making of any actor within international relations – and possibly beyond – requires better understanding. Thus, Black and Gunter limited themselves to ANSAs, whereas their potential scope was larger.

Table 8.1 illustrates that the governmental politics paradigm incorporates the least strategic dimensions of the paradigms applied in this study. The rational actor paradigm and the organizational behavior paradigm involve more strategic dimensions than the governmental politics paradigm. Complexity theory's scope of strategic dimensions is the largest of the paradigms applied in this study. That strength is also complexity theory's weakness. Next to the large number of strategic dimensions, if strategic dimensions interact and change themselves, conducting analysis becomes challenging, if not impossible. To cope with the challenge, this study applied a rather abstract structure based on time-, space-, and context-specifics, focusing on multi-level and multi-directional processes. Yet, such an abstract approach can become too complex to be scientific or societal relevant. The challenge for complexity theory is to narrow it down.

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<sup>1909</sup> Heuser, *The evolution of strategy*, 495.

**Table 8.1:** strategic dimensions identified in this study per paradigm.<sup>1910</sup> The numbers indicate whether the strategic dimensions were incorporated by the respective paradigms to explain strategic decision-making in this study's cases, using 1 for filling the vacuum (see table 5.1), 2 for the battle for the KRI (see table 6.1), and 3 for the siege of Kobani (see table 7.1).

Strategic dimension	Rational actor paradigm		Organizational behavior paradigm		Governmental politics paradigm		Complexity theory
	IS	KRI	IS	KRI	IS	KRI	IS/KRI
<i>politics</i>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<i>geography</i>	1 2 3	1 2 3					1 2 3
<i>people</i>	1 2	1 2 3			1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<i>economics and logistics</i>	1 2 3	1 2 3					1 2 3
<i>military operations</i>	1 2 3	1 2 3	2	2			1 2 3
<i>friction, chance and uncertainty</i>	1 2 3	1	1	1	1	1	1 2 3
<i>strategic theory and doctrine</i>	1 2 3		1 2 3	1 2 3			1 2 3
<i>culture</i>			1 2 3	1 2 3			1 2 3
<i>organization</i>			1 2 3	1 2 3			1 2 3
<i>information and intelligence</i>	2		3	2 3	1		1 2 3
<i>command</i>			3		1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<i>military administration</i>					2 3		2 3
<i>time</i>	2 3						2 3
<i>adversary</i>	1 2 3	1 2 3	2	2			1 2 3
<i>allies*</i>		1 2 3		2			1 2 3
<i>exogenous pressure*</i>	3	3					1 2 3
<i>interconnection*</i>							1 2 3
<i>emergence*</i>	2 3						2 3
<i>ideology*</i>	1 2 3	3	3	3	1 2 3		1 2 3
<i>identity*</i>				3			3
<i>decision-making processes*</i>				1 3	3		1 3
<i>symbolism*</i>	1 3	3		3	3	3	1 3

### 8.3 Evaluation

Assessing the chosen method – that is, paradigms based on state actor decision-making – and the value of empirical data in a (self-) critical reflection contributes to positioning this study among the field of study focusing on ANSAs.

<sup>1910</sup> Cf. Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44. Strategic dimensions not mentioned by Gray are indicated with an asterisk.

This study contributes to understanding ANSAs. ANSAs potentially have a significant impact on international relations, as IS and the KRI illustrated in 2014. Still, ANSAs are insufficiently researched in the predominantly state-centric field of IR, despite the many intra-state conflicts compared to inter-state conflicts in recent decades. By analyzing IS and the KRI and using IR paradigms, this study added to the extant knowledge concerning ANSAs' strategic decision-making and decision-making theory in general. Like state actors in international relations, these ANSAs operated to achieve goals, were structured in smaller organizations, and occasionally were guided by the actions of individuals. This study follows a trend within contemporary IR, acknowledging that these different levels interact, as suggested by complexity theory, making complexity theory an interesting avenue for analysis in IR.

