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

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Chapter 7

Siege (October 2014-January 2015)

After the KRI had expelled IS from KRI territory in August 2014, the conflict between IS and the KRI continued nevertheless. This became most prominent during IS' siege of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobanî from September 2014 to January 2015. The KRI decided to support Syrian Kurdish forces trapped there by sending 150 *peshmerga*. IS had decided to attack Kobanî and decided to continue the siege after the international coalition against IS started conducting air attacks against IS, which turned the odds against IS. This chapter explains the strategic decision-making by answering the question how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI regarding the siege of Kobanî in 2014-2015?

While the siege of Kobanî at the time dominated international media headlines, the actual decision-making that led to these events lacks academic attention. This chapter contributes to understanding strategic decision-making with respect to a crucial, but under-researched, phase in the conflict between IS and the KRI. While the IS threat for the KRI largely had disappeared since August 2014 – although, occasionally and unsuccessfully, IS conducted incursions[1653] – the KRI fought an expeditionary war of choice against IS by supporting Syrian Kurds in Kobanî. IS fought a war of necessity in northern Syria, in which the KRI initially had no direct involvement. The siege of Kobanî shows how IS and the KRI took their strategic decisions in pursuit of their foreign policies.

The rational actor paradigm-approach – considering goals, perceived strategic threats and opportunities, alternative options, and cost-benefit calculations – expects IS attacking Kobanî and the KRI sending reinforcements to be the outcome of cost-benefit calculations. The organizational behavior paradigm expects the decisions to be the results of internal bureaucratic struggle between different SOPs or doctrine. The governmental politics paradigm expects the strategic decisions to have been the compromise of key leaders' political power play. Combining elements of the other paradigms, complexity theory offers the most encompassing explanation,

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1653 Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 5.

which expects the strategic decisions to be time-, space-, and context-specific, occurring in multi-level and multi-directional processes.

The first paragraph sketches the situation before and during the event, that is, IS attacking Kobanî and the KRI supporting its Syrian Kurdish defenders. The following paragraphs each apply a different paradigm to the strategic decision-making.

7.1   Setting

While the shared conflict with IS moved Iraqi parliamentary disputes towards temporary solutions in the fall of 2014[1654] – including budget allocation and oil exports for the KRI[1655] – and reports indicated Sunni tribal opposition against IS in Iraq[1656], global media attention focused on Kobanî.[1657] Kobanî is a Syrian Kurdish town, located along the border with Turkey and home to approximately 45,000 inhabitants, mostly Kurdish and Armenian, when the Syrian Civil War began.[1658] While reluctant to conduct expeditionary support for the ISF against ISIS in Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014[1659], the KRI decided to send up to 200 – eventually 150 – *peshmerga* to Kobanî to support the besieged Syrian Kurdish forces.[1660] Despite such reinforcements and air strikes by the international coalition, IS continued the siege until January 2015.

Syrian Kurdish forces had controlled Kobanî since July 2012.[1661] The PYD dominated Syrian Kurdish politics and the PYD's affiliated militias YPG and *Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê* (Women's Protection Unit; YPJ) had expanded their control along the Turkish border in July 2013. The YPG/YPJ proved capable in expelling rival insurgent groups from predominantly Kurdish territories. Shortly afterwards, the PYD proclaimed the de facto autonomy of the Kurdish-majority cantons. On March 10, 2014, ISIS attacked the YPG in northern Aleppo and south of Kobanî. The latter allowed ISIS control over two major crossings north of the Euphrates river and to link its Aleppo area of operations to that in northern Raqqa. The YPG joined an attack

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1654 "Iraq's new government lacks meaningful Sunni participation, but a compromise with the Kurds is more likely," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, September 9, 2014.

1655 "KRG-Baghdad oil deal reduces non-payment and fragmentation risks in Iraq but faces high risk of non-implementation," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, December 4, 2014.

1656 "Islamic State militants execute 220 Sunni tribal militiamen in Iraq's Anbar," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, October 31, 2014; "State of war. The Iraqi Sunni actors taking on the Islamic State," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, November 3, 2014.

1657 For example: Bashdar Ismaeel, "Kobane, transforming the regional dynamic," *Kurdish Globe*, November 3, 2014.

1658 Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained"; Rebecca Grant, "The siege of Kobani," *Air Force Magazine*, August 29, 2018.

1659 "Offensive manoeuvres."

1660 Ismaeel, "Kobane."

1661 Derek Flood, "Victory at any cost. Symbolism transcends strategy in battle for Kobanê," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, October 17, 2014; Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

of an Islamist insurgent group against an ISIS stronghold on March 14, 2014. The YPG, thus, posed a threat to ISIS in Aleppo. In response, ISIS increased its attacks on the YPG-controlled areas, compelling the YPG to concentrate forces and deter future aggression. On March 19, the YPG announced a general mobilization to reinforce Kobanî. Clashes between ISIS and the YPG continued on April 17, as ISIS tried to surround Kobanî. Yet, throughout April, ISIS ceased its advance. ISIS 'failed to decisively punish and deter the YPG.'[1662] Instead, the YPG from April 25 onwards conducted counter-attacks against ISIS positions and continued its support of other insurgent groups that fought ISIS. Early May, ISIS conducted small-scale attacks along frontline positions in Kobanî, which the YPG quickly thwarted.[1663]

