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

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Chapter 6

Battle (August 2014)

An uneasy status quo had emerged in northern Iraq since ISIS and the KRI took over control there in June 2014. By July 2014, ISIS had become IS and had declared a caliphate. The KRI had announced an independence referendum. Iraq as a state seemed obsolete. IS and the KRI seemed the successor-states, behaving state-like. As part of their foreign policies, a war-like conflict occurred in August 2014, when IS invaded the KRI. Although these occurrences seem a given in hindsight, strategic decisions by IS to advance militarily into the KRI-controlled territories and strategic decisions by the KRI to defend its territories preceded the battle. This chapter explains the strategic decision-making by answering the question how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI regarding the battle for the KRI in 2014?

The attack on the KRI – for IS a war of choice and a remarkable choice, given its ongoing conflict with the Iraqi state – had a huge impact and academic attention focused primarily on the consequences of the attack, notably the formalization of the international anti-IS coalition¹⁴¹³, instead of the attack itself. For the KRI, forced into a war of necessity, the attack ‘represented the gravest security threat the KRI had faced.’¹⁴¹⁴ Yet, Sadoon observed in 2023 that ‘[t]he number of academic works focusing specifically on the KRI as a *de facto* entity during the ISIS onslaught [...] is still very limited.’¹⁴¹⁵ This chapter contributes to understanding the under-researched strategic decision-making with respect to a crucial phase in the conflict between IS and the KRI.

Applying four different paradigms, the rational actor paradigm – considering goals, perceived strategic threats and opportunities, alternative options, and cost-benefit calculations – expects IS’ decision to attack and the KRI’s decision to defend to be the result of cost-benefit calculations. The organizational behavior paradigm expects the strategic decisions to be the outcome of internal bureaucratic struggles, guided by different SOPs or doctrines. The governmental politics paradigm expects strategic decisions to be the result of key leaders’

1413 For example: Watson, “The conflict with ISIS.”

1414 Sadoon, “The Islamic State and the independence referendum,” 8.

1415 *Ibid.*, 3. Italics in original.

political powerplay. Combining elements of the other paradigms, complexity theory expects the strategic decisions to be time-, space-, and context-specific, occurring through multi-level and multi-directional processes.

The first paragraph sketches the situation before and during the event, that is, IS attacking the KRI and the KRI defending its territories in August 2014. The subsequent paragraphs each apply the different paradigms to the strategic decision-making.

6.1 Setting

IS attacked the KRI on August 1, 2014. The origins of the attack traced back to June 2014, when IS – then ISIS – and the KRI took over northern Iraq from the Iraqi state. Hostilities increased between IS and the KRI along their approximately 1,050-kilometer-long shared border, which divided northern Iraq between the two ANSAs.¹⁴¹⁶

By late June 2014, ISIS had set up governing structures¹⁴¹⁷, had adopted the name IS¹⁴¹⁸, and had proclaimed a caliphate: '[t]he decision of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to declare an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria in June 2014 is as much a statement of the confidence of the leadership of ISIS as it is the next perceived step by violent Islamic extremists to remake the political and social landscape of the region.'¹⁴¹⁹

The Iraqi state proved unable to push back or contain IS, which undermined the re-elected Iraqi prime-minister Maliki's position. Maliki's anti-Sunni rhetoric and behavior caused Sunni members of parliament to leave Baghdad, which delayed appointing a speaker of parliament. Neither was the Iraqi parliament able to appoint a new Iraqi president to succeed the diseased Talabani. The KRI's announcement of an independence referendum on July 3 fueled expectations that Talabani's successor would not to be Kurdish.¹⁴²⁰ On July 9, Maliki accused the KRI of harboring Islamist militants, causing Kurdish politicians to leave Baghdad too.¹⁴²¹ The next day, the Iraqi state cancelled all cargo flights to the Erbil and Suleimaniyah airports. The accusation and the sanctions reflected the Iraqi state's 'annoyance with what it

1416 Gerges, *ISIS*, 2; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,336; Wing, "Costs of Iraq's Kurds moving into the disputed territories." Also see: "Northern Iraq offensive (August 2014)," *Wikipedia*; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 28. The battle for the KRI is sometimes labeled the Northern Iraq offensive, which is also used for ISIS' advances in June 2014, elaborated on in chapter 5.

1417 Caris, "How does ISIS maintain control of large urban areas?"

1418 "From hijrah to khilafa," 40; "Khilafah declared," 7; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.

1419 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 359.

1420 "Government formation"; "Iraqi PM's insistence." On July 15, Sunni Salim al-Jabouri was appointed as the new speaker of parliament. On July 24, Kurdish PUK-politician Fuad Masum was elected as the president of Iraq.

1421 "Offensive manoeuvres."

sees as the Kurds' exploitation of the security crisis [...] to simultaneously move into disputed Arab-Kurd territories and accelerate calls for independence.¹⁴²²

While the KRI externally struggled with the Iraqi state over oil prices and revenues, internally it struggled with fragmentation. Despite the KDP and the PUK, contrary to their historical rivalries¹⁴²³, ostensibly had operated united when filling the power vacuum in northern Iraq in June 2014, '[i]n late July of 2014, [...] the Kurdish parliament instructed the KRG to unify all the *Peshmerga* forces in six months – that initiative remains unenacted.'¹⁴²⁴ Additionally, the KRI struggled with the influx of refugees and IDPs¹⁴²⁵, fearing destabilization of the ethnic balance in the KRI.¹⁴²⁶

Tensions between IS and the KRI increased. After IS attacked, analysts Jessica Lewis *et al.* remarked that 'ISIS has been setting an offensive against the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces in Sinjar and Mosul Dam areas [...] since June 11, 2014'¹⁴²⁷, suggesting that ISIS had aimed for the KRI, immediately after seizing Mosul. Before August 2014, reports occasionally mentioned clashes between IS and the KRI.¹⁴²⁸ IS reported a battle with *peshmerga* over a medical industrial facility and its surrounding areas, north of Mosul on June 23, 2014.¹⁴²⁹ For July 2014, IS further reported advances in: 'the northWestern [sic] regions of *Wilāyat* [authority] Nīnawā (Sinjār, Zimmār, Rabī'ah, and Wānah). These areas were mostly occupied by the *Peshmerga*, who fled upon hearing of the Islamic State's approach.'¹⁴³⁰

Analysts expected IS to attack *peshmerga* in the Arab-Kurd disputed territories, but not to open a second front against the KRI¹⁴³¹, as IS' main interest seemed Baghdad.¹⁴³² Yet, ISIS had conducted attacks in the KRI in 2013-2014, indicating 'the potential and intention to destabilize the Kurdish region.'¹⁴³³ Furthermore, Iraqi-Kurdish ISIS leader Abu Harith al-

1422 "KRG consolidation."

1423 For example: Torelli, "Kurdistan and the Middle East," 18-43.

1424 Hadad & Wallace, "The Iraqi Kurdish security apparatus." Italics added.

1425 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 27-8.

1426 Mahmoud, "Iraqi Kurds worry about ethnic balance."

1427 Jessica Lewis *et al.*, "Iraq Situation Report. August 3, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 3, 2014. Italics added.

1428 Ahmed Ali *et al.*, "Iraq Situation Report. July 22, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, July 22, 2014; Pickerell *et al.*, "Iraq situation report. June 17, 2014"; Pollack, "Iraq." Also see: Diaa Hadid, "Iraqi Kurds dig frontier around disputed areas," *The Times of Israel*, July 2, 2014.

1429 "Islamic State news," *Dabiq* 2, 40.

1430 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 3 (1435H|2014), 18. Italics added.

1431 "Kurds' ability to hold Kirkuk." Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 217-8; "Islamic State's advance towards Kurdish-Iraqi border heightens risk of isolated attacks within Kurdistan Region," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, August 4, 2014.

1432 For example: "Gaining ground"; "Increasing involvement or regional players." Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 93.

1433 Gunes, "The IS Factor," 83. Also see: "Sectarian violence. Kurdistan struggles with militancy," *Jane's Islamic Affairs*, January 22, 2014; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

Kurdi in a November 2013 video threatened to ‘return to Kurdistan and we [ISIS] will kill all of the members of the KDP, PUK and security forces.’¹⁴³⁴ The attacks and the video indicated ISIS’ interest in the KRI. Nevertheless, Baghdadi had stated that ‘Baghdad is the heart of the battle of Sunni people’¹⁴³⁵, suggesting that IS’ main target was the Iraqi capital.

The clashes of July served as a prequel for events on August 1, 2014. IS attacked the KRI and the border became a frontline.¹⁴³⁶ The attack surprised the KRI and international analysts alike.¹⁴³⁷ IS moved towards the KRI in two directions from Mosul on August 3: westwards towards Sinjar and eastwards towards Makhmour.¹⁴³⁸ The *peshmerga* left Sinjar without a fight, out of fear for encirclement¹⁴³⁹, or being outgunned.¹⁴⁴⁰ On August 4, reports appeared that Syrian Kurdish militias supported Iraqi Kurds in the area of Sinjar.¹⁴⁴¹ Forces of the PKK and the PYD created a corridor, allowing the Yazidi inhabitants to escape from Sinjar.¹⁴⁴² Coordination between the PKK and the PYD on the one hand and the KDP *peshmerga* – located in the western part of the KRI – on the other, hardly took place and was merely based on having the same interests, lacking a structural character.¹⁴⁴³ Nevertheless, Kurdish forces conducted a counter-offensive against IS in vicinity of Mosul on August 5, reportedly in close coordination with the ISF.¹⁴⁴⁴ The next day, media suggested that the KRI’s capital Erbil was in danger.¹⁴⁴⁵ On August 7, the KRI’s forces focused on defending Erbil, securing the Mosul Dam, and protecting the Sinjar-pocket. Despite the efforts to create an escape, many Yazidis remained trapped in Sinjar, leading to a humanitarian catastrophe¹⁴⁴⁶, including IS enslaving Yazidis there.¹⁴⁴⁷ As IS control over contested areas increased, including the Mosul Dam, fears

1434 Abu Harith al-Kurdi, cited in “Sectarian violence.”

1435 Baghdadi, “Allah will not allow.” Also see: Barzani, “The Peshmerga,” 24-5. “Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul,” 4.

1436 Cheterian, “Turkey in 2017,” 142.

1437 Dexter Filkins, “The fight of their lives,” *The New Yorker*, September 22, 2014. Cf. Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,329, 1,337. Also see: Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan?” 17.

1438 “Arming Iraq’s Kurds,” 2.

1439 Cheterian, “Turkey in 2017,” 142.

1440 “Islamic State’s advance.”