This study applied IR paradigms, based on state actor decision-making to ANSAs, assuming similar decision-making processes to occur within ANSAs, as in states. By choosing IR paradigms to analyze ANSAs, this study implicitly assumed that ANSAs have foreign policies and grand strategies. Academic debate on these concepts is ongoing and it depends on which definition or approach is used to accept whether ANSAs have foreign policies or grand strategies.<sup>1911</sup> Alternative approaches might avoid these IR discussions, for example by connecting strategic decision-making to a social movement approach.<sup>1912</sup>

Although the paradigms offer analysts frameworks for analysis, they are also prone to bias, if only limiting the analysis to the key issues: cost-benefit calculation for the rational actor paradigm, SOPs in the organizational behavior paradigm, and individuals' preferences in the governmental politics paradigm. Using these paradigms as input for complexity theory, thus potentially limits complexity theory. The complexity theory approach would benefit from collecting empirical data without guidance from other paradigms.<sup>1913</sup> To enhance feasibility, the traditional IR paradigms were used as input for complexity theory. However, using the traditional IR paradigms as input for complexity theory limits complexity theory's methodological rigor.

Strictly adopting complexity theory, the external validity is limited to the cases at hand, because of specific circumstances. Within the cases, the empirical data – that is, primary sources, such as the *Dabiq* magazines and translated documents – offered valuable insights. Still, the specific, usually propagandistic function of many of these documents invites further research, as does the relatively small number of captured, translated documents.

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1911 For example: Strachan, *The direction of war*, 11.

1912 For example: Opp, *Theories of political protest*, 127-303.

1913 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 65; Holland, *Complexity*, 9-12, 25, 89-90.

## 8.4 Future research

Future research, following from this study, can deepen and broaden the findings above. In general, further research is needed on ANSAs and their strategic decision-making. More in-depth research would consider to what extent the strategic dimensions observed in this study impact strategic decision-making, possibly regarding the same case studies. Newly available sources can be helpful. A huge amount of primary – increasingly translated into English –, secondary and tertiary sources are available on IS. However, sources on the KRI are significantly less. In particular, there is a lack of primary KRI-sources translated into English. This is all the more remarkable given the KRI's close cooperation with Western allies in its conflict with IS, and Western presence within the KRI. It offers opportunities for future research on the KRI's strategic decision-making, for example to refute findings from this study and to advance explanations regarding the KRI's strategic decision-making. In general, the governmental politics paradigm suffered from a lack of reliable resources regarding the strategic leaders' perceptions regarding decision-making. Propaganda-infected sources dominate the analyses, such as reports on Bilawi's alleged self-detonation, or Shishani's video appearances. Other sources need to provide context. Complexity theory, taking a broad approach and combining available sources, provides a suitable analytical framework to do just that.

Apart from more in-depth research, the scope could also be broadened to other strategic dimensions than the ones identified in this study. Three strategic dimensions, out of the seventeen mentioned by Gray, were not observed during the cases in this study: ethics, society, and technology.<sup>1914</sup> Future research could focus on the impact of these three strategic dimensions within ANSAs' strategic decision-making. Another approach would be to further explore additional strategic dimensions. This study found a significant impact of ideology on strategic decision-making, in particular in the case of IS. This study touched on religion as part of ideology, without further elaboration. Yet, to address a lack in existing research<sup>1915</sup>, incorporating religion into IR paradigms might be an interesting future research avenue, as suggested by historian Christopher Dawson during the 1930s. Dawson observed a secular tendency among social scientists, leading them to neglect religion as a variable within their theories.<sup>1916</sup> In 2011, political scientist Jack Snyder addressed the absence of religion among IR paradigms<sup>1917</sup>, while observing a significant impact of religion on IR.<sup>1918</sup> Given religion's

1914 Cf. Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44.

1915 Jack Snyder, "Introduction," in *Religion and international relations theory*, Jack Snyder (ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 1.

1916 Christopher Dawson, *Enquiries into religion and culture* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), xviii-xx. Also see: Heuser, *War*, 274, 397.

1917 Snyder, "Introduction," 2-20.

1918 Jack Snyder, "Conclusion. Religion's contribution to international relations theory," in *Religion and international relations theory*, Jack Snyder (ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 201.

transnational character and emphasis on symbolism<sup>1919</sup>, complexity theory in particular provides a suitable framework to incorporate religion. The same might be true for the concept of *asabiyya* (kinship) as developed by fourteenth century Islamic scholar Abd ar-Rahman ibn Khaldun. Different scholars suggested including *asabiyya* as a significant social factor in Middle Eastern contexts, omitted by Western-centric theoretical approaches.<sup>1920</sup> Yet, referring to anthropological insights, Snyder argued that kinship sometimes facilitates decision-making structures.<sup>1921</sup> While the anthropological research occurred at village level, the effect of kinship in relatively small social structures, like ANSAs and in particular dynastically organized ANSAs, arguably such as the KRI, offers interesting new research avenues.