On June 23, ISIS renewed its offensive against Kobanî[1664], empowered by resources seized in northern Iraq.[1665] The YPG recaptured a village on July 6. ISIS – IS by then – mentioned 'successful advances made against the PKK on numerous fronts, [...] on the 11th of Ramadān [July 8, 2014], with the advance continuing towards 'Ayn Al-'Arab [Kobanî].'[1666] By July 9, IS had captured villages surrounding Kobanî. The YPG announced counterattacks on July 11. Reports appeared that the PYD considered compulsory service in the YPG to reinforce Kobanî. However, the plan for compulsory service was not implemented, possibly due to the arrival of 800 Turkish Kurds from PKK training camps in Turkey in mid-July. The PKK reinforcements 'allowed the YPG to stabilize their defenses and begin to push ISIS forces back.'[1667] An intense battle erupted west of Kobanî on July 23, indicating that the YPG remained a significant threat for IS and hampered IS' lines of communication. Occasionally, small-scale clashes occurred in August, with no significant changes of territories. By early September, IS had secured 'critical locations on the eastern border of its declared Aleppo region. ISIS failed, however, to create a buffer zone [...] that would preclude subsequent YPG penetration into ISIS territory.'[1668]

IS increased its pressure on Kobanî from September 2014 onwards[1669], illustrated by the redeployment in Kobanî of the *Liwa Dawud* (David Brigade).[1670] *Liwa Dawud* was famous for its fierce attacks on Menagh Airbase in August 2013, which enabled insurgents to capture the airbase from Syrian regime troops after a two-year siege.[1671] *Liwa Dawud* had pledged *bay'ah* to

1662 Joseph Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, September 19, 2014.
1663 *Ibid*.
1664 *Ibid*.
1665 Cafarella & Szybala, "ISIS's second front in Syria."
1666 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 2, 13. IS considered the PYD to be the PKK's Syrian branch.
1667 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."
1668 *Ibid*.
1669 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 15; Toivanen, *The Kobane generation*, 4. Also see: "Notification for Kurds to leave Raqqa city," *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Kareem Shaheen & Aymenn al-Tamimi.
1670 YPG commander, interview by Wietse van den Berge, email, January 2, 2024, transl. Google Translate.
1671 "Iraq. ISIL says Omar al-Shishani killed in air strike," *Al-Jazeera*, July 14, 2016; Scott Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story of insurgent leader Abu Umar al-Shishani & what it means," *EA Worldview*, November 21, 2013;

Baghdadi in early July 2014 and consisted of Caucasian foreign fighters, who acted as IS' shock troops.[1672] IS' increased pressure was possibly ignited by the proclamation of Syrian Kurdish and FSA groups to coordinate their efforts against IS.[1673] On September 16, IS captured a strategically important bridge over the Euphrates river, allowing IS to move artillery and tanks up to ten kilometers from Kobanî on September 20. On September 24, IS shelled Kobanî, causing approximately 130,000 Syrian Kurdish refugees there to flee to Turkey. Around 4,000 IS fighters advanced into the town and captured the strategically important Mishtenur Hill, which overlooks Kobanî, on September 26.[1674] IS forces obtained a stronger grip on Kobanî the next weeks, despite airstrikes from September 27 onwards by Western coalition partners.[1675] However, around October 10, Western coalition partners acknowledged that airstrikes alone would not stop IS.[1676] Eventually, IS controlled approximately 40 percent of Kobanî[1677] and approached the town's center, applying suicide attacks to weaken Kurdish strongpoints. As air attacks increased, so did IS' commitment in capturing Kobanî, sending reinforcements from Aleppo and Raqqa, including vehicle-borne suicide bombers.[1678] Quite remarkably, IS had also launched an advance on Ramadi in Iraq in October, which turned into a 'bruising slugfest between IS fighters and Iraqi military forces.'[1679]

On October 20, American aircraft dropped supplies to Syrian Kurdish forces, who were trapped in Kobanî.[1680] Turkey had closed the border with Syria in an attempt to stop Kurdish reinforcements from joining Syrian Kurdish forces in Kobanî.[1681] On October 27, IS claimed to control the town.[1682] Turkey allowed the KRI *peshmerga* to reinforce Syrian Kurdish forces on October 31.[1683] On November 2, 2014, 150 KRI *peshmerga* reached Kobanî and joined Syrian Kurdish militias in the fight against IS.[1684] IS propaganda mentioned that 'the media

Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 43; Mitchell Prothero, "'Star pupil.' Pied piper of ISIS recruits was trained by U.S.," *The Seattle Times*, September 15, 2015.

1672 Aaron Zelin, "Jihadi 'counterterrorism.' Hayat Tahrir al-Sham versus the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 16:2 (2023), 17. Also see: Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Where in the world is Abu Umar al-Shishani?" *EA Worldview*, January 7, 2014.

1673 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

1674 Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 34.

1675 Jennifer Cafarella *et al*., "Syria update. September 24-October 2, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, October 2, 2014; Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; Gunes, "The IS Factor,", 78.

1676 Hayden Cooper, "Islamic State. Militants capture Kurd headquarters in Syria's Kobane. UN warns of massacre if Kobane falls," *ABC News*, October 10, 2014.

1677 Jennifer Cafarella & Theodore Bell, "Syria update. October 2-October 10, 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, October 10, 2014.

1678 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1679 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 221.

1680 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1681 Toivanen, *The Kobane generation*, 4.

1682 Catherine Shoichet, "Hostage in video claims Syrian city of Kobani is under ISIS control," *CNN*, October 27, 2014.

1683 Gunes, "The IS Factor,", 78. Also see: Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; Ismaeel, "Kobane."

1684 Karouny & Berberoglu, "Heavy fighting in Kobani." Also see: Omar Berberoglu, "Peshmerga, Syrian rebels battle Islamic State in besieged Kobani," *Reuters*, November 3, 2014.

was abuzz with the news that the *Peshmerga* [...] *murtaddīn* [apostates] would be sending reinforcements.'[1685] IS framed the reinforcements as proof that Syrian Kurdish forces could not withstand IS forces on their own. Air-ground coordination became more important as IS entered more urbanized areas in the inner-city of Kobanî.[1686] The *peshmerga* troops were experienced in air-ground coordination. With their input, coalition air attacks became more effective. The effective air attacks, together with supplies arriving through Turkey, caused IS to lose ground in Kobanî as of early November.[1687] Halfway through November, IS still believed it could capture Kobanî, though.[1688]