1441 Bengio, “The Islamic State,” 3; Gunes, “The IS Factor,” 85; “Iraq situation report. August 4, 2014,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 4, 2014.

1442 Bengio, “The Islamic State,” 3; Cheterian, “Turkey in 2017,” 142; Isabel Coles, “Kurds’ battle for Kobani unites a people divided by borders,” *Reuters*, October 31, 2014.

1443 Local journalist, informal conversation by Wietse van den Berge, Ainkawa, September 14, 2014. Information taken from notes of the author, as no audio or video equipment was available during the conversation.

1444 “Kurdish offensive unlikely to weaken Islamic State significantly but increases likelihood of US military aid,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, August 7, 2014; Lauren Squires, *et al.*, “Iraq situation report. August 5, 2014,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 5, 2014.

1445 Jessica Lewis *et al.*, “Iraq situation report. August 6, 2014,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 6, 2014. Also see: “Arming Iraq’s Kurds,” 3, 3n13; Barzani, “Protecting Kurdistan,” 26.

1446 Valeria Cetorelli *et al.*, “ISIS’ Yazidi genocide. Demographic evidence of the killings and kidnappings,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 8, 2017; Eyal & Quintana. “Editor’s notes,” v; Lauren Squires *et al.*, “Iraq situation report. August 7, 2014,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 7, 2014. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 109.

1447 “The revival of slavery before the hour,” *Dabiq* 4 (1435|2014), 15. Also see: “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 6, 31n1.

increased of an attack on Erbil. That day, American fighter planes conducted the first bombing sorties against IS.¹⁴⁴⁸ Air support for the KRI by ISF fighter planes illustrated a response against IS coordinated between the KRI and the Iraqi state.¹⁴⁴⁹ With the help of these airstrikes, the KRI was able to counter IS attacks and push back IS.¹⁴⁵⁰ Heavy clashes between IS and a combination of *peshmerga* and PKK forces were reported near Makhmour on August 8.¹⁴⁵¹ On August 16, *peshmerga* and the ISF, supported by coalition airstrikes, attacked IS positions near the Mosul dam. The next day, reports appeared that *peshmerga* controlled the dam, as well as villages just east of Mosul.¹⁴⁵²

IS initially conducted large-scale attacks on the KRI. Later, IS conducted small-scale attacks that focused on the KRI's security organizations, in particular *peshmerga* and *asayesh*.¹⁴⁵³ Frequent IS attacks on KRI-positions kept occurring nevertheless, in particular near Kirkuk¹⁴⁵⁴, occasionally in Erbil.¹⁴⁵⁵ Apart from the attacks, IS indirectly challenged the KRI as refugees from Syria and IDPs from Anbar and Nineveh pressured the KRI's economy and society.¹⁴⁵⁶ The situation also provided IS opportunities to infiltrate the KRI as refugees or IDP's.¹⁴⁵⁷

On Iraq's national political level, Maliki resigned as the prime-minister on August 14, 2014, as he proved unable to bring solutions to Iraq's crisis. Shia Haider al-Abadi succeeded Maliki. Abadi had to decide whether to allow further reinforcements of the KRI's *peshmerga*, which would benefit the conflict against IS, but would probably also increase the call for independence within the KRI.¹⁴⁵⁸ During August, legal and political issues arose over the KRI selling crude oil, independent of Iraqi authorities, which would have huge political consequences in offering possibilities for the KRI to export oil and maintain its own economy.¹⁴⁵⁹

1448 "Foreword," *Dabiq* 3, 3; Timothy Schultz, "Remote warfare. A new architecture of air power," in *Air power in the age of primacy. Air power since the Cold War*, Phil Haun et al. (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 49; Lauren Squires et al., "Control of terrain in Iraq. August 8, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 8, 2014; "US airstrikes in Iraq likely to prevent Islamic State militants' advance into Kurdistan Region or Baghdad," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, August 8, 2014; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 24-5.

1449 Lauren Squires et al., "Iraq situation report. August 9, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 9, 2014; Jessica Lewis et al., "Control of terrain in Iraq. August 10, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 10, 2014.

1450 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,329-30; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 81.

1451 Squires et al., "Control of terrain in Iraq. August 8, 2014."

1452 Lauren Squires et al., "Iraq situation report. August 16-17, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 17, 2014.

1453 *Asayesh* officers, interview by Wietse van den Berge, Suleimaniyah, April 7, 2015. Information taken from notes of the author, as no audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview.

1454 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 4, 25.

1455 Erin McClam & Richard Engel, "Erbil blast. Car bomb explodes outside U.S. consulate in Iraq, official says," *NBC*, April 17, 2015.

1456 Kulaksiz et al., "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 1-2; Mahmoud, "Iraqi Kurds worry"; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

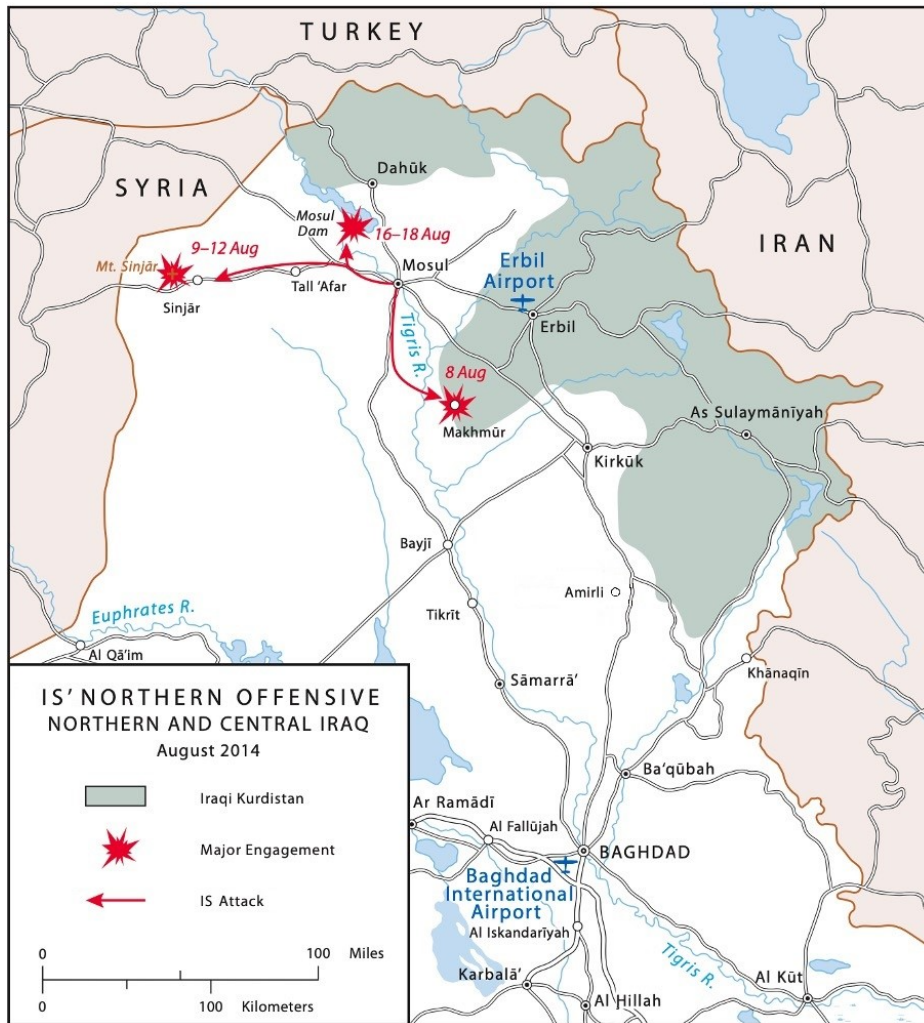
1457 UN security official, informal conversation by Wietse van den Berge, Erbil, November 13, 2014.

1458 "Iraqi government challenges arms shipments to Kurdish forces, complicating foreign military intervention against Islamic State," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, August 18, 2014. Also see: Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 138-9.

1459 "Uncertainty over legal repercussions of purchasing Kurdish oil likely to remain despite court ruling, inhibiting

IS had taken the risky endeavor to attack the KRI in August 2014, thus, creating an additional front, while it was already battling the ISF. The KRI decided to defend its territory against the IS incursion. The remainder of this chapter explores the strategic decision-making of IS to attack and of the KRI to defend. Figure 6.1 indicates IS' main lines of attack in the KRI in August 2014.

Figure 6.1: IS' main lines of attack in northern Iraq in August 2014.¹⁴⁶⁰ The KRI-controlled territory was in fact larger than indicated, including Kirkuk and areas near Mosul since June 2014.



oil sales," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, August 27, 2014.
1460 Based on: Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 28.

6.2 Rational actor paradigm¹⁴⁶¹

The next three sections apply the rational actor paradigm to IS and the KRI, when IS took the strategic decision to advance into the KRI in August 2014 and the KRI decided to defend. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: goals, perceived strategic opportunities and threats, alternative options, and consecutive cost-benefit calculations.

6.2.1 IS

ISIS achieved its primary goal of ‘the caliphate’s reestablishment’¹⁴⁶² when it controlled a substantial and viable territory¹⁴⁶³ – that is, Mosul and its surroundings – and proclaimed the caliphate.¹⁴⁶⁴ Yet, IS retained the motto *dawlat al-islam bakiyya wa tattamaddad*¹⁴⁶⁵, indicating that re-establishing the caliphate was not enough. IS wished to expand geographically and demographically. Thus, IS continued to conquer Sunni-inhabited territories. Furthermore, two days after re-establishing the caliphate, Baghdadi explained IS’ view that Sunni Muslims globally were under threat and IS aimed to protect them. Baghdadi argued that to provide protection, IS was allowed to use violence against potential threats. At the same time, Baghdadi requested Sunni Muslims around the world to help expand the caliphate by going there.¹⁴⁶⁶

The KRI provided IS a nearby opportunity to expand the caliphate geographically and demographically.¹⁴⁶⁷ IS was aware that ‘Kurdistan is a region that is mostly home to a Sunni Kurdish population.’¹⁴⁶⁸ ISIS bomb attacks in the KRI in 2013-2014 and the November 2013 video statement by Kurdi were aimed against the KRI’s political parties and security organizations¹⁴⁶⁹, later continued by IS:

1461 Parts of paragraph 6.2 appeared as: Berge, “Armed non-state actors and strategic decision-making,” 279-99.

1462 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 28, 233; Bahney & Johnston, “Who runs the Islamic State group?”

1463 Wood, “What ISIS really wants,” 81-6.

1464 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, untitled speech, July 4, 2014, transl. INSITE Blog on Terrorism and Extremism, in “The first appearance of the caliph,” Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, July 12, 2014. Cf. “From hijrah to khilafa,” 40; “Khilafah declared,” 7; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.