Finally, including ANSAs in the study of IR and the practice of international relations, implicitly recognizes that ANSAs have something like a grand strategy and foreign policy. This study found some implicit evidence of both IS and the KRI being well aware of the interaction of the different (foreign) policy instruments to achieve policy goals, varying from economic strategy<sup>1922</sup> to domestic policies to gain public support.<sup>1923</sup> More explicit research on ANSAs' policies, grand strategies, or strategies, will further expand understanding of the concept beyond the dominating Western-centric and state-centric views.<sup>1924</sup> Broadening understanding of grand strategy and strategy beyond traditional views will also benefit practical implications, elaborated on below.

## 8.5 Practical implications

This study assumed similarities between states and ANSAs in IR. Researchers have indicated that by labeling an actor within international relations as an ANSA, withholds the actor access to potential recognition as a legitimate actor. Suggestions to apply some form of acknowledgement – as small as these may seem – might open up lines of communication.<sup>1925</sup> In 2014, the KRI was labelled as a de facto state by many Western states. However, while the international coalition used the KRI's *peshmerga* as a vanguard to fight IS, the KRI could not

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1919 *Ibid.*, 207.

1920 Lawrence, *Zeven zuilen van wijsheid*, 93-99; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 17-21; Rabi', *Contemporary Arab thought*, 140-1; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 90-1; Beyza Sümer, "Ibn Khaldun's *asabiyya* for social cohesion," *Electronic Journal of Social Sciences* 11:41 (2012), 253-67; Umunc, "A hope so transcendent," 189. Also see: Kiras, "Key concepts," 302; Kiras, "The historical practice," 333.

1921 Snyder, "Anarchy and culture," 14.

1922 For example: Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 1-2; Mahmoud, "Iraqi Kurds worry"; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1923 For example: Naji, *The management of savagery*, 16-22. Also see: Graaf & Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance," 17; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 3.

1924 Black, review of *The direction of war*, 473, 475; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 4, 9.

1925 Pfeifer *et al.*, "The politics of recognition," 20-2.

purchase military equipment that required end-user certificates, because the KRI was not an independent state.<sup>1926</sup> This example indicates the state-centeredness of international relations, including its international judicial agreements. As ANSAs do exert influence in international relations, either by themselves or indirectly by influencing state actors, IR analysis needs to include ANSAs in analyses. By excluding ANSAs, opportunities are lost to mitigate conflict and potentially reduce suffering for the population involved. While Strachan argued that applying concepts like strategy and policy to ANSAs creates leverage for ANSAs in their struggle against states<sup>1927</sup>, the KRI's example indicates that ANSAs are hampered when acting on behalf of states too. Acknowledging ANSAs' grand strategies and foreign policies creates opportunities to deal with ANSAs along their policy goals and strategic instruments. It also means a further step in transferring from a state-non-state dichotomy towards a state-non-state continuum, with judicial implications.

Including ANSAs in IR analysis requires more academic attention for ANSAs in IR, as well as in military studies, intelligence studies, economics, and international law. Scientific analysis on ANSAs is necessary to assess their impact on, and relevance for, IR in general, and foreign policy analysis in particular. Beyond scientific analyses, other stakeholders involved need to address ANSAs, adding practitioners' insights to the scientific views. Non-governmental organizations and private companies – non-state actors themselves – need to share the effect of ANSAs on their activities and businesses to assess the societal and economic impact, respectively. Military organizations and intelligence agencies need to share their knowledge on ANSAs to assess their capabilities and intentions. If possible, and only when safe enough for the researchers, ANSAs themselves – as a line of communication – could invite impartial researchers to explain their position and intentions, thus, avoiding their statements to be dismissed as propaganda. Additionally, ANSAs could exchange diplomatic, military, and intelligence liaisons, to establish additional lines of communication with other ANSAs, but also with states. This requires a paradigm shift in many states' state-centric approach to diplomacy. The KRI tried such an approach, but failed, as the next paragraph indicates.

## 8.6 Situation since

The 2014 conflict involving IS and the KRI left both ANSAs in very different, but little promising positions. With the benefit of hindsight, IS overstretched, which became clear from 2015 onwards.<sup>1928</sup> Since the August 2014 attack, along the northern-Iraqi frontline, IS was gradually pushed back by the *peshmerga*, which received air support, training, and

1926 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 21n61; Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 430-2.