On November 13, IS and its onetime Syrian branch JaN reached a ceasefire.[1689] IS propaganda reported that fighters had joined IS from other jihadist groups, including from JaN.[1690] Yet, gradually the combined Kurdish forces gained battlefield momentum and recaptured the Mishtenur Hill on January 19, 2015. Syrian Kurdish forces declared Kobanî freed from IS on January 27, 2015[1691], despite over 300 surrounding villages remained under control of IS.[1692]

Whether IS considered Kobanî lost is doubtful. IS cited journalist Patrick Cockburn in a *Dabiq* article: 'Isis [sic] is being squeezed militarily and economically, but there is no sign of it imploding. Even its loss of Kobani is not necessarily a sign of weakness, since it held on for months despite fighting ... (the) Syrian Kurds, backed by an intensive US air bombardment in a confined place.'[1693] In the same article, IS quoted the Washington Post editorial board drawing similar conclusions and added that 'perhaps the most significant fact about Kobane is that it consumed 75 percent of the nearly 1,000 airstrikes carried out by allied planes throughout Syria since September... In the rest of the Syrian territory it controls, including its capital of Raqqa, the Islamic State... is growing stronger rather than weaker.'[1694]

The merger of the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields by IS got Iraqi Kurdish parties involved in the Syrian Civil War: '[t]he PYD/YPG military advantage on the ground since 2011 spurred Iraq's Kurdish factions, particularly the KDP (encouraged by Turkey), to project political influence into Syria by hosting Syrian Kurdish party representatives in Erbil, and to recruit and train

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1685 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 15. Italics added.

1686 "Interview with YPJ commander in Kobanê. Kobanê will not fall," *The Rojava Report*, October 9, 2014.

1687 Grant, "The siege of Kobani." Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 481-2.

1688 Abu al-Yaman al-Shami, Twitter, November 18, 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, in Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The factions of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab)," *Syria Comment*, November 21, 2014.

1689 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 83.

1690 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 7 (1436H|2015), 38.

1691 Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; Gunes, "The IS Factor,", 78. Also see: Toivanen, *The Kobane generation*, 4.

1692 Gunes, "The IS Factor,", 78.

1693 Patrick Cockburn, cited in "In the words of the enemy," *Dabiq* 7 (1436H|2015), 53.

1694 Washington Post editorial board, cited in "In the words of the enemy," *Dabiq* 7, 53. Also see: "A message to the people in Kurdistan," *Dabiq* 8 (1436H|2015), 38; "Irjā'," 39-56.

an alternative Syrian *peshmerga* force, while pressing for an agreement that would place YPG forces under overall KDP command.'[1695] Despite the KDP pressure, the PYD held almost exclusive control over the Syrian Kurdish areas, not allowing the KDP affiliated forces into the areas and fighting IS successfully. To repel IS' siege of Kobanî in September 2014, the PYD requested international support, though.[1696]

Although a member of the anti-IS coalition, Turkey was reluctant to support the PYD, considered by Turkey as allies of its archenemy the PKK. During October 2014, tensions increased between Turkey and the PKK.[1697] The American-led coalition did not want to harass Turkey and was reluctant to support the YPG, also due to the YPG's occasional cooperation with the Syrian regime. A work-around was found by supporting the YPG via the KRI, which was considered a partner of both Turkey and the United States. Eventually, Turkey – possibly pressured by the United States – allowed the KRI *peshmerga* passage to support Kobanî.[1698] The YPG provided intelligence to the KDP, needed for coalition sorties, and received weapons through Turkey from the KDP *peshmerga* and the PUK *peshmerga* to be deployed in Syrian Kurdish areas. The arrangement for this intra-Kurdish cooperation was the Duhok Agreement that was announced on October 25, 2014, in which the 'KDP, PUK and PYD committed to shared governance in Syria'[1699] and to cooperate in defeating IS.[1700] According to some reports, the KRI *peshmerga* were limited to artillery support, not allowed to participate in frontline fighting[1701], while other reports mentioned they would.[1702]

The Duhok Agreement allowed the PYD to maintain control over Syrian Kurdish areas and provided the KDP and the PUK a footprint there. Still, there appeared no significant improvement in intra-Kurdish strategic cooperation. According to the International Crisis Group, the YPG 'has been yoked into an arrangement with the KDP so as to benefit from U.S. airstrikes and with the PUK in order to receive weapons from Iran.'[1703] Furthermore,

1695 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 26. Italics added

1696 *Ibid*., 27.

1697 Scott Lucas, "Turkey daily, Nov 4. Top Kurdish official warns of attacks amid stalled negotiations with PKK," *EA Worldview*, November 4, 2014; Scott Lucas, "Turkey daily, Oct 14. Ankara bombs Kurdish targets in southeast," *EA Worldview*, October 14, 2014; Scott Lucas, "Turkey daily, Oct 19. 'Erdogan policy on Kurds will drive country into chaos' – senior MP," *EA Worldview*, October 19, 2014; Scott Lucas, "Turkey daily, Oct 29. Kurdish PKK declares end of 'peace process,'" *EA Worldview*, October 29, 2014. Also see: Ali Yenidunya, "Turkey spotlight. The Kurds & Ankara's foreign policy dilemma," *EA Worldview*, November 18, 2014.

1698 "Islamic State. Turkey to let Iraq Kurds join Kobane fight," *BBC*, October 20, 2014.

1699 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 27; Ismaeel, "Kobane."

1700 Wilgenburg & Saadullah, "Syrian Kurdish factions unite." Also see: Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 105.

1701 Scott Lucas, "Syria daily, Oct 28. Insurgents attack Idlib in northwest, take checkpoints around city," *EA Worldview*, October 28, 2014.

1702 "More than 20 vehicles enter the city of Kobani," *Syria Observatory for Human Rights*, October 31, 2014.