1465 Kyle Orton, “The announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, April 2, 2014, n7. Cf. Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 123; “Remaining and expanding,” 32-3.

1466 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “A message to the mujahideen and the Muslim umma in the month of Ramadan,” audio speech, July 1, 2014, transl. unknown, in “The leader of the Islamic State explains the caliphate’s vision,” Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, July 2, 2014; “Khilafah declared,” 7; Muhājir, “Come to a just word”; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.

1467 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens & Ranj Alaaldin. “The Kurds of ISIS. Why some join the terrorist group,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 8, 2016.

1468 “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 2, 13. Also see: Watson, “The conflict with ISIS,” 9.

1469 Gunes, “The IS Factor,” 83; “Sectarian violence”; Shapland, “Iraqi Kurds’ aim of statehood stays out of reach”; Speri, “Not all Kurds”

[o]ur war with Kurds is a religious war. [...] We do not fight Kurds because they are Kurds. Rather we fight the disbelievers amongst them, the allies of the crusaders and jews [sic] in their war against the Muslims. As for the Muslim Kurds, then they are our people and brothers wherever they may be. We spill our blood to save their blood. The Muslim Kurds in the ranks of the Islamic State are many. They are the toughest of fighters against the disbelievers amongst their people.¹⁴⁷⁰

IS possibly counted on 'a history of Kurdish Islamist mobilisation [in Iraq].'¹⁴⁷¹ IS provided a contemporary example in a *Dabiq* article on Kurdish-originating jihadi-salafist organization AaI, which pledged *bay'ah* to IS on July 26, 2014¹⁴⁷², despite earlier but recent conflicts between AaI and IS.¹⁴⁷³ Another *Dabiq* article claimed that over thirty Syrian-Kurdish villages near Aleppo pledged *bay'ah* to IS.¹⁴⁷⁴ Analysts estimated the actual number of Kurds that had joined IS by 2014-2015 between 240 and 500¹⁴⁷⁵, depending on the definitions used. One analyst concluded that 'there appears to be little popular sympathy for the Islamic State in the Kurdistan Region'¹⁴⁷⁶, based on the relatively small number of Kurds who had joined IS, and which declined after August 2014. Its unpopularity might explain why, on July 25, 2014, IS responded to claims that it had expelled Kurds from the Nineveh province. IS claimed it did not, as long as the Kurds were Sunni Muslims.¹⁴⁷⁷

For IS, the Kurdish population was an opportunity and a threat alike. Some analysts argued that IS' *Ba'ath*-ist roots caused anti-Kurdish sentiments among IS' ranks, fueled by the KRI's support for the anti-*Ba'ath* coalition since 2003 and the Kurds' secular image.¹⁴⁷⁸ While the analysis seems awkward, given *Ba'ath*'s secular origins, IS' predecessors were indeed aware of Kurdish internal fragmentation and alleged suppressing of religious Kurds.¹⁴⁷⁹

1470 Adnani, cited in "Indeed your lord is ever watchful," *Dabiq* 4 (1435H|2014), 9; Adnani, cited in "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 12; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 158. Also see: "Denial of expelling Kurds."

1471 Gunes, "The IS Factor," 74. Also see: Meleagrou-Hitchens & Alaaldin, "The Kurds of ISIS"; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 12.

1472 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 4, 21-2.

1473 Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar al Islam claims attacks against Iraqi military, police," *Long War Journal*, June 20, 2014. Also see: Thomas Joscelyn, "The Islamic State's curious cover story," *Long War Journal*, January 5, 2015.

1474 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 12.

1475 KRG official, interview by Wietse van den Berge, Suleimaniyah, April 8, 2015. Information taken from notes of the author, as no audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview. Also see: "250 Kurdish militants within Daesh ranks killed. Official," *Press TV*, October 1, 2015; Wietse van den Berge, "Countering violent extremism in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, May 10, 2016; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 104; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Alaaldin, "The Kurds of ISIS"; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 17; "Sectarian violence"; Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1476 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1477 "Denial of expelling Kurds."

1478 Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 20.

1479 Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Cf. Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37-54.

Geographically, proximity might be the reason that IS considered the KRI as a significant threat.¹⁴⁸⁰ Yet, IS may have seen the Kurdish mountains as potential IS strongholds, like they had historically been for the Kurds themselves.¹⁴⁸¹ Zarqawi had complained about the terrain in Iraq for not having supportive geography or strategic depth.¹⁴⁸² However, the Kurds' reputation with respect to the mountains and the ISF background of many IS leaders, thus with experience in fighting Kurds in the mountains, might have made IS reluctant of entering the Kurdish mountains.¹⁴⁸³

IS potentially perceived Kurdish expansionism as a threat. The KRI's rejection of IS' presence in Syrian-Kurdish territory had already troubled IS.¹⁴⁸⁴ Just before the Iraqi parliamentary elections in April 2014, Nineveh governor Usama al-Nujaifi had announced an agreement with the KRI over crude oil exports from an oil field 35 kilometers east of Mosul, until then considered disputed territory.¹⁴⁸⁵ The agreement indicated the KRI's interest – and involvement – in Mosul. After capturing Mosul, IS was cautious of 'any possible *peshmerga* and PKK advances on both the Iraqi and Syrian "Kurdistan" fronts.'¹⁴⁸⁶ In July 2014, IS claimed '[t]here are presently a number of fronts in the Islamic State being defended against the Kurdish communists in both Iraq and Shām. The month of Ramadān [July 2014] saw numerous operations taking place against the PKK and their Iraqi counterparts, the *Peshmerga*.'¹⁴⁸⁷ Important in the quote above is the use of the word defended, emphasizing that IS deemed it necessary to protect the caliphate against Kurdish aggression, both in Iraq and Syria. Reports of Nujaifi requesting support of Kurdish officials and the KRI's maintaining relationships with local Arab tribal leaders¹⁴⁸⁸, possibly fueled IS' fears.

Perhaps IS expected the Kurds to advance even further into IS-held territories.¹⁴⁸⁹ In June 2014, the KRI had become actively involved in Iraq's internal armed conflict, by entering and taking over the disputed territories. Since then, the KRI controlled more than half of the Nineveh province surrounding Mosul and about 70 percent of the oil-rich Kirkuk area¹⁴⁹⁰, where most clashes between IS and the KRI occurred.¹⁴⁹¹ The KRI also controlled Sinjar, which

1480 Chigudu, "Sectarianism and the ideology of the Islamic State," 5,153.

1481 Cf. Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,340-1n23.

1482 Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Cf. Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 39-40; Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37-54.

1483 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,340-1n23.

1484 "Sectarian violence."

1485 "Deteriorating security will jeopardise growing co-operation between Iraq's Nineveh province and the Kurdistan government over coming year," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, April 22, 2014.

1486 "Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul," 3. Italics added.

1487 Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 2, 13. Italics added.

1488 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,340-1n23.

1489 *Ibid.*, 1,340.

1490 Nawzad Mahmoud, "Peshmerga control all Kurdish territories in Iraq," *Rûdaw*, June 17, 2014.

1491 Hawramy, "Kurdish peshmerga seize a chaotic victory in Kirkuk"; "Iraqi Kurdish regional government's territorial

was strategically located along the Iraqi-Syrian border, thus not only important for collecting revenue, but also for IS' supply lines between the Iraqi and Syrian battlefields.¹⁴⁹²

Perhaps even more troublesome for IS, was the KRI's partnership with Western countries, most notably the United States.¹⁴⁹³ On several occasions, IS referred to American involvement in and support of the KRI¹⁴⁹⁴: 'until they [the Americans] get their act together the *Peshmerga* can bear the brunt of the dying with the odd resupply from the air and some Special Forces help on the ground.'¹⁴⁹⁵ Western – that is, American – support enabled the KRI to maintain its position in northern Iraq and, thus, to threaten IS. Yet, by late July, Masrour Barzani acknowledged the *peshmerga's* vulnerability. Since filling the vacuum in June, Kurdish security forces were overstretched, controlling 40 percent more territory.¹⁴⁹⁶ When IS attacked the KRI – potentially to expose the weakness of the *peshmerga*, until then regarded the only ground force potentially capable of stopping IS¹⁴⁹⁷ –, the *peshmerga* initially could not withhold IS, lacking heavy weaponry and air support. Only when the American-led international coalition provided air support¹⁴⁹⁸, were the *peshmerga* able to push back IS.

The political instability within Iraq and within the KRI provided opportunities for IS. The Iraqi parliament proved unable in forming an executive power, and tensions remained between the Iraqi state and the KRI.¹⁴⁹⁹ Societal unrest within the KRI followed after the KRI could no longer pay official's salaries – approximately 70 percent of its budget – due to the Iraqi state withholding oil revenues since December 2013.¹⁵⁰⁰ The KDP and the PUK paid their party-affiliated *peshmerga* themselves, thus contributing to the KRI's disunity.¹⁵⁰¹

While the KRI's economic growth had been at least 7 percent since 2005¹⁵⁰², the 2014 economic and societal situation was fragile.¹⁵⁰³ Despite its weak economy at the time, the KRI was an attractive region to capture for IS. In general, IS was keen to capture resources during combat,

control set to boost oil export autonomy"; "Iraqi Kurds battle Sunni fighters in Kirkuk"; "Iraqi Kurds 'fully control Kirkuk' as army flees"; Morris *et al.*, "The future of Kirkuk," 14; Pickerell *et al.*, "Iraq situation report. June 17, 2014." Also see: "Kurds' ability to hold Kirkuk."

1492 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 128-9.

1493 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 185.

1494 "Foreword," *Dabiq* 3, 3; "The revival of slavery," 14.

1495 Cantlie, "If I were the US president today..." 39. Italics added.

1496 "Under attack."

1497 David Gardner, "ISIS"; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 105; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,337.

1498 Charles Lister, "A long way from success. Assessing the war on the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015), 3-13; Pollack, "Iraq."

1499 "Iraqi PM's insistence on running for third term."

1500 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1501 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 43.

1502 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1503 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 1-2.

in particular weaponry and ammunition, as long as it did not replace *jihad* and become a goal in itself.¹⁵⁰⁴ The KRI was a potential source for oil.¹⁵⁰⁵ Apart from potential new recruits, IS considered newly conquered areas for paying taxes¹⁵⁰⁶, denying opponents those same financial resources.

