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

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Chapter 5

Vacuum (June 2014)

ANSAs 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.¹¹²⁷ 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.

¹¹²⁷ 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-making¹¹²⁸, given the historical inter-Kurdish rivalries.¹¹²⁹ 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 2014'¹¹³⁰, 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.'¹¹³¹ However, such powerful groups do not appear out of nowhere. Conditions must be such that they can 'emerge.'¹¹³² Analysts related ISIS' emergence to the American-led 2003 invasion¹¹³³, when Sunnis lost political power due to the Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) *de-Ba'athification* policies.¹¹³⁴ 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.¹¹³⁵

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.¹¹³⁶ 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.¹¹³⁷ 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.¹¹³⁸ 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.¹¹³⁹

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.¹¹⁴⁰ On January 4, 2014, reports appeared that ISIS had captured Fallujah and fought ISF in Ramadi.¹¹⁴¹ ISIS proved successful due to a combination of ‘significant military build-up, tactical innovations in urban terrorism and shifts between conventional and guerrilla warfare.’¹¹⁴² Fights between ISIS and ISF continued throughout the first months of 2014 and expanded to other governorates in Iraq, such as Diyala.¹¹⁴³ 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.¹¹⁴⁴ 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.¹¹⁴⁵ Maliki, thus, referred to a seventh-century intra-Muslim battle¹¹⁴⁶, framing the contemporary conflict as a primordial struggle between Shia and Sunni Muslims.¹¹⁴⁷

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.¹¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Iraqis re-elected Maliki, which increased tensions between the different ethnicities in Iraq. As a result, Sunnis increasingly supported ISIS.¹¹⁴⁹ 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.¹¹⁵⁰ 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.¹¹⁵¹

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.¹¹⁵² 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.¹¹⁵³ 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].'¹¹⁵⁴ 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.¹¹⁵⁵

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”¹¹⁵⁶, 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.¹¹⁵⁷ 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.’¹¹⁵⁸ ISIS activated its sleeper cells to take over the city.¹¹⁵⁹

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.¹¹⁶⁰ 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 strong¹¹⁶¹ 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.¹¹⁶² 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.’¹¹⁶³ Maliki urged to declare a state of emergency after ISIS captured Mosul, which the Iraqi parliament did not allow.¹¹⁶⁴

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.

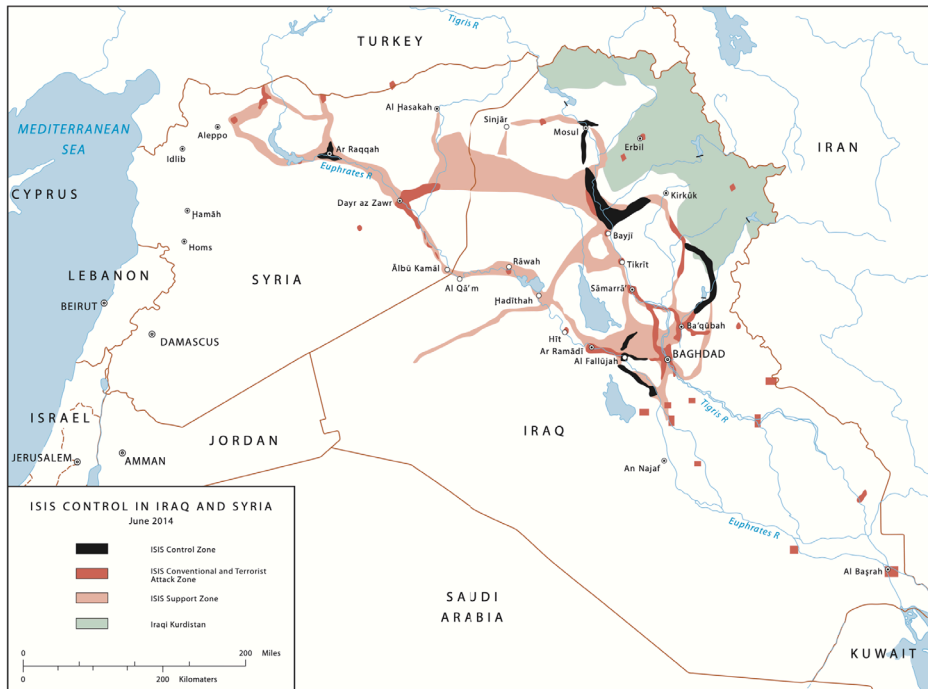
1161 *Ibid.*, 2, 51-2.