1927 Strachan, *The direction of war*, 45.

1928 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 5-6, 11, 185.

equipment from the international coalition and coordinated operations with the ISF.<sup>1929</sup> Knights and Mello observed that ‘Islamic State has lost every time they faced a determined and well-resourced ISF or *Peshmerga* attack.’<sup>1930</sup> By April 2015, the *peshmerga* had recaptured approximately 95 percent of territory lost to IS in August 2014. Still, IS proved difficult to defeat<sup>1931</sup> and tensions between IS and the KRI remained.<sup>1932</sup> It took until summer 2017 for the ISF – supported by the international coalition and the *peshmerga* – to recapture Mosul. The Hawija-pocket south-west of Kirkuk remained under IS control. By 2019, the IS caliphate had ceased to exist.<sup>1933</sup> Still, since 2019, IS has reemerged in the region, benefitting from foreign powers withdrawing their militaries due to inter-state tensions.<sup>1934</sup> Iraq remained IS’ main area of operations in 2022. Since 2023, Iraq was no longer IS’ main area of operations.<sup>1935</sup>

Within the KRI a political crisis erupted in late 2015. President Masoud Barzani did not want to leave office, according to him due to the threat of IS. Some analysts feared tensions might lead to a new intra-Kurdish civil war.<sup>1936</sup> In March 2017, a proxy-clash occurred in Sinjar between KDP-affiliated Syrian-Kurdish fighters and an Iraqi-Yezidi group backed by the PKK, the PUK and *Gorran*.<sup>1937</sup> The clash faded away, as attention focused on an independence referendum in the KRI – and within the disputed territories that the KRI controlled since June 2014 – on September 25, 2017.<sup>1938</sup> The KDP and the PUK supported the referendum, *Gorran* argued for strengthening the democratic institutions in the KRI first, and several minority parties rejected the referendum as unconstitutional. Parties occasionally switched their positions, though.<sup>1939</sup> The outcome of the referendum was overwhelmingly in favor of independence. Supported by this outcome, Kurdish officials tried to restart autonomy negotiations with the Iraqi state. Yet, tensions between Baghdad and Erbil rose again, as Iraq’s prime minister Haider al-Abadi rejected the referendum and stated that the KRI’s borders, were the 2003 borders. In response, the Iraqi state, as well as Turkey and Iran, ceased the KRI’s commercial flights, concentrated military capacity close to the KRI’s borders, and threatened the KRI with a full embargo. In October, 2017, the ISF retook Kirkuk and nearly all disputed territories the

1929 Roggio, “US Special Forces.”

1930 Knights & Mello, “The cult of the offensive,” 3. Italics added.

1931 *Ibid.*, 4; Shapland, “Iraqi Kurds’ aim of statehood stays out of reach.”

1932 For example: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “March forth whether light or heavy,” audio speech, May 14, 2015, transl. unknown, in “Islamic State leader attacks Saudi Arabia, claims to be the Sunni vanguard,” Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, May 15, 2015.

1933 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 164.

1934 Ghadhawi, “Revenge for the two sheikhs.”

1935 Palani, “The low likelihood of ISIS resurgence in Iraq,” 2.

1936 Patrick Martin, “Political crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan escalates into violence,” *Institute for the Study of War*, October 15, 2015. Also see: Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan?” 23.

1937 Hadad & Wallace, “The Iraqi Kurdish security apparatus.”

1938 “The Kurdish vote for independence,” *The Soufan Center*, September 25, 2017.

1939 Sadoon, “The Islamic State and the independence referendum,” 11-2.

KRI had captured in 2014.<sup>1940</sup> The return of *peshmerga* forces from the disputed territories led to renewed repartitioning of the *peshmerga* along party lines.<sup>1941</sup> Sadoon viewed the KRI remaining a political entity – despite the referendum – as a success for the KRI.<sup>1942</sup> Tamimi concluded that Masoud Barzani and the KDP miscalculated by continuing the referendum, despite fierce opposition among neighboring states. Additionally, the KRI’s weak financial position and internal fragmentation provided Barzani very little leverage on his side, and it was obvious that a unilateral independence referendum at the time would not change that.<sup>1943</sup> Internal fragmentation, a hampering economy, and involvement of the Iraqi state and regional powers have frustrated the KRI’s ambitions for autonomy since 2017.<sup>1944</sup> As such, the KRI will remain an ANSA in the near-future.