Finally, IS may have considered timing as an opportunity, using its battlefield momentum after capturing Mosul. This seems in line with the analysis that IS used strategic surprise. In August 2014, many analysts expected IS to advance on Baghdad. Instead, IS attacked the relatively unprepared KRI¹⁵⁰⁷, as the KRI seemed more concerned about the Iraqi state.¹⁵⁰⁸

Considering the opportunities and threats, IS in essence could chose to hold, to attack or to delegate. The strategic costs to hold included a delay in expanding the caliphate.¹⁵⁰⁹ Then, IS remained, but – at least temporarily – would not expand. Furthermore, holding stalled IS’ battlefield momentum. To hold allowed the KRI an opportunity to reinforce¹⁵¹⁰, to enter alliances with Arab tribes¹⁵¹¹, and Western allies¹⁵¹², potentially preparing for invading IS territory.¹⁵¹³ As such, IS would jeopardize the caliphate. To hold protected IS from overreach and enabled IS to create solid defensive positions.¹⁵¹⁴ IS could use the lull in fighting to establish itself in the region as a potentially legitimate actor¹⁵¹⁵ – perhaps enter allegiances¹⁵¹⁶ –, seeking acceptance as an actual state.¹⁵¹⁷

To attack risked overreach¹⁵¹⁸, with conquests potentially turning into quagmires by attritional warfare.¹⁵¹⁹ By attacking, IS could demographically and territorially expand the caliphate.¹⁵²⁰ IS’ jihadi-salafist ideology made fighting not only a means to fight – and conquer – infidels

1504 Al-Hanbalī, “My provision,” 10-3.

1505 “Kurds’ ability to hold Kirkuk”; “Sectarian violence.”

1506 “Islamic State news,” *Dabiq* 2, 36.

1507 Pollack, “Iraq.”

1508 “Arming Iraq’s Kurds,” 25-6; Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,334.

1509 “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 2, 12-13. Cf. Black, *The history of Islamic political thought*, 12; Lewis, *The crisis of Islam*, 29-38; Moussalli, “Wahhabism, salafism and Islamism,” 17-8.

1510 Cf. Kulaksiz *et al.*, “Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” 1-2; Mahmoud, “Peshmerga control.”

1511 Cf. Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,340-1n23.

1512 Cf. “Foreword,” *Dabiq* 3, 3; “The revival of slavery,” 14.

1513 Cf. Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,340.

1514 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 293-4. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 234; “The looming assault on Mosul.”

1515 Walt, “What should we do.” Cf. Coggins, “Rebel diplomacy,” 98.

1516 Cf. Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 20.

1517 Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, 11; “Convention on rights and duties of states”; Freedman, *The future of war*, 28.

1518 Gerges, *ISIS*, 43; Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 341.

1519 Cf. Stansfield, “The Islamic State,” 1,340-1n23.

1520 “Indeed your lord is ever watchful,” 9; “Islamic State reports,” *Dabiq* 1, 12; “Khilafah declared,” 11; “Remaining and expanding,” 32-3. Cf. Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 123.

and gain support¹⁵²¹, but an end in itself.¹⁵²² To attack allowed IS to gain resources as war spoils¹⁵²³, benefitting from its battlefield momentum. The large influx of refugees and IDP's that the KRI's experienced¹⁵²⁴ provided relatively easy opportunities for IS to infiltrate sleeper cells into the KRI, to prepare a surprise attack on the KRI.¹⁵²⁵ IS then could gain resources – in particular oil, but mountainous hide-outs too – by controlling Kurdish areas.¹⁵²⁶ IS might have hoped for more support among the Kurdish population, based on the Kurdish IS-members¹⁵²⁷, that many Kurds were Sunnis, and the shared rival of the Shia-dominated Iraqi state. IS could benefit from overwhelming a potential rival in a surprise attack, using momentum and the KRI's focus on the Iraqi state.¹⁵²⁸

To delegate the attack on the KRI to a proxy, left IS with some of the benefits of the hold and attack options, without much of the costs. IS did not have the best experiences with proxies, however. Early 2014, JaN not only pledged allegiance to *al-Qaeda*, becoming a rival in Syria¹⁵²⁹, but also *al-Qaeda* in Kurdistan left IS' ranks.¹⁵³⁰ Instead, IS preferred incorporating groups that pledged *bay'ah*, such as AaI, though reluctantly.

IS' preferred option was to attack the KRI. To hold or to delegate would not lead to achieving IS' goal of expanding its caliphate. Equally important was IS' emphasis on its jihadi-salafist ideology, which argued that fighting is necessary in order to achieve goals.¹⁵³¹ Nevertheless, earlier analyses on IS' strategic decision-making indicated that IS was reluctant in using its resources under threat¹⁵³², and acted rather pragmatically to ensure its own survival.¹⁵³³ IS' eventual strategic decision to attack the KRI and advance into the KRI-controlled territory functioned as a tactical offense within an allegedly defensive strategy to protect the caliphate from potential Kurdish expansionism.

1521 "The return of khilafah," 37.

1522 "Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism," 20-4.

1523 Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 21-4; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers," 19-20, 40n85.

1524 "Iraqi Kurdistan"; Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 1-2; Mahmoud, "Iraqi Kurds"; UN security official.

1525 Pollack, "Iraq"; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,334. Cf. Baghdadi, untitled speech, January 19, 2014.

1526 "Senior Kurdistan official."

1527 "The failed crusade," 9; "Remaining and expanding, 12.

1528 Pollack, "Iraq," 2; Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,334.

1529 Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 13-4.

1530 Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda in Kurdistan' breaks ranks with ISIS over Syria," *Long War Journal*, May 1, 2014. Cf. Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 238-9.

1531 "Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism," 20-4.

1532 "The looming assault on Mosul."

1533 Noyes, "Pragmatic takfir." Cf. Naji, *The management of savagery*, 81.

6.2.2 The KRI

The KRI's autonomy undertone in its strategic communications since 2003 became semi-official on July 3, 2014, when the KRI initiated preparations for an independence referendum. This move seemed a reaction to the failing policy of the Iraqi state to deal with IS effectively¹⁵³⁴, as well as ongoing disputes with the Iraqi state over oil revenues and territories.¹⁵³⁵ For an independence referendum to take place, the KRI needed to secure a viable territory. A July 2014 statement by the KRI's minister of Foreign Relations, Falah Bakir, and the advisor for the KRI's president, Fuad Hussein, explicitly stated that 'the first goal [of the KRI] is to defend our border. [...] The second goal is to protect the Kurdistan population.'¹⁵³⁶ The wording our border implicitly referred to the KRI as an independent state. Furthermore, protecting the Kurdistan population indicated regional aspirations, referring to Kurds beyond the KRI, spurred by Iraq's impotence to contain IS.¹⁵³⁷ The *peshmerga's* task was to 'prevent ISIS from advancing into Kurdish territory, to break up and disrupt their subversive strategies, to wear out their ability to carry out large scale military actions, and to slowly diminish and eradicate their power.'¹⁵³⁸ As IS had attacked on August 1, 2014, from then on, only disrupting IS' strategies and undermining IS' fighting capabilities remained.

Since August 1, 2014, IS posed an existential threat towards the KRI.¹⁵³⁹ IS attacked Kurdish territories, executed captured Kurds, and IS propaganda turned anti-Kurdish.¹⁵⁴⁰ Indirect threats included societal disruption within the KRI, either by the Kurds who joined the ranks of IS¹⁵⁴¹, or the refugees and IDPs within the KRI. The KRI struggled with funding and training the *peshmerga*, which had little experience in fighting in the flat desert areas, in which IS attacked.¹⁵⁴²

Confronting IS could increase the foreign support for the KRI and the *peshmerga* in particular. Especially Western donors regarded the *peshmerga* as a vanguard to counter IS together with coalition air support.¹⁵⁴³ The KRI interpreted foreign support as international recognition of the KRI as a de facto independent entity. At least it provided the *peshmerga* an opportunity

1534 Caryl, "The world's next country."

1535 "KRG blocks dam over budget dispute with Iraq, but agreement remains likely," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, March 3, 2014; "KRG's fiscal dependency."

1536 Hussein & Bakir, "Iraq's crisis and the KRG."

1537 Caryl, "The world's next country."

1538 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 27.

1539 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,338.

1540 "From hijrah to khilafa," 37; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 2, 12-3; Wood, "What ISIS really wants," 83. Also see: "Indeed your lord is ever watchful," 9; "Reflections on the final crusade," 41-2.

1541 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 12; KRG official. Also see: "250 Kurdish militants"; Berge, "Countering violent extremism"; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 104; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 17; "Sectarian violence"; Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1542 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 28-9; "Iraqi Kurdistan"; UN security official.

1543 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 30; "Confidence in the future," *Invest in Group*.

of no longer being weakened by sanctions imposed by the Iraqi state.¹⁵⁴⁴ Locally, the PKK and the PYD were allies, supporting the KRI in Sinjar. However, the PKK and the PYD presence there was limited to approximately only tens of fighters.¹⁵⁴⁵

Despite IS forcing the KRI into a war of necessity, the KRI could still chose to hold, to attack, or to delegate, which would translate here into surrender, counter-attack, or proxy-warfare, respectively. To hold delayed the actualization of an autonomous KRI. The KRI then lost areas it regarded as historically Kurdish. The KRI then left the tactical initiative with IS, which gave the KRI no other options than to react to IS' future moves. Even if the *peshmerga* withheld the initial attacks, IS' next attack could be anywhere along the frontline. Such a defensive posture costs great efforts and still ran the risk that many Kurds came under IS repressive control.¹⁵⁴⁶ IS became relatively stronger and the KRI relatively weaker. To hold might give the impression to regional and international actors that the KRI was weak, perhaps too weak to become autonomous, let alone be independent. Still, it might lead to sympathy from regional and international actors as the KRI was no aggressor – or at least not any more, as in June 2014. The KRI saved essential resources, compared to the attack-option. As such, there would not be an additional burden to the KRI's already hammered economic situation, while being no threat to its most important regional economic partner, Turkey.¹⁵⁴⁷

To attack cost the KRI many resources, not only due to the attack itself, but also for controlling territory with potentially hostile inhabitants.¹⁵⁴⁸ To attack also created benefits. The KRI relied on the reputation of the *peshmerga* as fierce fighters to boost the KRI's own morale and lower that of rivals. The will to fight indicated that the Kurds were ready for independence¹⁵⁴⁹, fighting for what the KRI perceived as Kurdish lands.¹⁵⁵⁰ Attacking acknowledged that the KRI had forces willing, and possibly capable, to fight IS.

To delegate implied that the KRI acted by proxy. Delegation denied the KRI possible gains, leaving essential resources like oil and gas under proxy control. More important, delegation declined the goal of an autonomous KRI, as the KRI seemed unable or unwilling to act. While regional and international actors might perceive the KRI as non-aggressive, the KRI then depended on proxies for self-defense. The KRI saved resources and the *peshmerga* could recuperate. Potential proxies, such as the PKK and the PYD, did not have sufficient capacities, however.¹⁵⁵¹

1544 "Confidence in the future."