1703 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 27-8.

the Duhok Agreement acknowledged Masoud Barzani's claim to be the Kurds' paramount leader. In practice, however, Masoud Barzani failed to win the support from the PUK's and the PKK's hard-liners, who assessed his efforts as an attempt to impose his family's and party's leadership.[1704]

In sum, IS attacked Kobanî and the KRI contributed to the fight by sending *peshmerga*. Some scholars argued that 'in the battle for Kobani in Syria in 2014, the IS fighters fled quickly after losing a few hundred men.'[1705] Yet, the opposite seemed true. Despite IS' usual modus operandi of withdrawing, when opposing an overwhelming enemy, 'IS stood and fought, throwing wave after wave of fighters into the PKK-held city as the International Coalition appeared in the skies.'[1706] IS lost hundreds of fighters[1707], possibly over 1,000 fighters, during the siege.[1708] Why, then, was IS willing to make such a costly exception to its usual force-preserving approach? The KRI took a remarkable strategic decision too. Why did the KRI send *peshmerga* to help the besieged Syrian Kurds?[1709] The KRI potentially jeopardized its relations with Turkey by sending *peshmerga* to Kobanî through Turkey, to support an organization considered terrorist by Turkey.[1710] Up till then, Turkey prioritized weakening the PKK and its Syrian affiliates over defeating IS. Turkey had explicitly refused any Kurdish reinforcement of Kobanî. The KRI's president Masoud Barzani was reluctant too, as the PYD were considered affiliated with his political party's rival, the PUK.[1711]

Even though the effect of the support was disputed, the KRI would eventually send four consecutive contingents on two-month tours to Kobanî. The deployments ended on April 27, 2015.[1712] Late January 2015, IS ceased besieging Kobanî, only to return mid-2015.[1713] IS' return to Kobanî indicated the importance that IS attached to the area.

The remainder of this chapter explores IS' strategic decision-making to attack Kobanî, and to continue by besieging, when the odds turned against IS, as well as the KRI's strategic decision-making on supporting the Syrian Kurds besieged in Kobanî. To enhance readability, this chapter treats IS' decision to attack Kobanî and to continue the siege, as two phases within a single course of action.[1714] When applicable, the chapter focuses on either of these phases.

1704 *Ibid.*, 27-9.
1705 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 186.
1706 Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency."
1707 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 266.
1708 Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency."
1709 Cf. Stansfield, "Iraq," 19.
1710 Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained."
1711 Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."
1712 "Peshmerga forces leave Kobani, having secured the town," *BGN News*, April 30, 2015.
1713 YPG commander.
1714 Cf. Warden "Smart strategy, smart airpower," 108.

7.2   Rational actor paradigm[1715]

The next three sections view IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS besieging Kobanî and the KRI supporting Syrian Kurds there in late 2014 from a rational actor paradigm perspective. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: goals, perceived strategic opportunities and threats, alternative options, and consecutive cost-benefit calculations.

7.2.1   IS

IS had expected to conquer Kobanî in 2014, before the international coalition's air attacks started.[1716] Kobanî was the middlemost of three Syrian Kurdish salients. By capturing Kobanî, IS took out the possibility of a contiguous Kurdish area within Syria, thus weakening the Syrian Kurds and potentially taking them out as a rival.[1717] Kobanî's location forced Syrian Kurds to overstretch in defending the area. IS expected the YPG/YPJ to be 'stretching themselves thin over vast extents of territory and attempting to cover so many frontlines while relying solely on crusader [that is, Western] airstrikes.'[1718] On November 13, 2014, Baghdadi claimed that the airstrikes had failed and fear had led the coalition not to send ground troops to fight IS, but instead to rely on proxies.[1719]

Syrian Kurdish militia were among the most powerful actors in the Syrian Civil War. As fierce opponents of IS, Syrian Kurds threatened IS positions in northern Syria, as acknowledged by IS: '[d]uring the course of the *jihad* in Shām [Syria], the PYD's armed wing, the YPG, became increasingly involved in clashes with the *mujahidin* as they attempted to control a number of towns and cities in the north with significant Kurdish populations.'[1720] IS blamed the PYD, of 'ethnic cleansing carried out against Arabs and Turkmen.'[1721] Still, IS propaganda seemed more concerned with rival jihadi-salafists. IS argued with *al-Qaeda* over how to wage *jihad*, blaming *al-Qaeda* for being too elitist, compared to IS.[1722] Additionally, IS referred to an anti-IS coalition of other jihadist groups and the PYD in the Syrian Kurdish canton Afrin.[1723]

1715 Parts of paragraph 7.2 appeared as: Berge, "Armed non-state actors and strategic decision-making," 279-99.
1716 Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency." Also see: Renner, "Air power in the Battle of Mosul," 262.
1717 Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained"; Gunes, "The IS Factor.", 80; Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."
1718 "American Kurdistan," 32. Cf. Black, *Geopolitics*, 83; Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the great powers*, xvi; Naji, *The management of savagery*, 7.
1719 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Even if the disbelievers despise such," audio speech, November 13, 2014, transl. unknown, in "The Islamic State creates foreign 'provinces,'" Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton's Blog*, December 6, 2014. Also see: "American Kurdistan," 30; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 16.
1720 "The fight against the PKK," 13. Italics added.
1721 "American Kurdistan," 31n7.
1722 Shamālī, "Al-Qāʾidah of Waziristan," 41-51
1723 "The allies of al-Qāʾidah in Sham," 8. Cf. Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 182. Also see: Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

The fight over Kobanî received international media attention, which provided IS an opportunity to present itself as the vanguard of traditionalism against the secular Syrian Kurdish forces.[1724] As such, IS presented the siege as a decisive battle against Western forces[1725], possibly framing it as the foretold apocalyptic battle at Dabiq.[1726] Yet, international media attention was not guaranteed when IS started its advance on Kobanî. Therefore, other than IS' internal media outlets, media attention offered no plausible explanation for IS deciding to attack Kobanî. However, once IS was besieging Kobanî, the international media attention influenced IS' strategic decision to continue, despite the high numbers of casualties. To what extent media attention is worth such a loss in personnel is questionable.[1727] IS propaganda suggested that IS fought a moral fight in Kobanî, when it published photos of burning drugs and cigarettes – *haram* (forbidden) according to *shari'a* – from captured PKK compounds.[1728] Such propaganda re-emphasized IS' claims of Kurdish secularism.