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 2014.¹¹⁶⁵ 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.¹¹⁶⁶

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.¹¹⁶⁷ Reports differed on whether ISF had already left¹¹⁶⁸ or the *peshmerga* forced the ISF to leave.¹¹⁶⁹ 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

¹¹⁶⁵ Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 22-3.

¹¹⁶⁶ Ahmed Ali & Heather Pickerell, "Situation report. June 12-14, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 15, 2014.

¹¹⁶⁷ Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 5; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach"; Stansfield, "Iraq," 18. Cf. Ezrow, *Global politics*, 64-5.

¹¹⁶⁸ "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.

¹¹⁶⁹ 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.¹¹⁷⁰ 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.'¹¹⁷¹ 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.¹¹⁷²

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 12.¹¹⁷³ Next to clashes in the Diyala governorate on June 13¹¹⁷⁴, 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*.¹¹⁷⁵ The *peshmerga* was able to hold Kirkuk from ISIS control during clashes on June 18.¹¹⁷⁶ 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.¹¹⁷⁷ From Kirkuk, the *peshmerga* took heavy military equipment left behind by ISF.¹¹⁷⁸

The *peshmerga* further advanced into disputed areas on June 16. The KRI's territory eventually increased by more than forty percent.¹¹⁷⁹ Shia members of the Iraqi parliament claimed a conspiracy between ISIS and the KRI.¹¹⁸⁰ The areas under control of ISIS and the KRI moved closer and eventually established an approximately 1,050-kilometer-long border – or frontline.¹¹⁸¹ 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 paradigm¹¹⁸²

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.'¹¹⁸³ So, ISIS needed to control a territory.¹¹⁸⁴ Although ISIS controlled the Anbar governorate since the beginning of 2014¹¹⁸⁵, its focus remained the Nineveh governorate, where it conducted most of its operations between November 2013 and April 2014.¹¹⁸⁶ 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.¹¹⁸⁷

Thus, ISIS regarded expansion as a strategic goal, necessary for survival. Expansion preceded implementing *shari'a* governance and providing social services.¹¹⁸⁸ Together with offering security¹¹⁸⁹, *shari'a* and social services were prerequisites for re-establishing the caliphate.¹¹⁹⁰ 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.¹¹⁹¹

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.¹¹⁹² Sunnis were potential supporters of ISIS, in particular those imprisoned by Iraqi authorities.¹¹⁹³ 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 10,000.¹¹⁹⁴

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.¹¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, ISIS could tax the population for a steady income and the Mosul oil reserves could serve as the economic backbone of the caliphate.¹¹⁹⁶

Finally, ISIS saw Mosul as a symbol of former caliphal power¹¹⁹⁷ 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.¹¹⁹⁸ 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 ISIS¹¹⁹⁹ and threatening the Sunni *ummah*¹²⁰⁰, guided by Maliki's anti-Sunni rhetoric¹²⁰¹ 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.¹²⁰² ISIS accused the ISF of acting as an American proxy and suggested that America was responsible for the marginalization of Sunni interests in Iraq.¹²⁰³ It seems likely that ISIS perceived the KRI's aspirations of an autonomous greater Kurdistan¹²⁰⁴ as a secondary threat, although this study found no evidence to support that claim. Still, in 2003, the *peshmerga* had captured Mosul and Kirkuk¹²⁰⁵ and, according to maps that had appeared on the internet, based on the Sèvres Treaty, greater Kurdistan would reach into the city of Mosul.¹²⁰⁶ Additionally, Iraqi authorities had considered allowing the *peshmerga* into the disputed areas in Nineveh, Salaheddine, and Diyala governorates.¹²⁰⁷

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.¹²⁰⁸ 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'¹²⁰⁹ – and potentially its combat morale – 'the willingness to fight.'¹²¹⁰ To hold prevented ISIS from overextending personnel, resources, and supply lines.¹²¹¹ Also, ISIS then could establish solid defensive positions¹²¹² and develop domestic and foreign relations¹²¹³ to position itself as a legitimate actor.¹²¹⁴

To attack meant that ISIS then advanced into ISF-controlled territories. ISIS then risked overextension by controlling territories that needed governing and contained rivals¹²¹⁵, fighting too many battles on different fronts with limited resources.¹²¹⁶ 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 warfare¹²¹⁷, 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 momentum¹²¹⁸, as well as support of other Sunni and jihadi-salafist groups.¹²¹⁹

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.¹²²⁰ 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.¹²²¹ A prerequisite to delegate was the availability of allies or proxies. Several other Sunni and jihadi-salafist groups supported ISIS.¹²²²