1545 Academic, informal conversation by Wietse van den Berge, Ainkawa, August 20, 2014.

1546 "From hijrah to khilafa," 37.

1547 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 21, 111-3.

1548 *Ibid.*, 111-113.

1549 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,336.

1550 Pollack, "Iraq," 2.

1551 Academic.

The KRI's best choice was to attack, in this case to counter-attack. Foremost, the KRI had to survive. Surrender, or retreat, would endanger the KRI's existence. Proxies powerful enough were not available. This left counter-attacking IS as the only realistic option. Additionally, if successful, the KRI would secure the disputed territories.

6.2.3 Reflections

With its focus on strategic goals, the rational actor paradigm in this case found that the strategic dimensions of politics, geography, people, economics and logistics, and military operations explain strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI. Whereas IS aimed to expand to create strategic depth, the KRI intended to defend its territory (geography, military operations), to maintain or to establish an independent political entity, respectively (politics). Therefore, both required sufficient resources (people, economics and logistics). In IS' case, jihadi-salafism guided strategy (strategic theory and doctrine, ideology). The rational actor paradigm's analysis of threats and opportunities, where one actor's threats usually are the other actor's opportunities and vice versa, indicates that IS and the KRI feared the other (adversary, military operations), but IS could benefit from proximity and surprise (friction, chance, and uncertainty) and its battlefield momentum (emergence). Additionally, IS seemed wary of the KRI's Western partners (allies), which had announced an anti-IS coalition (time).

Out of the options offered – that is, to hold, to attack, or to delegate – IS and the KRI preferred the option that most likely achieved the actors' strategic goals in the short term. IS preferred to attack to expand the caliphate and the KRI preferred to counter-attack IS in order to survive as a political entity, a prerequisite to achieving its strategic goal of independence. As such, the rational actor paradigm provides solid explanations for the decisions taken.

Yet, the analysis seems incomplete and some analytical weaknesses emerge within the rational actor paradigm. The costs and benefits that are mentioned for the options typically are not qualified. The paradigm intuitively ranks the arguments.¹⁵⁵² Still, some arguments are more important than others. Here, the paradigm does not provide guidance, other than the analysts' intuition. In the case above, IS achieving its strategic goal of expanding the caliphate seemed more important than being able to create strong defensive positions. The paradigm simplifies the strategic dimensions by considering them linear, instead of non-linear, thus overlooking how they influence one another, for example the threat that IS perceived by the KRI's allies' announcement of an anti-IS coalition, which was established due to IS' political power. Furthermore, the rational actor paradigm struggles with analytical ambivalence. The

¹⁵⁵² Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 25. Also see: Calabretta *et al.*, "The interplay between intuition and rationality," 365-9.

paradigm assumes the research subject is a unitary actor – thus neglecting identity or internal fragmentation. Still, IS as an external enemy potentially strengthened the fragmented KRI by reinforcing Kurdish identity.¹⁵⁵³ Yet, IS as a unitary entity benefitted from disunity within the KRI. Similarly, IS comprised different specialized organizations, sometimes unaware of the overall picture¹⁵⁵⁴, and up to 500 Kurds joined the ranks of IS.¹⁵⁵⁵ Therefore, it seems that the rational actor paradigm overlaps with the organizational behavior paradigm, which considers that other actors comprise multiple organizations.

Overall, the rational actor paradigm is helpful to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI, regarding the battle for the KRI in August 2014. Yet, the findings above suggest analytical discrepancies and overlap with the organizational behavior paradigm. Thus, in this case, the rational actor paradigm is insufficient to fully explain strategic decision-making.

6.3 Organizational behavior paradigm

The next three sections view IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS' attack on the KRI in August 2014 from an organizational behavior paradigm-perspective. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: decision-making organizations, SOPs' capabilities and constraints, options, and implementation.

6.3.1 IS

The decision-making organizations within IS on the strategic level were the caliph and the *shura* council, as was the case in June 2014. Yet, on the military strategic level, since June 2014, organizational changes had occurred: '[f]rom one hybrid army in Syria and a guerrilla army in Iraq in 2013, the department [*diwan al-jund*] expanded its force structure to four distinct entities after the conquest of Mosul, each with a different purpose.'¹⁵⁵⁶ These four entities were: (1) the caliphate army, a conventional force protecting IS' territorial integrity across Iraq and Syria; (2) the Dabiq army, loosely organized foreign fighters, grouped into ethnic/common language-centric units and dispersed among different fronts as 'highly motivated shock troops defending key nodes of the caliphate'¹⁵⁵⁷; (3) the *al-Uhra* army, a special operations force for defending Mosul; and, (4) the army of the provinces, which were all forces under control of

1553 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,346. Also see: Hanbali, "My provision," 9.

1554 IS *emir*.

1555 "250 Kurdish militants"; Berge, "Countering violent extremism"; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 104; Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1556 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 8.

1557 *Ibid.*, 8. Also see: Husham al-Hashimi, "ISIS 2020. New structures and leaders in Iraq revealed," *New Lines Institute*, May 19, 2020.

a particular *wali*.¹⁵⁵⁸ As historian Mason Watson observed, IS' capture of large urban areas during the first months of 2014, forced IS to establish and maintain defensive positions there. Thus, IS formalized its semi-conventional armed forces and 'forfeited its ability to use its most-favored style of warfare [that is, raids] and was forced to switch to one in which its opponents – particularly the Iraqi government and the United States – held many advantages.¹⁵⁵⁹ Still, like in June, the *diwan al-jund* used specialized units¹⁵⁶⁰ to conduct simultaneously irregular and semi-conventional warfare¹⁵⁶¹ in small-scale and large-scale attacks.

For the attack on the KRI, IS' small-scale attacks focused on the KRI's security apparatus, in particular the *peshmerga* and the *asayesh*. For these focused attacks, IS made use of sleeper cells that operated covertly in order to avoid detection by *asayesh*. The sleeper cells comprised Kurdish jihadists, or Arab jihadists who spoke Kurdish, and they proved hard to eliminate as they maintained strict operational security.¹⁵⁶² A captured IS *emir*, who had led a unit that conducted attacks behind Kurdish lines, explained that issues like attacking the KRI – fellow Sunni Muslims – was not under any discussion within IS' ranks.¹⁵⁶³ A captured, low-rank IS-member explained, when asked about attacking the KRI: '[w]e don't know what is the policy. Others decide on the policy.'¹⁵⁶⁴ The *emir* and low-rank IS-member indicated a strict compartmentalization, which created organizational resilience by making IS hard to infiltrate.¹⁵⁶⁵ Additionally, all prospective IS members were thoroughly vetted. Trusted Kurdish IS members vetted Kurdish prospects.¹⁵⁶⁶ Although the members of the sleeper cells seemed unaware of the overall picture¹⁵⁶⁷, the presence of sleeper cells within the KRI indicated that the IS attack on the KRI was well-prepared and planned long before.

IS stated that, before the attack, IS' religious scholars had studied what to do with the Yazidi-minority.¹⁵⁶⁸ The prior involvement of IS' religious scholars suggests meticulous preparations. Yet, this study found no evidence of direct involvement of IS' religious scholars in the strategic decision-making whether or not to attack the KRI. The IS' religious scholars did provide input for courses of action on what to do after capturing Yazidi-inhabited territories. In general, IS

1558 *Ibid.*, 8. Also see: Hashimi, "ISIS 2020." The *al-Usra* army was named after the last campaign ordered by the prophet Muhammad.

1559 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 80.

1560 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 43.

1561 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 236-7. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 103; Muhājir, "Advice for the leaders of the Islamic State," 15; "The Fallujah memorandum," 128-9.

1562 *Asayesh* officers; IS *emir*.

1563 IS *emir*.

1564 Low-rank IS-member 1, interview by Wietse van den Berge & Mark Dechesne, Kirkuk, November 11, 2015.

Information taken from notes of the author, as no audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview.

1565 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 15.

1566 *Asayesh* officers.

1567 IS *emir*.

1568 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 6, 31n1; "The revival of slavery," 15.

was reluctant in building and maintaining relations with tribes in captured regions, limiting relations to requesting *zakah* (religious donation), men, and materiel in return for support and security.¹⁵⁶⁹ After IS' August setbacks, IS proclaimed a more repressive posture towards the tribes¹⁵⁷⁰, including collective punishment. Furthermore, IS initiated *da'wah* (religious education) in conquered territories, as well as monitoring by the *bisbah* (religious police).¹⁵⁷¹

IS propaganda increasingly focused on Kurdish secularism.¹⁵⁷² A content analysis of IS' *Dabiq* magazine found that Kurds were referred to 391 times, 86.46 percent of which were unfavorably.¹⁵⁷³ The ground for IS' animosity against the Kurds was their supposed involvement in suppressing the Sunni population by denying Sunnis a state-like political entity, which the Kurds and Shia did have.¹⁵⁷⁴ Still, by mentioning Kurds, IS implicitly recognized the Kurdish people, their identity, and Kurdistan as the homeland of Kurds.¹⁵⁷⁵ Internally, IS had had its share of Kurdish secessionist tendencies, when a group called *al-Qaeda* in Kurdistan had left its ranks.¹⁵⁷⁶ Other analyses stressed Sunni ideology's Arabic roots, which would inherently imply non-Arabs being seen as potential threats¹⁵⁷⁷, while downplaying the Kurdish IS members.¹⁵⁷⁸

IS had taken the strategic decision to attack the KRI. The organizational behavior paradigm falls short in providing a conclusion that SOPs of different bureaucratic entities significantly influenced the decision. What the paradigm does indicate, however, were the changes since the first half of 2014. IS needed to defend large urban areas, whereas beforehand IS mainly conducted raids and, thus, had altered its organization and doctrine. The introduction of static defenses did not influence generating alternative courses of action, though.

6.3.2 The KRI

While the General Command Staff, headed by Masoud Barzani, was in charge of the military decisions in the KRI¹⁵⁷⁹, the KDP and the PUK maintained their own chains of command within

1569 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 1, 12-4.

1570 "The Islamic State before al-malhamah," *Dabiq* 3 (1435H|2014), 6.

1571 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 3, 12-7.

1572 Cf. Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Also see: Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 37-54.

1573 Qaraman, "The representation of Kurds," 12-3. For example: "Indeed your lord is ever watchful," 9; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 4, 12.

1574 Masri, "Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology." Also see: Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 12.

1575 Salih, "The Islamic State's visions of political community," 14.

1576 Roggio, "Al Qaeda in Kurdistan' breaks ranks." Also see: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 238-9.

1577 Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 6-7, 17.