Kobanî's importance followed from the corridor of oil pipelines there, through which around $2 million worth of oil passed daily. As Kobanî is situated along the Syrian-Turkish border, controlling the town means controlling a border passage between Syria and Turkey, through which men and equipment can be transferred.[1729] IS potentially looked to Turkey as a potential ally, in particular sharing the Kurds as perceived enemies.[1730] IS claimed that '[i]n Turkey, the communists [PKK] began rioting, and even attacking and killing Muslims in anger over the course of events on the [Kobanî] battlefield.'[1731] Given IS' non-conformationist ideology, more likely is an intention to divide regional allies, in particular Turkey and the KRI. Forcing the KRI to support Syrian Kurds, whom Turkey considered terrorist, potentially jeopardized relations between Turkey and the KRI.[1732] Harm to its relations with Turkey would seriously damage the KRI's already battered economy.[1733]

Another opportunity for IS was northern Syria's flat landscape, which made attacking Kobanî easier compared to a city within a mountainous area. On the downside, the city – once taken – would be hard to defend. Apart from the strategic benefits, capturing Kobanî might pose a considerable symbolic opportunity. The Arab name for the town is 'Ayn al-Arab (Spring of

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1724 Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency." Also see: Flood, "Victory at any cost."

1725 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1726 *Dabiq* 1-15 (2014-5), 2. Cf. Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 4. Also see: Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 12.

1727 Cf. Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1728 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 17.

1729 Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 20; Toivanen, *The Kobane generation*, 4; Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."

1730 Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 103, 106.

1731 "Islamic State report," *Dabiq* 5, 15.

1732 Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 13. Cf. Bengio, "The Islamic State," 3.

1733 Kulaksiz *et al*., "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 18.

the Arabs) and IS had renamed it 'Ayn al-Islām (Spring of Islam).[1734] As such, the town might be considered to be the focal point of the Islamic world in Syria.[1735]

Among its ranks, IS had a significant number of Kurdish fighters, who were allegedly deployed in Kobanî profiting from their acquaintance of local circumstances, language and culture. Some analysts suggested that IS used Kurdish IS-members to win over local Kurds, or at least to show that IS was open to accepting Kurds.[1736]

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.[1737] Then, IS remained, but – at least temporarily – would not expand. More important, the YPG/YPJ continued to threaten IS' lines of communication near Kobanî.[1738] To hold offered IS the opportunity to recuperate, and thus not risk overreach after fierce battles in northern Syria – including against the YPG/YPJ – and given the offensive IS started in Ramadi, Iraq, in October.[1739]

To attack, potentially led to IS control over territories, which needed governance and contained hostile inhabitants, thus risking overreach. With its limited resources, IS then had to fight too many battles on different fronts.[1740] Attacking expanded the caliphate geographically and demographically[1741], allowed IS to continue gaining resources as war spoils[1742], and confirmed IS' claim as the jihadi-salafist vanguard against secularism.[1743]

To delegate the attack on Kobanî to a proxy, provided IS the benefits of the hold and attack options, without much of the costs. To delegate allowed IS to recuperate and avoid the risk of overreach, as IS saved resources, compared to the attack-option. However, IS had bad experiences with proxies. Early 2014, JaN pledged allegiance to *al-Qaeda*, becoming a rival

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1734 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5, 15.

1735 "The Islamic State before al-malhamah," 9-11.

1736 Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1737 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 2, 12-13. Cf. Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, 12; Lewis, *The crisis of Islam*, 29-38; Moussalli, "Wahhabism, salafism and Islamism," 17-8.

1738 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

1739 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 221.

1740 Gerges, *ISIS*, 43; Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 341. Cf. Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,340-1n23.

1741 "From hijrah to khilafah," 37; "Indeed your lord is ever watchful," 9; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 1, 12; "Khilafah declared," 11; "Remaining and expanding," 32-3.

1742 Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 21-4; Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers," 19-20, 40n85.

1743 For example: "Islamic State report," *Dabiq* 5, 17.

in Syria.[1744] IS preferred incorporating groups by pledging *bay'ah* to Baghdadi.[1745] Arguably, acting by proxy, would not fit the goal of lasting and expanding.

Concerning Kobanî, IS' best option from a cost-benefit calculation was to attack Kobanî. At the time that IS advanced towards the town, external support for the Syrian Kurds was lacking. The isolated position of Syria's Kurds benefitted IS. IS choose to attack Kobanî, as it was the only option for achieving its strategic goal, according to its jihadi-salafist ideology. Inherent of attacking, was the risk of overreach. And that was exactly what happened.[1746] IS acknowledged it had expected to conquer Kobanî in 2014, before the international coalition's air attacks started.[1747] Although the air attacks initially seemed incapable of stopping IS, when the air attacks increased and repelled IS, IS continued attacking nevertheless. The rational actor paradigm did not provide solid explanations for continuing the attack, which turned into a siege.

7.2.2   The KRI

The KRI committed to defeating IS, together with the PYD, in the Duhok Agreement.[1748] Five days after singing the Duhok Agreement, Turkey allowed the KRI *peshmerga* to reinforce Syrian Kurdish forces in Kobanî.[1749] As IS' main threat against the KRI had disappeared before the Duhok Agreement was settled, why did the KRI choose to get involved in Kobanî?

Some analysts argued that the KRI chose to support fellow-Kurds in Kobanî from an identity perspective.[1750] Furthermore, next to protecting Kurdish territories, the KRI wanted to 'break up and disrupt their [IS] subversive strategies, to wear out their ability to carry out large scale military actions, and to slowly diminish and eradicate their power.'[1751] The KRI was reluctant to fight IS outside Kurdish territories, fearing backlash ramifications and disapproval among Arab populations. Thus, the KRI choose to support the coalition against IS, including the ISF. Supporting Syrian Kurds in Kobanî out of Kurdish unity[1752], seems in line with that strategy, fighting IS, without harassing Iraqi – or Syrian – Arabs.