## 8.7 Final remarks

At the time of writing, despite – or because of – global attention focusing on inter-state rivalries, the relevance of ANSAs seems higher than ever. This study started with the notion that ANSAs have been the historical continuity that challenged states. Black noticed an ongoing historical increase in political actors and, therefore, in military actors.<sup>1945</sup> Thus, despite attention in IR in the late 2010s and early 2020s moving away from ANSAs to inter-state tensions, notably the Russo-Ukraine war (2014-present) and tensions between Western states and China over Taiwan, Black foresees that ‘strategic practice in the future will perforce focus more on civil warfare across much of the world.’<sup>1946</sup> Earlier, Heuser had reached a similar conclusion.<sup>1947</sup> In practice, the major war-small war binary is non-existent and various types of warfare overlap.<sup>1948</sup> Yet, states’ militaries ceased conducting, or preparing for, counterinsurgencies.<sup>1949</sup> This likely means that ANSAs can benefit from new power vacuums. In Syria, a new power vacuum

1940 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 155; Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 362; Aymenn al-Tamimi, “Iraqi Kurdistan’s crisis. A failure of strategy,” *American Spectator*, October 22, 2017.

1941 Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan?” 16.

1942 Sadoon, “The Islamic State and the independence referendum,” 15.

1943 Tamimi, “Iraqi Kurdistan’s crisis.”

1944 Bekir Aydoğan & Mehmet Alaca, “Kurdistan’s fading dream. The struggle and despair behind Erbil-Baghdad relations,” *Gulf International Forum*, no date.

1945 Jeremy Black, “Strategies for the twenty-first century,” in *The practice of strategy. A global history*, Jeremy Black (ed.), (Società Italiana di Storia Militare, 2024), 543-5.

1946 *Ibid.*, 544.

1947 Heuser, *The evolution of strategy*, 450.

1948 Heuser, *War*, 29-34, 58, 397-401. Also see: Anneleen van der Meer, “Strategies of chemical warfare. Understanding the purpose of norm transgression in war,” PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2023, 132-3.

1949 Frans Osinga & Tim Sweijs, “Conclusion. Insights from theory and practice,” in *Netherlands annual review of military studies 2020. Deterrence in the 21st century – insights from theory and practice*, Frans Osinga & Tim Sweijs (eds.) (The Hague: Asser Press, 2021), 524-5.

possibly allows IS' re-emergence; in Iraq, the KRI's next bid for autonomy; and, in either country the rise of other ANSAs.

Beyond Iraq and Syria, Palestinian ANSA *Hamas'* October 7, 2023 attack on Israel triggered a counter-attack of Israel Defense Forces in Gaza. The Israeli response triggered attacks of Yemenite Houthi's on cargo-vessels in the Red Sea in support of *Hamas*. The Houthi attacks, in turn, triggered the formation of an international maritime mission to protect cargo-vessels in the Red Sea. Furthermore, the conflict polarized societies across the globe over which side to support. *Hamas* and Houthi operations illustrate ANSAs' potential and their impact, but also the complexity of such conflicts. Other contemporary conflicts involving ANSAs receive less global attention than the fight between Israel and *Hamas*. In Sudan, a vicious civil war broke out between the army and ANSA Rapid Support Forces in April 2023, the former supported by Egypt, the latter by the United Arab Emirates. Nearby, Ethiopia struggles with an ongoing civil war with Tigrayan insurgents and in 2023 military coups occurred in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. In Myanmar, different mainly ethnically organized ANSAs fight the military junta in power, while China occasionally gets involved to protect its interests. In the Russo-Ukraine war, ANSAs are involved too, most notably – until its leadership turned shortly against Russia – Russian private military company Wagner Group.<sup>1950</sup>

What these conflicts have in common, apart from ANSA-involvement, is the enormous human suffering: '[a]round the globe, more people are dying in fighting, being forced from their homes or in need of life-saving aid than in decades.'<sup>1951</sup> In a 2024 report on contemporary conflicts, the International Crisis Group president and vice-president, Comfort Ero and Richard Atwood, blamed the unstable global political environment, which created opportunities for states and ANSAs alike, to seize territory or conduct ethnic cleansing.<sup>1952</sup> Their observation underlines this study's findings on ANSAs seizing opportunities. Their observation also points out the limitation of this study in addressing a conflict from IR-perspectives. Contemporary conflicts are too complex to analyze solely by IR. IR forms part of the analysis and, in addition, other fields, varying from cultural and religious studies, to economics and governance, also need to be included.