1578 "250 Kurdish militants"; Berge, "Countering violent extremism"; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 104; KRG official; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Alaaldin, "The Kurds of ISIS; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 17; "Sectarian violence"; Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1579 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 39.

their zones of influence.¹⁵⁸⁰ Therefore, the parties remained the military strategic decision-making organizations in the KRI in August 2014, despite operating united when filling the vacuum in northern Iraq in June. According to a 2015 study of the International Crisis Group, within the KRI '[d]ecision-making about the IS threat has become as much a partisan as military matter, subject to factions' complex domestic and regional agendas.¹⁵⁸¹ The study concluded that:

'[c]ompetition between and within the parties [the KDP and the PUK] strongly affects professionalism and performance, undermining the Kurdish region's security. Party intelligence services enjoy separate sources of information, have developed privileged ties to different regional partners and share information selectively. Some view this as a primary factor behind the defeat in Sinjar in August, which resulted from inability or unwillingness to share evidence indicating that IS was about to attack.'¹⁵⁸²

The abovementioned separate sources and lack of shared intelligence led the PUK to think that IS 'was a terrorist group that had to be fought,' whereas the KDP 'saw the group as an anti-Baghdad force and was ready to accept IS as its new neighbour, confident that it would not attack Kurdish territory.'¹⁵⁸³ Instead of considering IS a threat towards the KRI, the KDP considered IS as an opportunity to acquire the disputed territories and, thus, establish autonomy.¹⁵⁸⁴ Yet, the existential threat posed by IS, from August 1 onwards, brought the KDP and the PUK together. Within the *peshmerga*, a KDP-affiliated commander noted 'the ability of the commanders on the ground to liaise with each other, despite owing allegiance to different political parties in Kurdistan.'¹⁵⁸⁵ Still, the internal divisions had caused sub-optimal distribution of equipment across the *peshmerga*. As some *peshmerga* units were better equipped than others, highly mobile opponents such as IS, could 'exploit weak points across the long front line.'¹⁵⁸⁶

A PUK general, based at Kirkuk's southern front, in 2015 illustrated the sub-optimalization and the challenges his units faced during the fight against IS. Weapons deliveries from Western countries, that should have contributed to fight IS, allegedly disappeared after arriving on Kurdish airports, possibly towards the extensive Kurdish black markets. Sometimes, units turned to the black markets to purchase the weapons that were intended for the units in the first place.¹⁵⁸⁷ Sometimes, weapons were claimed by other units. As most weapon deliveries

1580 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10.

1581 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 8.

1582 *Ibid.*, 11.

1583 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 17.

1584 *Ibid.*, 17.

1585 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 31.

1586 "Kurdish peshmerga." Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 219.

1587 PUK general, interview by Wietse van den Berge & Mark Dechesne, Kirkuk, November 11, 2015. Information taken from notes of the author, as no audio or video equipment was allowed during the interview. Also see: Jonathan Brown, "The rise of the Kurdish gun market," *Al-Jazeera*, November 1, 2015.

ran through the KDP-controlled Erbil International Airport, KDP units confiscated goods before the *Gorran* controlled Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs could allocate them.¹⁵⁸⁸ It does not seem too farfetched to suppose that the transfer of weapons from a KDP-controlled airport to a PUK *peshmerga* unit is problematic.¹⁵⁸⁹ Due to mistrust between the KDP and the PUK, a unit might be reluctant to transfer weapons, fearing that these weapons one day might be used against themselves.¹⁵⁹⁰ Thus, rather than coordinating efforts, units competed over resources.¹⁵⁹¹

Additionally, scapegoating along party political lines after setbacks potentially frustrated much needed intra-Kurdish solidarity.¹⁵⁹² The IS attack and the PKK's counterattack in Sinjar provoked divisions between Iraqi Kurds and Yazidis. Many Yazidis felt abandoned by the KRI, while they appreciated the PKK's efforts.¹⁵⁹³ IS probably speculated on Kurdish historical disunity¹⁵⁹⁴, likely a PKK-PYD-PUK-alliance quarreling with the KDP.¹⁵⁹⁵ External actors used the parties as proxies to become involved in the KRI's affairs. Sadoon explained that 'it seems while the West mostly assisted the KRG through the KDP, the PUK was receiving aid through weapons, advisers, and instructions supplied by Iran and its non-state allies such as the PKK and PYD.'¹⁵⁹⁶ In general, the KDP benefitted most from Western coalition support, as it had been empowered through weapons, training, air support, and political legitimization. Western partners remained silent on the KDP – and the PUK, for that matter – confiscating the disputed territories. Apart from competing over resources, the parties competed over foreign policy. One such occasion happened in August 2014. The KDP politburo negotiated with a Sunni Arab tribal leader for the KDP forces taking over areas around Rabiya in the Nineveh governorate – over which the KDP had long claimed Kurdish control. The aim of the negotiations was to secure an alliance that would provide the KDP future influence over the area, located on the border between Iraq's and Syria's Kurdish inhabited areas.¹⁵⁹⁷ Here, party interests superseded the KRI's interests.

Still, geographical spreading along party lines avoided problems. The PUK *peshmerga* fought close to the areas of Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah, whereas the KDP *peshmerga* from Erbil to Zakho. Both party-affiliated *peshmerga* benefitted from short supply lines and rapid

1588 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 22. Also see: "President Barzani inaugurates the security council."

1589 Also see: Layla Mohammed, "Political powers split over Kirkuk asayesh," *Iraqi News*, December 14, 2008.

1590 Cf. Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 210-7.

1591 Cf. Freedman, *Command*, 502.

1592 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 18.

1593 Cheterian, "Turkey in 2017," 142.

1594 Winston Harris, "Chaos in Iraq. Are the Kurds truly set to win?" *Small Wars Journal*, August 28, 2014.

1595 Local journalist. Also see: "From hijrah to khilafa," 37; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 2, 12-3.

1596 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10.

1597 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 11, 19-22.

mobilization opportunities. Furthermore, party affiliation created close unit bonds with unique strategic cultures.¹⁵⁹⁸

The KDP and the PUK needed to defend the KRI against the IS attack, which they did. Yet, the defense could have been more efficient and, thus, more effective, when conducted in a centralized manner. Despite some advantages of party-militia, the decentralized *peshmerga* could not withhold IS by itself.

6.3.3 Reflections

With its focus on how an actor is organized, assuming internal bureaucratic struggle, and an emphasis on doctrine, the organizational behavior paradigm in this case found that IS' modus operandi of combining conventional and unconventional warfare remained largely unchanged, compared to ISIS attacking Nineveh in June 2014. IS remained cautious and when the attack on the KRI failed – due to Western airstrikes – IS withdrew, while the IS attack forced the KRI again to change its foreign policy from independence-driven to survival-driven (strategic theory and doctrine, culture). IS' formalization of conventional-style army units did not change its conduct of warfighting, in the KRI's case, the defense against IS was not as effective as could have been, as the KDP and the PUK fought separate wars against IS¹⁵⁹⁹ (organization), leading to different estimates of IS' threat (information and intelligence). While recognizing that the KRI was forced into a war of necessity by IS (military operations, adversary) and struggled for mere survival, the organizational behavior paradigm explains the strategic decision to change the KRI's foreign policy doctrine. From an opportunity for independence, the KRI switched to a more cooperative stance, in search for foreign support (allies). The organizational behavior paradigm simplifies the strategic dimensions mentioned above, by considering them linear, instead of non-linear, thus overlooking how they influence one another, for example how the threat of IS adapted the KRI's foreign policy doctrine to become more directed at allies. Furthermore, the organizational behavior paradigm cannot fully explain IS' strategic decision-making, as IS largely acted as a unitary actor.

Overall, the organizational behavior paradigm has interesting insights, but is unable to fully explain by itself the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI regarding the battle for the KRI.

1598 "Kurdish peshmerga." Cf. Berge, "Muitertij in Frankrijk," 12. Also see: Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 18-9.
1599 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 18.

6.4 Governmental politics paradigm

The next three sections apply the governmental politics paradigm to IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS' advance into the KRI in August 2014. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: which leaders play, what are their stands, what is their impact, and what is their action channel?

6.4.1 IS

The re-establishment of the caliphate in late June 2014, and the consequential role as the caliph, confirmed Baghdadi's reputation and prestige.¹⁶⁰⁰ Given the tasks IS assumed to be the caliph's, in particular the preparation of the armies¹⁶⁰¹, it seems reasonable to assume the involvement of Baghdadi in deciding to attack the KRI. Yet, in line with Naji's suggestion to use 'separate, disparate organizations'¹⁶⁰², Baghdadi, probably urging for pragmatism and to avoid costly battles, likely delegated execution to his lower commanders.¹⁶⁰³ That approach can be expected to have increased with the establishment of the caliphate, including its governance, and the exposure since.

Turkmani acted as the governor of conquered territories in Iraq¹⁶⁰⁴ and the overall deputy of Baghdadi. Turkmani was skilled in operational security and counterintelligence due to his service as a lieutenant-colonel in the *Ba'ath* security apparatus. Furthermore, he had a background in special operations within Saddam Hussein's elite Republican Guard.¹⁶⁰⁵ The available documentary evidence on Turkmani described a harsh, fanatic jihadi-salafist, who was anti-American and sought revenge for Sunnis killed by American bombings. Documentary evidence also described Turkmani entering the competition among IS senior commanders over trophy women who were kept as sex slaves.¹⁶⁰⁶ He was also accused of ordering the killing of people from captured areas, even after they repented.¹⁶⁰⁷

1600 Cf. Fishman, *The master plan*, 152.

1601 "The structure of khilafa."

1602 Naji, *The management of savagery*, 12. Also see: Asbridge, *The crusades*, 343-61; Hassan; "ISIS has reached new depths of depravity"; Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 950; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 152-3; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 74, 88.

1603 Atwan, "A portrait of caliph Ibrahim," 69, 72. Cf. "Bringing down the towns i"; "Bringing down the towns iii"; "Bringing down the towns iv"; Naji, *The management of savagery*, 84.