When IS attacked Kobanî in September 2014, the KRI was relatively secure. IS had been pushed back from the KRI and slowly the *peshmerga* advanced into IS-controlled territory in northern Iraq. IS continued to threaten the KRI by using terrorist tactics, in particular (suicide)

1744 Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 13-4.
1745 For example: Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story."
1746 Cf. Fishman, *The master plan*, 234.
1747 Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency."
1748 Wilgenburg & Saadullah, "Syrian Kurdish factions unite." Also see: Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 105.
1749 Gunes, "The IS Factor," 78. Also see: Grant, "The siege of Kobani."
1750 Abbaszadah, "KRG's military help to Kobane"; Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained."
1751 Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan," 27.
1752 *Ibid.*, 27-30.

bomb attacks, mainly aimed at the KRI's governmental institutions and allies. Furthermore, the KRI feared an influx of refugees if IS captured Kobanî.[1753]

Facing IS increased the foreign support for the KRI, and its *peshmerga* forces in particular. Especially Western donors regarded the *peshmerga* the vanguard to counter IS in combination with coalition air support, as was acknowledged by Masoud Barzani. The KRI regarded foreign support as international recognition for a de facto independent entity. At least it provided the *peshmerga* an opportunity of no longer being weakened by sanctions imposed by the Iraqi regime.[1754]

Turkey remained skeptical on the issue of assisting Syrian Kurds in Kobanî, fearing Syrian Kurdish secession might ignite similar developments in Turkey.[1755] Still, Turkey had joined the coalition against IS on October 2, 2014.[1756] Turkey's coalition membership created opportunities for the PYD and the KRI. Secret meetings – apparently, not that secret – between the PYD and Turkish intelligence officials led to Turkey allowing support for the PYD, in return for the PYD dissolving self-rule for the cantons and joining the FSA.[1757] The compromise allowed reinforcements for Kobanî via Turkey. Supplies were no problem, but Western military involvement in Kobanî remained unacceptable for Turkey, fearing the enhancement of a Syrian Kurdish, PYD-dominated region. Thus, the KRI proved the only acceptable option for Turkey to reinforce Kobanî. As part of its zero-problems-with-neighbors policy, Turkey had established economic and political relations with the KRI.[1758] The Arab uprisings and ongoing PKK attacks in Turkey from Iraqi soil had cooled these relations.[1759]

Concerning Kobanî, the KRI had the options to hold, to attack, or to delegate. To hold, the KRI appeared weak, while at the same time, it led to sympathy from regional and international actors, as the KRI was not an aggressor as seen in June 2014. The KRI would save essential resources compared to the attack-option, not burdening the KRI's already hammered economic situation. Also, the KRI maintained its relations with Turkey.[1760] By holding, the KRI did not pressure IS, eventually running the risk of increased attacks in the KRI, if IS maintained or strengthened its position in northern Syria. The KRI ran the risk that its reputation might be that of self-interest, not showing interest in the suffering of fellow-Kurds, who did help the KRI when it was in need in August 2014.

1753 Coles, "Kurds' battle for Kobani."
1754 "Confidence in the future." Also see: "American Kurdistan," 30.
1755 Barkey, "What's behind Turkey's u-turn"; Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 160.
1756 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."
1757 Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."
1758 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 21.
1759 Noi, "The Arab Spring," 15-29
1760 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 21, 111-3.

To attack – that is, joining the fight against IS in Kobanî – meant increasing pressure on IS, thus providing IS less options to conduct attacks in the KRI. Also, by showing solidarity with Syria's Kurds, the KRI would greatly benefit internationally. The KRI proved not only to be capable of defending its own territory, but also a reliable and responsible international partner, able and willing to contribute to international coalitions and negotiate with international partners, such as Turkey.[1761] Perhaps a sentiment of returning solidarity played a role as well, as both Syrian Kurds and the PKK responded and fought IS during the August 2014 attack on the KRI. The downside of joining the fight in Kobanî, was that the KRI became a legitimate target for IS. Another risk would be overextension. Since IS' attack on the KRI, the KRI suffered from economic decline, mostly due to halted investments.[1762] Also, the KRI jeopardized its relations with Turkey by supporting the PYD.[1763]

To delegate meant that the KRI was only indirectly involved in the conflict against IS in Kobanî. Costs would be limited to providing money, equipment, and training to Syrian Kurdish proxies. This potentially disrupted the KRI's good relations with Turkey. Also, the extent of money, equipment, and training delivered burdened the KRI's battered economy.[1764] To delegate, the KRI secured human resources, and avoided overstretch.

By joining the fight in Kobanî, the KRI showed solidarity with fellow Kurds, while, at the same time, it maintained relations with Turkey. The KRI's assistance for the Syrian Kurds seemed brokered by the United States. The KRI appeared the only option acceptable for Turkey: 'Turkey sees Iraq's Kurds as more reliable and less threatening, coming from a semi-autonomous state with which it can do business.'[1765] The KRI provided the only reinforcement acceptable for all relevant parties. To hold or to delegate would damage the KRI's reputation among fellow-Kurds and international actors alike.