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.¹²²³ 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.¹²²⁴ Although ISIS cooperated with Sunni and jihadi-salafist groups¹²²⁵, 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.’¹²²⁶ The KRI did so for the area in Iraq that the Sèvres Treaty had appointed to the Kurds¹²²⁷, which concerned areas outside the KRI and controlled by the ISF, the so-called disputed territories.¹²²⁸ Controlling the areas – what the ISF in June 2014 apparently could no longer do – would confirm that the KRI was ready for autonomy.¹²²⁹ Export of the natural resources there could sustain the KRI’s economy.¹²³⁰ Foreign relations with Iran, Jordan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and European states further strengthened the KRI’s autonomy claim.¹²³¹ Next to the use of the diplomatic and economic instruments, the KRI’s military instrument, the *peshmerga*, had confirmed their reputation as fierce fighters¹²³² 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.¹²³³ 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.¹²³⁴

Until ISIS captured Mosul, the KRI’s primary threat concerned the Iraqi state, because of disputes over territories and oil revenues.¹²³⁵ 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 2014.¹²³⁶ 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 people¹²³⁷, which could offset the delicate ethnic balance in the region.¹²³⁸

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.¹²³⁹ 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 autonomy¹²⁴⁰, for example of the KRI's most important regional economic partner, Turkey.¹²⁴¹ The KRI further avoided overextension and spared its hammered economy.¹²⁴²

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.¹²⁴³ The economy then suffered from the financial burden of waging war.¹²⁴⁴ 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 2013.¹²⁴⁵ The KRI then signaled how eager it was to control these disputed territories and was ready for autonomy.¹²⁴⁶ 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.¹²⁴⁷

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.¹²⁴⁸ However, the KRI was considered a proxy itself – by ISIS¹²⁴⁹ and by Western states.¹²⁵⁰ 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.¹²⁵¹ The *diwan al-jund* combined conventional and insurgency forces, and continually adapted, supported by 'an adhocratic organizational culture that embraced fluidity and constant change.'¹²⁵² 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.'¹²⁵³

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.¹²⁵⁴ The claims regarding intelligence operations suggested that either specialized military units were involved¹²⁵⁵, or that the *emni* provided input for the *diwan al-jund*¹²⁵⁶, or both. Actual strategic decision-making took place within the *diwan al-jund*'s military council.¹²⁵⁷ If ISIS accepted politics' primacy over the military¹²⁵⁸, it would have consulted its *shura* council before it made significant strategic decisions.¹²⁵⁹ 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.¹²⁶⁰

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 vacuum¹²⁶¹, but framed a strategic narrative of ISIS' ability to govern.¹²⁶² 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.'¹²⁶³ Other studies verified that IS invested in confidence-building measures for the local population¹²⁶⁴, in particular concerning water, food, power, and security.¹²⁶⁵ ISIS issued instructions for anyone to report misbehavior conducted by IS soldiers or *emirs*.¹²⁶⁶

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.’¹²⁶⁷ ISIS’ main goal was ‘the caliphate’s reestablishment’¹²⁶⁸, along the five consecutive steps of *hijrah* (immigration), *jama’ah* (majority), destabilize *taghut* (idolater), *tamkin* (establishing the Islamic State¹²⁶⁹), 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*.’¹²⁷⁰

Arabist Pieter Van Ostaeyen recognized Naji’s *The management of savagery* in the strategy¹²⁷¹: jihadi-salafists believing they can defeat an enemy by destabilizing social cohesion.¹²⁷² 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*.¹²⁷³

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.’¹²⁷⁴ 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

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.’¹²⁷⁵ ISIS usually conducted hit-and-run attacks to inflict damage to its enemies, gain resources, free prisoners, and enable IS supporters¹²⁷⁶, 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.’¹²⁷⁷

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.¹²⁷⁸ This seems in line with Naji’s suggestion to use ‘small bands and separate, disparate organizations.’¹²⁷⁹ 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.’¹²⁸⁰ 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.¹²⁸¹ 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 counterattack¹²⁸² and ISIS *mujabedeens* pushing through when they realized that seizing eastern Mosul was possible.¹²⁸³ 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].¹²⁸⁴

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.¹²⁸⁵ Since April 2014, the Minister of *Peshmerga* Affairs was from *Gorran*.¹²⁸⁶ 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.¹²⁸⁷