As the title indicates, this study focuses on conflicts involving ANSAs, in particular on the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI in 2014. Yet, the traditional paradigms suggest clear boundaries between entities – states in the rational actor paradigm, states and sub-state entities in the organizational behavior paradigm, and individuals in the governmental politics paradigm. In practice, the boundaries are blurred. Both IS and the KRI sometimes made

1950 Comfort Ero & Richard Atwood, "10 conflicts to watch in 2024," *International Crisis Group*, January 1, 2024, 4-13.

Also see: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, "ACLED conflict index," accessed March 17, 2024.

1951 Ero & Atwood, "10 conflicts to watch in 2024," 1.

1952 *Ibid.*, 2.

strategic decisions unitarial, sometimes along sub-entities, and sometimes along individual's lines. Occasionally, overlap occurred with other entities. Explaining strategic decision-making, thus, requires a broad approach and inherently leads to overlap between the traditional IR paradigms. Complexity theory incorporates other paradigms, recognizes non-linearity, and adds relevant strategic dimensions. Recognizing that complexity theory lacks predictive power and can easily become too complex, this study applied an analytical complexity theory framework, which focused on time, space, context, and multi-level and multi-directional processes. The complexity theory framework explained strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI in 2014. Contemporary developments in international relations, involving states and ANSAs alike, and indicating non-linear complexity, requires such a well-suited approach for explaining the under-researched strategic decision-making of ANSAs in conflict.



## Abbreviations

The list below contains abbreviations used in this study alphabetically (left column) and their meanings (written bold) in English (right column) and, when applicable, in the native language (middle column, written in italics).

AaI	<i>Ansar al-Islam</i>	Partisans of Islam
AaS	<i>Ansar al-Sunnah</i>	Partisans of the teachings
ANARD		<b>Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset</b>
ANSA		<b>Armed Non-State Actor</b>
AQI		<i>Al-Qaeda</i> in Iraq
AQIM		<i>Al-Qaeda</i> in the Islamic Maghreb
CAS		<b>Complex Adaptive Systems</b>
CPA		<b>Coalition Provisional Authority</b>
CPS		<b>Complex Physical Systems</b>
DIME		<b>Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economy</b>
FPA		<b>Foreign Policy Analysis</b>
FSA		<b>Free Syrian Army</b>
H	<i>Hijra</i>	Migration (of prophet Muhammad)
HRE		<b>High-Risk Ethnography</b>
IDP		<b>Internally Displaced Person</b>
IED		<b>Improvised Explosive Device</b>
IR		<b>International Relations</b>
IS	<i>Ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah</i>	<b>Islamic State</b>
ISF		<b>Iraqi Security Forces</b>
ISI	<i>Ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-'Irāq</i>	<b>Islamic State in Iraq</b>
ISIS	<i>Ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-'Irāq wa-sb-Shām</i>	<b>Islamic State in Iraq and Syria</b>
JaN	<i>Jabhat al-Nusra</i>	<i>Nusra</i> Front
JMA	<i>Jaish al-Mubajideen wal Ansar</i>	Army of Emigrants and Helpers
JTJ	<i>Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad</i>	Group of monotheism and <i>jihad</i>
KDP	<i>Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê</i>	<b>Kurdistan Democratic Party</b>
KNC	<i>Encûmena Niştimanîya Kurdi li Sûriyê</i>	<b>Kurdish National Council</b>

## Abbreviations

KRG		<b>Kurdistan Regional Government</b>
KRI		<b>Kurdistan Region of Iraq</b>
MENA		<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>
MSC	<i>Al-Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen</i>	<b>Mujahideen Shura Council</b>
NSA		<b>Non-State Actor</b>
PKK	<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan</i>	Kurdistan Worker's Party
PUK	<i>Yekîtiya Nîştîmaniya Kurdistan</i>	<b>Patriotic Union of Kurdistan</b>
PYD	<i>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat</i>	Democratic Union Party
SOP		<b>Standard Operating Procedure</b>
SV-IED		<b>Suicide Vest Improvised Explosive Device</b>
YPG	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i>	People's Defense Corps
YPJ	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê</i>	Women's Protection Unit



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## Conversations and interviews