7.2.3   Reflections

With its focus on strategic goals, the rational actor paradigm in this case found that the strategic dimensions of politics, geography, strategic theory and doctrine, ideology, adversary, friction, chance, and uncertainty, allies, and time explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI. To a lesser extent, economics and logistics played a role. IS aimed to control northern Syria and the KRI preferred Kurdish control over northern Syria (geography), to expand or to support an independent political entity, respectively (politics). While Kobanî was a border

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1761 Abbaszadah, "KRG's military help to Kobane." Cf. Coggins, "Rebel diplomacy," 98.
1762 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 18.
1763 Cf. Bengio, "The Islamic State," 3.
1764 Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 111-113.
1765 "Islamic State. Turkey to let Iraq Kurds join Kobane fight."

town with oil pipelines to Turkey for resources (economics and logistics), IS' jihadi-salafism versus Kurdish secular nationalism (strategic theory and doctrine) seemed to prevail to the point that Kobanî became a goal by itself (ideology). The rational actor paradigm's analysis of threats and opportunities, where one actor's threats usually are the other actor's opportunities and vice versa, indicates that IS feared the Syrian Kurds. The other way around, the KRI feared an influx of more refugees from northern Syria, and during the siege, both sides feared losing the symbolic Kobanî (adversary). IS could benefit from resources acquired in northern Iraq[1766], Kobanî's proximity, and its central location, while for the KRI, supporting the YPG and the YPJ meant that IS could be fought from a relative safe distance from the KRI, creating strategic depth (friction, chance, and uncertainty). The KRI and its Syrian Kurdish allies benefitted from Western partners, which actually had pushed the KRI to support Kobanî (allies), and were joined by Turkey (time). Out of the options offered – that is, to hold, to attack, or to delegate – IS and the KRI preferred the option that most likely achieved the actors' strategic goals in the short term. IS preferred to attack to expand the caliphate and the KRI preferred to attack IS by supporting the YPG/YPJ, pressured by its Western allies, though. As such, the rational actor paradigm provides solid explanations for the decisions taken.

Yet, the analysis seems incomplete and some analytical weaknesses emerge within the rational actor paradigm. The paradigm simplifies the strategic dimensions by considering them linear, instead of non-linear, thus overlooking how they influence one another, for example how ideology established symbolism, which created opportunities for both IS and the KRI. The costs and benefits that are mentioned for the options, typically are not qualified and the paradigm cannot explain IS' decision to continue the siege when the airstrikes increased. IS' cost-benefit analysis should have concluded that lifting the siege was its most beneficial option. The cost-benefit analysis also struggles with the KRI's solidarity: for the KRI, the most rational option might have been not to join the siege, or only to send weapons and munitions, instead of also sending manpower.[1767] Still, the KRI joined the Duhok Agreements and fulfilled its obligations, indicating bureaucratic constraints, reminiscent of the organizational behavior paradigm.

Overall, the rational actor paradigm is helpful to explain strategic decision-making of IS to attack Kobanî, but it cannot explain IS' continuation of the attack into a siege, nor fully explain the KRI's decision to support the YPG/YPJ. The findings above suggest analytical discrepancies and overlap with the organizational behavior paradigm. Thus, in this case, the paradigm is insufficient to fully explain strategic decision-making.

1766 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."
1767 *Ibid.*

7.3   Organizational behavior paradigm

The next three sections apply the organizational behavior paradigm to IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions regarding IS besieging Kobanî and the KRI supporting the Syrian Kurds there in late 2014. The sections adopt the structure along the elements of the paradigm: decision-making organizations, SOPs' capabilities and constraints, options, and implementation.

7.3.1   IS

Since June 2014, the caliph and the *shura* council remained the decision-making organizations within IS on the strategic level. Within the *diwan al-jund*, on the military strategic level, the conventional force of the caliphate army protected IS' territorial integrity across Iraq and Syria, whereas the irregular Dabiq army functioned as shock troops.[1768] IS deployed Kurdish fighters in Kobanî in order to benefit from their knowledge of local circumstances, language and culture.[1769]

Whereas IS considered Iraq and Syria as one battlefield[1770], analysts had noted differences between its Iraqi and its Syrian branch.[1771] IS' commitment in capturing Kobanî, sending in reinforcements from Aleppo and Raqqa[1772], seemed ill coordinated with its Iraqi theatre of operations, where IS launched a vicious attack on Ramadi in October.[1773] Further reinforcements from Iraq to Kobanî thus seemed impossible, therefore constraining options for IS. Still, the relatively high level of autonomy that IS frontline commanders possessed, made that the different battlefields hardly affected one another.[1774] Orton explained that 'the broad strategic policy is already outlined, and its implementation is tasked to local leaders,' adding that the 'decentralisation of operational decisions is a key part of IS' military strategy, entrusting the execution of ordinances to local emirs who have better granular knowledge.'[1775] Decentralization of operations made IS resilient against internal threats and against another *sahwa* (awakening).[1776] Yet, analysts concluded that 'dissimilar ideologies and objectives seem to be pulling the Islamic State military operations

1768 Whiteside *et al.*, "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers," 8.

1769 Speri, "Not all Kurds."

1770 See: Eyal, "Introduction," 3-4; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 4, 205; Stephens, "The emergence of ISIS," 15.

1771 Bilger, "ISIS annual reports," 10-1.

1772 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

1773 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 221-2. Nevertheless, IS was able to capture Ramadi on May 17, 2015.

1774 Stephens, "The emergence of ISIS," 14.

1775 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 14. For example: "Fighting alongside FSA factions"; "Negotiations and ceasefire agreement with the regime over the thermal plant and surrounding in Aleppo," *Islamic State*, June 2013, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1776 *Ibid.*, 15.

in different directions. Within the leadership there are Salafi ideologues, former *Baath*ist [sic] military officers of considerable skill, and hybrids of the two.'[1777]