In May 2013, the *peshmerga* moved towards the outskirts of Kirkuk, when the ISF redeployed to fight ISI.¹²⁸⁸ Tensions between the KRI and the Iraqi state over territory remained, notably over the oil-rich Kirkuk area.¹²⁸⁹ The Iraqi state considered any KRI gains in the Kirkuk governorate a move towards independence.¹²⁹⁰ The tensions led to the KRI allegedly refusing to support the ISF during battles with ISIS over Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014¹²⁹¹, and the Iraqi state cutting the 17 percent of the Iraqi national budget allocation for the KRI.¹²⁹² In response, the KDP and the PUK paid their respective *peshmerga* salaries from the parties' budgets¹²⁹³, 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; Saeed, "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.¹²⁹⁴ 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.¹²⁹⁵ Still, analysts expected the KDP and the PUK to form a coalition to advance Kurdish interests in the Iraqi parliament.¹²⁹⁶

As the ISF withdrew from northern Iraq, the KDP and the PUK agreed on advancing into the disputed territories, though dividing terrain geographically.¹²⁹⁷ 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.¹²⁹⁸ *Peshmerga* belonging to both parties took over an ISF base in the Kirkuk governorate¹²⁹⁹, 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.¹³⁰⁰ *Gorran* allegedly stated via private communications that the party did not support Kurdish independence, nor that Kirkuk belonged to the KRI.¹³⁰¹ The Department of Foreign Relations occasionally explained decisions on behalf of the KRI.¹³⁰² 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.¹³⁰³

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 past¹³⁰⁴ and would happen later. The PUK's *yekey* 70 and

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.¹³⁰⁵ 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-salafism¹³⁰⁶ (ideology), applied a cautious and pragmatic *modus operandi*¹³⁰⁷, 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 units¹³⁰⁸, whereas the KRI's foreign policy was historically fragmented along the KDP's and the PUK's party-lines¹³⁰⁹ (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'¹³¹⁰ (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*¹³¹¹, 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 religious¹³¹², illustrated by referring to Baghdadi as '*Amirul-Mu'minin*' (the commander of the believers)¹³¹³, 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.¹³¹⁴ Re-establishing the caliphate would make Baghdadi the global jihadi-salafist leader, a position left vacant since bin Laden's death in 2011.¹³¹⁵ Since Baghdadi had become the ISI leader, the organization regained momentum¹³¹⁶, which offered Baghdadi leverage among jihadi-salafists.

Despite his battlefield experience and applying a carefully constructed warrior-like image¹³¹⁷, Baghdadi delegated the conduct of operations to local commanders¹³¹⁸, while at the same time expecting total obedience of the fighters.¹³¹⁹ A follower described Baghdadi's military style as 'robust and confrontational.'¹³²⁰ 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).'¹³²¹

Differences exist on who was ISIS' military commander in northern Iraq in early 2014.¹³²² Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi¹³²³ 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.¹³²⁴ Some reports indicated that he was the ISIS coordinator between the Iraqi and Syrian battlefields.¹³²⁵ Bilawi had been an infantry captain in the Iraqi army during the *Ba'ath* regime. He had joined Zarqawi in 2003.¹³²⁶ For his AQI membership, he had been detained in Camp Bucca, after Baghdadi had been released from prison, though.¹³²⁷ Bilawi was transferred to Abu Ghraib prison and freed there on July 21, 2013, as part of ISIS' "Breaking the walls" campaign.¹³²⁸

Documentary evidence suggested that Bilawi was a fanatic jihadi-salafist.¹³²⁹ Since ISIS freed Bilawi from prison, he became responsible for ISIS' military organization.¹³³⁰ Bilawi was said to have planned the conquest of Mosul¹³³¹, but allegedly killed himself with a suicide vest on June 5, during the ISIS attack on the city.¹³³² When referred to by ISIS propaganda as an illustration of leading by example, the 'act [...] inflamed the already-overzealous fighters.'¹³³³ In Bilawi's honor, ISIS renamed its advance in Nineveh 'the campaign of *Asadullah* (lion of Allah) Al-Bilawi.'¹³³⁴

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 districts¹³³⁵ – was credited for ISIS’s capture of Mosul.¹³³⁶ His sacrifice and example – at least as mentioned in ISIS propaganda – boosted ISIS’ morale and encouraged bravery¹³³⁷, 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.¹³³⁸ He was assumed to pursue leadership over all Kurds by establishing a Kurdish state during his lifetime.¹³³⁹ 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 Council¹³⁴⁰, 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.¹³⁴¹ 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.’¹³⁴² Within the KRI, Talabani’s absence offered Masoud Barzani more political leverage, in particular for pursuing autonomy.¹³⁴³ In June 2014, Barzani announced an independence referendum to occur ‘within a few months.’¹³⁴⁴

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 impact¹³⁴⁵, 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.'¹³⁴⁶ 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.¹³⁴⁷