- Academic. Informal conversation by Wietse van den Berge. Ainkawa, August 20, 2014.
- Asayesh* officers. Interview by Wietse van den Berge. Suleimaniyah, April 7, 2015.
- IS *emir*. Interview by Wietse van den Berge. Suleimaniyah, April 8, 2015.
- KRG official. Interview by Wietse van den Berge. Suleimaniyah, April 8, 2015.
- Local journalist. Informal conversation by Wietse van den Berge. Ainkawa, September 14, 2014.
- Low-rank IS-member 1. Interview by Wietse van den Berge & Mark Dechesne. Kirkuk, November 11, 2015.
- Low-rank IS-member 2. Interview by Wietse van den Berge & Mark Dechesne. Kirkuk, November 11, 2015.
- PUK general. Interview by Wietse van den Berge & Mark Dechesne. Kirkuk, November 11, 2015.
- Two Hawija inhabitants. Interview by Wietse van den Berge & Mark Dechesne. Kirkuk, November 11, 2015.
- UN security official. Informal conversation by Wietse van den Berge. Erbil, November 13, 2014.
- YPG commander. Interview by Wietse van den Berge. Email, January 2, 2024. Translated via Google Translate.



## Dutch summary | Nederlandse samenvatting

De bewapende niet-statelijke actoren (*armed non-state actors*, ANSA's) Islamitische Staat (IS) en de Koerdische Autonome Regio in Irak (*Kurdistan Region in Iraq*, KRI) namen in juni 2014 gebieden over van de staat Irak, raakten in augustus 2014 met elkaar in een gewapend conflict, en bevochten elkaar in de Syrisch-Koerdische stad Kobani van oktober 2014 tot en met januari 2015. IS en de KRI gedroegen zich als staten, zonder erkenning als zodanig door andere (statelijke) actoren. Veel eerdere studies beschouwen de drie bovenbeschreven gebeurtenissen als een gegeven. Deze studie richt zich echter op de strategische besluitvormingsprocessen voorafgaand en tijdens de gebeurtenissen, die achteraf cruciaal bleken, met als hoofdvraag: hoe valt de strategische besluitvorming van zowel IS, als de KRI te verklaren met betrekking tot deze drie cruciale gebeurtenissen uit hun onderlinge conflict in 2014?

De studie gebruikt drie traditionele paradigma's binnen de internationale betrekkingen als basis voor de analyse: het rationele actor paradigma, het *organizational behavior* paradigma en het *governmental politics* paradigma. Het rationele actor paradigma gaat uit van enkelvoudige actoren, meestal staten, die strategische besluiten nemen op basis van kosten-batenafwegingen. Daarmee zijn echter niet alle besluiten van actoren binnen de internationale betrekkingen te verklaren. Het *organizational behavior* paradigma vormt een alternatief, dat uitgaat van relevante organisatiedelen binnen de actor, die via bureaucratische processen en *standard operating procedures* tot strategische besluitvorming komen. Een ander alternatief is het *governmental politics* paradigma, dat strategische besluitvorming ziet als het resultaat van politieke onderhandelingen tussen de belangrijkste politieke leiders binnen een actor.

Veel studies gebruiken de bovenbeschreven paradigma's primair voor statelijke actoren. Methodologisch bestaan echter geen bezwaren om de paradigma's toe te passen op ANSA's. Daarnaast vullen de paradigma's elkaar aan en overlappen zij elkaar, wat analyses completer maakt. Binnen deze studie vormt complexiteitstheorie een vierde paradigma, dat de andere paradigma's combineert en uitbreidt, uitgaande van wederkerige processen die meerdere strategische niveaus omvatten én non-lineariteit. Non-lineariteit houdt in dat binnen een proces niet altijd sprake is van een eenduidig oorzaak-gevolg verband, maar soms binnen een proces fenomenen ontstaan. Complexiteitstheorie duidt dit fenomeen aan als *emergence*. Waar de drie traditionele paradigma's uitgaan van lineariteit, biedt complexiteitstheorie de meest complete verklaringen. Wel kent complexiteitstheorie een inherente uitdaging om de strategische dimensies te beperken tot de meest relevante, terwijl conclusies theoretisch nooit sluitend zullen zijn.