1604 Cf. Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 109.

1605 Orton, "The Islamic State's deputy"; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers," 7.

1606 Paul Wood, "US hostage Kayla Mueller 'killed by IS' say ex-slaves," *BBC*, September 10, 2015.

1607 Qardash, in "Captured senior ISIS commander."

Since the death of Bilawi in early June, Suwaydawi had become the *emir* of the military council, which he remained until his death in May 2015.¹⁶⁰⁸ Suwaydawi had been childhood friends with Bilawi and under Saddam Hussein he had served in the same intelligence unit as Haji Bakr, who had been IS' first *emir* of the military council. Like Bilawi and Haji Bakr, Suwaydawi had joined JTJ and became a close associate of Zarqawi. Suwaydawi had been imprisoned from 2007 to 2010.¹⁶⁰⁹ When Suwaydawi died, Turkmani succeeded him as the *emir* of IS' military council.¹⁶¹⁰

The *Ba'ath*-ist background of Turkmani and Suwaydawi explained why IS conducted large-scale attacks on the KRI as outlined in Soviet-inspired *Ba'ath* doctrine. Turkmani's experience in special operations contributed to integrating small-scale military operations into larger campaigns. Suwaydawi's intelligence background contributed to IS' strict internal security, including vetting of prospect IS-members and infiltrating the *asayesh*.¹⁶¹¹ The *Ba'ath*-like operations fitted the newly established caliphate that aimed to expand, but that also had to defend urban areas against external threats.¹⁶¹² Yet, the profiles of Turkmani and Suwaydawi do not explain strategic decision-making as the result of political struggles, as this study found no documentary evidence of political powerplay among IS' leadership.

6.4.2 The KRI

Within the KRI, Masoud Barzani took the strategic decisions on military affairs within the General Command Staff.¹⁶¹³ What had changed since June, was the proclamation of the KRI's independence referendum by Barzani. Some analysts saw in the proclamation a reaction to Turkey refusing to assist the KDP, while Iran supported the PUK.¹⁶¹⁴

Yet, the IS attack forced the KRI into a war of necessity. The center of gravity of the IS attack was in the KRI's west. This concerned *peshmerga* border sector 6 in vicinity of Gwer and Makhmur and border sector 8 for Sinjar. The *peshmerga* commander in sector 6 was major-general Sirwan Barzani, who was also a member of the KDP central committee and was advisor to Masoud Barzani. Masoud Barzani himself was commander-in-chief of the KRI *peshmerga*, but also

1608 Salafi, in Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi." Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 124.

1609 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 17, 29, 37.

1610 "Abu Muslim al-Turkmani. From Iraqi officer to slain ISIS deputy," *Al Arabiya*, December 19, 2014; Bill Roggio, "US kills Islamic State deputy emir, 2 senior commanders in recent airstrikes," *Long War Journal*, December 19, 2014.

1611 Cf. *Asayesh* officers.

1612 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 80.

1613 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 39; "President Barzani inaugurates the security council"; Wilgenburg & Fumerton, "Kurdistan's political armies," 9n28.

1614 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10.

leading *peshmerga* operations against IS from a base in border sector 8. From their sectors, both commanders aimed to stop the IS advance and conduct a counter-offensive against IS.¹⁶¹⁵

The KRI's defenses were geographically organized along party lines. PUK *peshmerga* fought close to the areas of Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah, whereas the KDP *peshmerga* from Erbil to Zakho. Party affiliation created close unit bonds with unique strategic cultures¹⁶¹⁶, which increased when the KDP and the PUK paid their *peshmerga* salaries from the parties' budgets, in response to the budget cut by the Iraq state.¹⁶¹⁷ Potentially, the individual *peshmerga* fighters increasingly became dependent on the parties and the commanding officers that were appointed by the parties, which created politicians with militias.

6.4.3 Reflections

With its focus on key leaders' perceptions and assuming powerplay among those key leaders, the governmental politics paradigm expects seizing opportunities by the leaders on both sides. Baghdadi, as IS' caliph, left the Iraqi affairs to his deputy for Iraq, and the military affairs to the *emir* of the military council, the fanatic jihadi-salafists Turkmani and Suwaydawi, respectively, whereas on the KRI's side Masoud Barzani, as the KRI's leader, found the military commander in IS' center of gravity also to be his advisor and member of the KDP central committee (people, command). While IS' military leaders were capable in military and security affairs (military administration), together with their jihadi-salafist beliefs (ideology), the KRI's military leaders held their commanding positions via political affiliations (politics). The governmental politics paradigm's strength as an explanatory model lies in the powerplay-assumption, which involves a process among key leaders. The lack of reliable sources with such level of detail undermines the paradigm's explanatory power. In the case here, no documentary evidence suggested political powerplay among IS' or the KRI's leaders.

Overall, the governmental politics paradigm offers insights into IS' and the KRI's strategic leadership, but the paradigm fails to provide an explanation based on political powerplay. This study found no indications of powerplay among IS' or the KRI's leaders. To explain the KRI's strategic decision-making, party affiliation – the subject of inquiry of the organizational behavior paradigm – seems more suitable than powerplay by individual leaders.

1615 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 26-7.

1616 "Kurdish peshmerga." Cf. Berge, "Muitelij in Frankrijk," 12.

1617 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 43.

6.5 Complexity theory

This paragraph applies complexity theory to IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS' advance into the KRI in August 2014. The paragraph adopts the structure along the elements of the paradigm: time-, space-, and case-specific factors and multi-level, multi-directional processes. Because of the focus on processes, the structure of the paragraph is to jointly analyze ISIS and the KRI, instead of separately, as occurred in previous paragraphs of this chapter.

6.5.1 Time, space, context, and processes

Time-specific factors in this case trace back to ISIS capturing Mosul on June 10, 2014, and its immediate advance southwards, towards the Baiji oil refinery and Tikrit.¹⁶¹⁸ On June 12, ISIS acknowledged its next military campaign towards Baghdad.¹⁶¹⁹ On June 28, ISIS proclaimed the caliphate and turned into IS. The KRI announced the preparations for its independence referendum on July 3¹⁶²⁰, potentially creating an independent, ambitious rival for IS in northern Iraq. The Iraqi state responded by accusing the KRI of conspiring with jihadi-salafists and closing the KRI's airports for cargo flights, on July 9 and 10, respectively.¹⁶²¹ The tensions between the KRI and the Iraqi state and their preoccupation with each other, rendered themselves ineffective and made coordinated military action against IS highly unlikely. Still, IS needed to attack before the start of the anti-IS "Inherent Resolve" campaign, which the United States announced mid-June 2014.¹⁶²² As the KRI had been a known ally of the United States since 2003¹⁶²³ and a likely participant of "Inherent Resolve", attacking the KRI in July or August was an attractive option for IS.

Although ISIS' announcement of a campaign towards Baghdad was sometimes regarded a distraction maneuver, ISIS did advance in that direction, only to be stopped by a combination of the ISF and Shia militias. The suggestion that 'the Kurds stood in the way of the ISIS march south toward Anbar province and Baghdad,' seems plausible. IS then needed to 'weaken the Kurds and push them back from their forward positions close to ISIS's path of advance southward.'¹⁶²⁴ Still, IS also advanced on Sinjar, which was not towards the south. Thus, the attack also seems connected to the geographical and demographical expansion that IS

1618 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 20.

1619 "Following capture of Mosul." Also see: Lewis, "The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham captures Mosul."

1620 "Iraqi PM's insistence on running for third term." Also see: "Government formation."

1621 "KRG consolidation of disputed territories"; "Offensive manoeuvres."

1622 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 7.

1623 Fishman, *The master plan*, 29; Noi, "The Arab spring," 22; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10.

1624 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 217.

sought.¹⁶²⁵ Sinjar strategically connected the Iraqi and Syrian battlefields, whereas the natural resources and infrastructure of Kirkuk were attractive aims¹⁶²⁶, where IS had relatively strong presence¹⁶²⁷, and perhaps hoped for popular support. Yet, proximity may also have played a role, causing the KRI for IS to be simultaneously an opportunity and a threat.

Multi-directional processes occurred, taking the form of interconnection, considering that IS had benefitted from the increased tensions between the Iraqi state and the KRI since June, but also contributed to those tensions by defeating the ISF in northern Iraq. IS was able to maintain its battlefield momentum until August 2014. The threat that IS posed, got external actors involved, notably the United States as the leader of the “Inherent Resolve” campaign. Rather paradoxically, the KRI’s probable participation in “Inherent Resolve” as a known local ally of the United States, made it a threat – and thus, a target – for IS. Still, based on IS’ long-term preparations for the attack, it seems likely that the KRI advancing into the disputed territories in June, had already fueled IS’ fears of the KRI’s expansionism. The KRI’s vulnerable position since August 1, 2014, fighting for its survival, made it more accommodating towards international partners, compared to the situation in June 2014, when it focused on independence. Multi-level processes occurred too, as IS operated mainly as a unitary actor, while the KRI was fragmented with the KDP and the PUK fighting two separate wars against IS.

6.5.2 Reflections

Complexity theory merges the other paradigms in this study and adds elements, focusing on time-, space-, and context-specific events with multi-level and multi-directional processes.

On the strategic level, following the rational actor paradigm, in this case IS aimed to create strategic depth and the KRI intended to defend its territory (geography, military operations), to expand and protect their political entity, respectively (politics), for which both required resources (people, economics and logistics). IS adopted jihadi-salafist guidance (ideology, strategic theory and doctrine) and benefitted from proximity, and surprise (friction, chance, and uncertainty, information and intelligence), using its battlefield momentum (emergence). Additionally, IS seemed wary of the KRI (adversary, military operations) and its Western partners (allies), which had announced an anti-IS coalition (time). In line with the organizational behavior paradigm, IS maintained its cautious foreign policy, whereas the KRI switched to a survival-driven foreign policy, once under attack (strategic theory and doctrine, culture, allies). IS’ doctrine remained largely unchanged, despite formalizing conventional-style operations into organizational

1625 Orton, “The leader of the Islamic State explains the caliphate’s vision.” Also see: “Khilafah declared,” 7; Muhājir, “Come to a just word”; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 46; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.

1626 Saeed, “The problem of Kirkuk,”

1627 Gunes, “The IS factor,” 83-4.

structures. The KRI remained highly fragmented (organization), causing different intelligence estimates on IS' threat towards the KRI (information and intelligence, military operations, adversary). The governmental politics paradigm observed capable jihadi-salafist (ideology) military commanders within IS (people, command, military administration), while the KRI's commanders held their commanding positions via political affiliations (politics).

Complexity theory acknowledges that IS primarily acted as a unitary actor, while the KRI responded along party level (interconnection). Within the case, the why-then-question of IS attacking the KRI on August 1, can be explained by the announcement in mid-June (time) of the anti-IS operation "Inherent Resolve" (exogenous pressure), and the KRI's independence referendum on July 3 (adversary).

Recognizing that strategy can change¹⁶²⁸, the time-specific element proved important. Taking a non-linear approach towards the strategic paradoxes, IS' surprise attack on the KRI illustrates the limitations of complexity theory to forecast future strategic decisions. Only in hindsight can analysts narrow down the infinite number of variables leading to strategic decision-making.

Overall, complexity theory offers the most encompassing explanation for strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI, regarding the battle for the KRI. Complexity theory merges the other paradigms in this study and adds multi-level and multi-directional processes to the analysis, thus offering a solution how to analyze non-linearity.