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.¹³⁴⁸ ISIS' strategy of exposure to support rapid growth proved successful.¹³⁴⁹ The Sunni protests from 2012 onwards, and the Iraqi state's responses, created an escalating cycle of violence.¹³⁵⁰ Sunni tribes eventually fought alongside ISIS against the ISF. When the ISF withdrew from Anbar, the governorate was left to ISIS.¹³⁵¹ 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 elections¹³⁵², Maliki further alienated the Sunni tribes and further ignited ethnic tensions. Maliki's re-election¹³⁵³ 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.¹³⁵⁴ 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 east¹³⁵⁵, it was able to capture Mosul on June 10.¹³⁵⁶ Parallel to the rise of ISIS, tensions increased between the KRI and the Iraqi state during the first months of 2014.¹³⁵⁷ 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 governorates¹³⁵⁸, ISIS' culmination point remained the mainly Sunni-inhabited Nineveh.¹³⁵⁹ 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.¹³⁶⁰ For ISIS, Mosul was a symbol of caliphal power¹³⁶¹ and the location for the Quranic story of Nuh's ark.¹³⁶² The KRI primarily focused on Kirkuk. The Iraqi state recognized Kirkuk's value as a prerequisite for Kurdish autonomy¹³⁶³, in particular because of Kirkuk's oil fields.¹³⁶⁴ Within the larger Kirkuk governorate, ISIS had a strong presence and threatened to take over the city after the ISF left.¹³⁶⁵ In a pre-emptive move, the KRI's *peshmerga* took control over Kirkuk and its direct surroundings¹³⁶⁶, as well as the areas west, north, and east of Mosul.¹³⁶⁷ The KRI's territory eventually increased by more than forty percent¹³⁶⁸, creating an approximately 1,050-kilometer-long border – or frontline – between ISIS and the KRI.¹³⁶⁹

The case-specific factors include the situation in Iraq, that was reminiscent of Bull's new mediaevalism¹³⁷⁰, or Hashim's description of 2003-2006 Iraq as a 'Hobbesian "warre of all against all"¹³⁷¹: 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 war¹³⁷², 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.’¹³⁷³

Multi-layered, multi-directional processes occurred within the new mediaeval situation sketched above. Iraq’s political leadership alienated Sunnis¹³⁷⁴, 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.¹³⁷⁵ Maliki’s anti-Sunni campaign¹³⁷⁶ and his re-election during the April 2014 elections¹³⁷⁷ backfired as ISIS’ threat to the Iraqi state increased.¹³⁷⁸ A process reminiscent of emergence appeared with ISIS’ battlefield momentum.¹³⁷⁹ In the conquest of Mosul, ISIS’ propaganda presented Bilawi’s self-detonation¹³⁸⁰ as a pivotal event, that further strengthened ISIS’ existing momentum.¹³⁸¹ 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.¹³⁸² Tactical occurrences created strategic effects.¹³⁸³ ISIS successes – neatly exploited by its propaganda – had effects too: more than 6,000 Arabs tried to join ISIS’ ranks in June 2014.¹³⁸⁴ Possibly, they were attracted by ISIS announcing ‘developing into a full-fledged state’¹³⁸⁵, as the final step of an allegedly intentional strategy.¹³⁸⁶

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 2014.¹³⁸⁷ The Iraqi state cut the budgets for the KRI¹³⁸⁸, 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 society¹³⁸⁹ 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.'¹³⁹⁰

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.¹³⁹¹

¹³⁹¹ 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 ideology¹³⁹², ISIS' *diwan al-jund* operated cautiously and pragmatically, simultaneously using conventional and semi-conventional warfare¹³⁹³, conducted by specialized units.¹³⁹⁴ 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.'¹³⁹⁵ 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 struggles¹³⁹⁶, 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.¹³⁹⁷ 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.¹³⁹⁸ 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

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.¹³⁹⁹

| 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 |

¹³⁹⁹ 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 equipment¹⁴⁰⁰, as well as allegedly \$430 million worth in cash from Mosul's banks.¹⁴⁰¹ On June 11, ISIS moved southwards, capturing the Baiji oil refinery and the city of Tikrit.¹⁴⁰² 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."¹⁴⁰³

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.¹⁴⁰⁴ 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).¹⁴⁰⁵ IS rendered any other Islamic scholar or group obsolete – including *al-Qaeda* – by proclaiming the caliphate on behalf of the *ummah*.¹⁴⁰⁶ 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.'¹⁴⁰⁷

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.¹⁴⁰⁸ On July 3, the KRI announced a referendum for independence.¹⁴⁰⁹ 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.¹⁴¹⁰ 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.”¹⁴¹¹ 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.’¹⁴¹²

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.

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.