Het conflict tussen IS en de KRI bevestigt bevindingen van bestaand onderzoek met betrekking tot het belang van de strategische dimensies geografie, bevolking, economie en logistiek, bondgenoten en besluitvormingsprocessen. Echter, meer strategische dimensies

waren van belang, zoals – niet uitsluitend – frictie, doctrine en cultuur. Daarnaast, in lijn met complexiteitstheorie, beïnvloedden strategische dimensies elkaar, ook op verschillende strategische niveaus. Gedragingen en uitingen van de Iraakse minister-president bevestigden IS en de KRI in hun machtsovername in noord-Irak in juni 2014, waarbij beide ANSA's profiteerden van de zwakte van de Iraakse staat. De nieuwe machtsbalans in noord-Irak maakte de KRI een bedreiging voor IS, wat leidde tot een preventieve aanval op de KRI in augustus 2014. De KRI reageerde langs de lijnen van de twee dominante politieke partijen binnen de KRI. Nadat IS uit de KRI was teruggedreven, besloot de KRI Syrische Koerden te steunen in Kobani onder bondgenootschappelijke druk, maar ook vanuit solidariteit. IS zette een aanvankelijke succesrijke, maar uiteindelijk tot mislukken gedoemde belegering door vanuit ideologisch perspectief. Voor beide zijden was Kobani van symbolische waarde.

Deze studie geeft een aanzet tot verder onderzoek naar het fenomeen ANSA's binnen het vakgebied Internationale Betrekkingen (*International Relations*, IR), specifiek hun strategische besluitvorming. Waar deze studie zich beperkt tot beschikbare primaire bronnen, aangevuld met secundaire en tertiaire literatuur, kan toekomstig beschikbaar primair bronmateriaal tot nieuwe, wellicht andere, inzichten leiden. Hierbij geldt dat veel beschikbaar primair bronmateriaal een propagandistisch doel diende. Daarnaast richt deze studie zich op input vanuit drie traditionele IR-paradigma's, terwijl juist complexiteitstheorie zich leent voor andere invalshoeken. Met betrekking tot IS en de KRI kunnen – niet uitsluitend – een lokaal sociologisch fenomeen, zoals *asabiyya* (verwantschap), of religie interessante aanvullende verklaringen leveren.

Hoewel de drie traditionele paradigma's elk verklaringen geven voor de strategische besluiten van IS en de KRI, zijn de verklaringen incompleet. Complexiteitstheorie biedt de meest complete verklaringen, waarbinnen de bevindingen van de andere paradigma's én aanvullende verklaringen passen. Complexiteitstheorie sluit daarmee aan bij een trend binnen IR, die uitgaat van multi-disciplinaire verklaringen voor gebeurtenissen en beslissingen van actoren. Veel studies beperken zich echter tot statelijke actoren, terwijl niet-statale actoren – inclusief ANSA's – in toenemende mate invloed verkrijgen. Hoewel complexiteitstheorie breder toepasbaar is dan alleen ANSA's, tonen huidige conflicten met ANSA's de relevantie aan van inzicht in de strategische besluitvorming van dergelijke actoren. Juist de actuele focus op inter-statale conflicten creëert potentiële machtsvacuums, waarbinnen ANSA's gedijen en invloed uitoefenen. Als zodanig horen ANSA's onderdeel te zijn van relevante strategische analyses, inclusief hun onderlinge machtsstrijd. In die zin bestaat behoefte aan academisch en praktisch inzicht in ANSA's in conflict.



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## Curriculum Vitae

Wietse van den Berge (Goes, 1978) completed high school in Goes, the Netherlands, in 1997. He studied political science at Leiden University. After graduating in 2002, he joined the Royal Netherlands Air Force and attended the Royal Netherlands Military Academy. An internship at the academy's military science faculty followed the completion of his officer training, researching military history and military operations. Wietse held several ranks within the Air Force and in 2011-2012 he served as a military observer for the United Nations in the Middle East. He was triggered by personally witnessing the Arab uprisings in that region to return to his academic career.

Since joining Leiden University's Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA, then Centre for Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, CTC) in 2013, Wietse's focus centered on political violence in contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts, from 2014 onwards on IS and the KRI. His research continued when he joined the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017-2018 to monitor and evaluate projects in Iraq and, later, when he worked as a risk management consultant in 2019. Later that year, Wietse returned to the military, where he has worked since, eventually as a senior project manager liaising between the ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs.

From 2014 to 2022, Wietse was an associate fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT – The Hague), where he was involved in projects concerning foreign terrorist fighters. In 2017-2018, he was a research fellow at the Netherlands Defense Academy (NLDA), lecturing on armed non-state actors in the Middle East.