6.6 Conclusion

In August 2014, IS took the strategic decision to attack the KRI. The KRI decided to defend. From a military strategic level point of view, the IS attack initially seemed successful, despite the *peshmerga* putting up a dogged defense. However, with the benefit of hindsight, on the policy level, IS' strategic decision to attack proved a misjudgment, whereas the KRI's strategic decision to stand its ground turned out successful. The IS attack accelerated the establishment of an international anti-IS coalition, which eventually existed of 86 partners that committed to defeating IS.¹⁶²⁹ The KRI gained support of regional and global actors, including air support, and eventually was able to push back IS.

This chapter focused on how to explain the strategic decisions of IS to attack and the KRI to defend. The chapter used four different IR paradigms, each offering different perspectives. The

¹⁶²⁸ Freedman, *Strategy*, xi.

¹⁶²⁹ "Our mission," *The global coalition*.

section below summarizes the different approaches of how to explain the strategic decision-making of both ANSAs in August 2014. Section 6.6.2 focuses on how useful the different paradigms proved in analyzing IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions. The last section looks forward, linking the battle that IS and the KRI fought over the KRI to this study's next case.

6.6.1 Explanations

Since IS and the KRI came in close proximity of one another in June, IS observed the KRI take over land in the vicinity of Kirkuk and the IS-bulwark Mosul. While minor skirmishes occurred between IS and KRI before August 2014, IS' attack on the KRI fitted in the perception of defending the *ummah*.¹⁶³⁰ In this case IS presented perceived Kurdish expansionism by an operational offense in light of a defensive strategy.¹⁶³¹ Analysts have described IS as merely an aggressive actor.¹⁶³² However, despite aggressive tactics, the analysis indicates that a calculated strategic defensive posture should be taken in consideration for understanding IS' strategic decisions.¹⁶³³ This explains why IS chose to attack the KRI as a measure against a perceived threat posed by KRI. Instead of setting up solid defenses along its borders, IS risked overreach and accelerated the formation of the anti-IS coalition¹⁶³⁴, which eventually limited IS' operational possibilities.¹⁶³⁵ Earlier analyses on IS' strategic decision-making pointed out that IS was reluctant in using its resources under threat.¹⁶³⁶ The two relevant IS leaders – Turkmani, as the deputy of Baghdadi for Iraq, and Suwaydawi, as the *emir* of the military council – had complementary experience in incorporating small-scale operations in large-scale campaigns, as well as intelligence operations. Finally, the announcement in mid-June of operation “Inherent Resolve”¹⁶³⁷ and the KRI's independence referendum on July 3¹⁶³⁸ influenced the timing of the attack.

The KRI's best response – basically its only option – was to defend. Apart from existential survival, ‘the KRI needed to align its goals with those of the United States and its allies which requested the KRI not to further disintegrate Iraq.’¹⁶³⁹ The KRI changed from an assertive foreign policy in June 2014¹⁶⁴⁰ – entering the disputed territories with its military instrument

1630 “Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism,” 20-4.

1631 “Purpose of jihad.” Also see: Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 2.

1632 Cf. Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 234-5; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 238-9, 242.

1633 Noyes, “Pragmatic takfiris.” Cf. Naji, *The management of savagery*, 81.

1634 Fishman, *The master plan*, 234. Also see: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 10; “Our mission,” *The global coalition*.

1635 For example: “General notification. Ban on GPS and Apple devices,” *Islamic State*, December 14, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1636 “The looming assault on Mosul.”

1637 Watson, “The conflict with ISIS,” 7.

1638 “Iraqi PM's insistence on running for third term.” Also see: “Government formation.”

1639 Sadoon, “The Islamic State and the independence referendum,” 9.

1640 Cf. Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 366.

and aspiring independence – to a foreign policy prepared to compromise for mere survival.¹⁶⁴¹ Still, strategic decisions took place on the party level, despite its seemingly concerted efforts in June 2014. Division led to sub-optimal, and sometimes counter-productive, decisions. Whereas IS acted as a unitary actor, the KRI responded along party level and, basically, fought two separate wars against IS.¹⁶⁴²

6.6.2 Paradigms

The rational actor paradigm considers strategy static. Yet, as the case of the KRI indicated, strategy can change.¹⁶⁴³ On August 1, the KRI's goal changed from autonomy to survival.¹⁶⁴⁴ The strategic decision-making seems to prefer options that quickly achieve goals, as in the case of IS. The rational actor paradigm does not explicitly consider the time-specific factor in its explanation. Furthermore, the paradigm does not explain issues like internal fragmentation and creates analytical ambivalence, such as when IS as a unitary actor attacked the fragmented Kurds. Arguably, the KRI seemed unified in the struggle against IS, but in fact remained fragmented.¹⁶⁴⁵ As such, the rational actor paradigm falls short in explaining why the KRI focused solely on the Iraqi state, and was surprised by IS' attack on August 1. The organizational behavior paradigm seems more suitable to explain internal fragmentation, in particular when institutionalized as in the case of the KRI. Thus, the paradigm explains why the KRI was surprised by IS' attack. The paradigm does not provide sufficient explanations for IS' strategic decision to attack the KRI, as IS seemed to operate as a unitary – rational actor paradigm-like – actor. The governmental politics paradigm failed to provide useful explanations for either IS' or the KRI's strategic decision-making. This was due to IS operating as a unitary actor and the KRI operating along political party-lines, the realms of the rational actor paradigm and the organizational behavior paradigm, respectively. The governmental politics paradigm provided insight in two relevant IS leaders, Turkmani and Suwaydawi, but did not explain strategic decisions. Complexity theory incorporates the elements of the other paradigms, as well as other relevant strategic dimensions, in a non-linear fashion. Therefore, complexity theory provides a solution to the strategic paradoxes, considering the time-, space-, and context-specific elements of events and strategic decisions. However, it also limits complexity theory to reverse engineering, which in itself needs to be approached as narrow as possible.

1641 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 14.

1642 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 18.

1643 Freedman, *Strategy*, xi.

1644 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 366; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 9, 14.

1645 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 18; Harris, "Chaos in Iraq." Also see: "250 Kurdish militants"; Berge, "Countering violent extremism"; Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 104; Speri, "Not all Kurds."

The rational actor paradigm in this case explained the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI through the strategic dimensions of politics, geography, people, economics and logistics, military operations, strategic theory and doctrine, friction, chance, and uncertainty, adversary, and emergence. Additionally, the KRI depended on its allies. Via the announcement of the anti-IS coalition, those allies added time as a relevant strategic dimension. The organizational behavior paradigm added culture, ideology, and organization, as well as information and intelligence, which added nuance to the strategic dimensions focused on by the rational actor paradigm. The governmental politics paradigm further added command, military administration, and ideology. Finally, complexity theory added exogenous pressure and interconnection as relevant strategic dimensions. Table 6.1 indicates the factors identified per paradigm for the battle for the KRI, showing complexity theory as the most encompassing.

Table 6.1: strategic dimensions identified in this study per paradigm regarding the battle for the KRI.¹⁶⁴⁶

Strategic dimension	Rational actor paradigm		Organizational behavior paradigm		Governmental politics paradigm		Complexity theory
	IS	KRI	IS	KRI	IS	KRI	IS/KRI
<i>politics</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>geography</i>	X	X					X
<i>people</i>	X	X			X	X	X
<i>economics and logistics</i>	X	X					X
<i>military operations</i>	X	X	X	X			X
<i>friction, chance and uncertainty</i>	X						X
<i>strategic theory and doctrine</i>	X		X	X			X
<i>ideology</i>	X				X		X
<i>culture</i>			X	X			X
<i>organization</i>			X	X			X
<i>information and intelligence</i>	X			X			X
<i>command</i>					X	X	X
<i>military administration</i>					X		X
<i>time</i>	X						X
<i>adversary</i>	X	X	X	X			X
<i>allies*</i>		X		X			X
<i>exogenous pressure*</i>							X
<i>interconnection*</i>							X
<i>emergence*</i>	X						X
<i>ideology*</i>	X				X		X

¹⁶⁴⁶ Cf. Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44. Strategic dimensions not mentioned by Gray are indicated with an asterisk.

6.6.3 Next

The IS attack on the KRI was a game changer in northern Iraq in 2014. The attack was not the decisive battle that concluded the conflict in the Clausewitzian sense. Yet, the attack accelerated the formation of the international coalition that fought IS. The coalition air strikes that started on August 7, eventually forced IS to withhold further large-scale attacks. As important as the coalition against IS, was Western support for the KRI. Forced by the existential threat of IS, the KRI had to compromise via diplomatic outreach, next to its military instrument. Via that diplomatic outreach, *peshmerga* efforts got recognized through the KRI's international visibility.¹⁶⁴⁷ For the time being, and under international pressure, the IS attack brought together the KRI and the Iraqi state.¹⁶⁴⁸ Halfway August, IS was pushed back to positions near Mosul. From October onwards, the KRI *peshmerga* and ISF conducted attacks to expel IS from Mosul¹⁶⁴⁹, sometimes in joint operations.¹⁶⁵⁰ Eventually, it took until the summer of 2017 for the ISF – supported by the international coalition and the *peshmerga* – to recapture Mosul. The so-called Hawija-pocket, southwest of Kirkuk, remained IS' last area under control in Iraq. From the Hawija-pocket, IS occasionally conducted attacks in the KRI, in particular near Kirkuk.

Internally, the KRI's parliament passed a resolution in August 2014, urging unification and subordinating the *yekey* 70 and *yekey* 80 to the Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs.¹⁶⁵¹ The threat of IS had also brought together Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. Despite different political affiliations and conflicts in the past, an agreement between the KRI and the Syrian Kurdish PYD was announced on October 25, 2014, to cooperate in defeating IS.¹⁶⁵² The agreement was crucial in the KRI assisting Syrian Kurdish forces, besieged by IS, in the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobanî. The strategic decisions made by IS and the KRI regarding the Kobanî siege are the subject of chapter 7.

1647 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 10-1.

1648 "Offensive manoeuvres."

1649 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 31; Michael Knights & Alexandre Mello, "The cult of the offensive. The Islamic State on defense," *CTC Sentinel* 8:4 (2015), 3.

1650 Bill Roggio, "US special forces, Kurdish troops raid Islamic State prison in Iraq," *The Long War Journal*, October 23, 2015.

1651 Mohammed Salih, "New units step toward reforming Kurdish peshmerga," *Al-Monitor*, July 2, 2015. Despite a six-month deadline, the forces remained under the parties' control.

1652 Wladimir van Wilgenburg & Vager Saadullah, "Syrian Kurdish factions unite over Islamic State threat," *Middle East Eye*, February 13, 2015. Also see: Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 105.