The different factions within IS' ranks – notably the Caucasian faction, which dominated IS' Syrian branch – undermined 'the portrayal of a well-organized "foreign jihadist" effort which has systematically taken over the insurgency.'[1778] Instead, ad hoc circumstances and opportunities seemed to determine decision-making.[1779] Illustrative is the split of the northern Caucasian foreign fighter group *Jaish al-Muhajireen wal Ansar* (Army of Emigrants and Helpers; JMA) into two factions, of which, eventually, one joined IS and the other JaN.[1780] The *Liwa Dawud* faction – known for its ruthlessness and determination – that joined IS, took a prominent role in the siege of Kobanî.[1781] Yet, a faction within *Liwa Dawud* emerged on August 15, 2014, when the *Katibat al-Aqsa* (The supreme brigade) faction separately pledged *bay'ah* to Baghdadi. The faction consisted of former JMA fighters. In October 2014, *Katibat al-Aqsa* was involved in IS's attack on Kobani[1782], as a mobile, special operations forces-type unit.[1783] The Caucasian factions conducted fierce attacks, similar to attacks that had brought success at Menagh Airbase the year before.[1784]

Compared to a year earlier, anti-IS airstrikes, since August 2014, significantly constrained IS' opportunities.[1785] Watson concluded that IS' 'assault on Kobani was the Islamic State's last real attempt to launch a conventional attack on a ground force backed by coalition airpower.'[1786] IS could no longer move in convoys, but had to move in separate vehicles along oil pipelines, which were avoided by the coalition airstrikes.[1787] Next to a limited freedom of movement, the airstrikes forced IS to apply concealment.[1788] Thus, IS' jihadi-salafist ideology of '[s]preading the faith by the sword, killing infidels and purifying the Islamic world from foreign ideas and

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1777 Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 2. Italics added. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 271.

1778 Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story."

1779 *Ibid*.; Prothero, "'Star pupil.'"

1780 Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Video – Chechen amir Seyfullakh Shishani & Jaish Khilafatul Islamia join Jabhat al-Nusra," *EA Worldview*, December 30, 2013. Also see: Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. Insurgent split – the dispute between Abu Umar al-Shishani & his deputy, Seyfullakh the Chechen," *EA Worldview*, November 23, 2013; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. Some north Caucasian militants swear allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," *EA Worldview*, November 21, 2013.

1781 YPG commander.

1782 Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story." Also see: Maciej Falkowski & Józef Lang, "Homo jihadicus. Islam in the former USSR and the phenomemon of post-Soviet militants in Syria and Iraq" (Warsaw: *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich*, 2015), 42-7.

1783 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 43.

1784 "Iraq. ISIL says Omar al-Shishani killed"; Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story." Also see: Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 43; Prothero, "'Star pupil.'"

1785 "Bringing down the towns iv."

1786 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 81.

1787 *Asayesh* officers.

1788 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."

lifestyles'[1789], changed into a doctrine of 'surprising the enemy forces in weak areas, in which the *mujahideen* can be secure in their superiority in force,' to 'strike or neutralize the force of the enemy' while avoiding 'losses in the ranks of the *mujahideen* as far as possible.'[1790]

IS' jihadi-salafist ideology was a constraint, which made fighting not only a means – to conquer territories, defeat infidels, and gain support – but an end in itself.[1791] However, IS did not waste its resources easily.[1792] According to IS' doctrine to avoid unnecessary casualties among its ranks, IS should have withdrawn once it realized it was unable to conquer Kobanî and suffered many – too many – casualties.[1793] It did not. 'When it [IS] faltered militarily, it would launch tenacious operational counteroffensives, and then shift its strategies and adjust or innovate its tactics accordingly.'[1794] Yet, analysts observed that 'when outnumbered the Islamic State frequently relinquishes terrain to suit its own operational needs and often signals an awareness that they will be forced from attacked areas in short order. Though the Islamic State frequently holds out until the last possible moment before withdrawing, they have a track record of draining their main forces from areas that are about to be attacked.'[1795] Noteworthy here, is that IS ideology included an Islamic prophecy, foreseeing an all-decisive battle between believers and non-believers in the Syrian town of Dabiq, roughly one hundred kilometers from Kobanî. As the siege evolved and the anti-IS coalition entered, IS may have seen Kobanî as the prophetic battle.

Beyond the ideological factor, by continuing the siege, even when the odds turned against IS, IS behaved according to the social psychology phenomenon of the sunk cost fallacy, to 'persist with the option which they have already invested in and resist changing to another option that might be more suitable regarding the future requirements of the situation.'[1796] IS had taken the strategic decision to attack Kobanî and, in a counter-productive manner, decided to continue the attack, thus risking and sacrificing too many resources.

The organizational behavior paradigm provides an image of different sub-organizations, notably the Caucasian factions, which applied ad hoc decision-making and relied on fierce attacks, which had delivered success in the past. Yet, the coalition airstrikes significantly limited IS' opportunities. Despite the attacks, IS' ideology seemed more important than its

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1789 Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 10.
1790 "Bringing down the towns i." Italics added. Also see: "Bringing down the towns iv."
1791 "Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism," 20-4.
1792 "The looming assault on Mosul."
1793 Cf. Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency."
1794 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 209.
1795 Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 3.
1796 Markus Domeier *et al.*, "Motivational reasons for biased decisions. The sunk cost effect's instrumental rationality," *Frontiers in psychology* 9 (2018), 4. Cf. Fukuyama, *Identity*, 85; Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 275; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 23-4. Also see: Ariely, *Predictably irrational*, 243-4; Kahneman, *Ons feilbare denken*, 287-8.

doctrine. Possibly, the Dabiq-prophecy played a role here. It resulted in a counter-productive continuation of the siege of Kobanî.

7.3.2   The KRI

Members of the KRI's parliament discussed aiding Kobanî in early October 2014 and agreed that help was needed. They disagreed on the role of the PYD. As Kobanî was surrounded by IS in the east, south, and west, the town could only be reached via Turkey, which considered the PYD as an ally of its archenemy the PKK.[1797] The discussions reflected the differences between the KDP and the PUK, of which the latter maintained an ideological partnership with the PYD. Internally, some reports on the PYD's YPG and YPJ militias suggested that the achievements of the all-female YPJ sparked disagreements with its male equivalent, the YPG, and criticism from Kurdish society in general.[1798]

The KDP could gain popularity among Kurdish populations by joining the fight, as the PYD and the PKK had done in August.[1799] The support mostly seemed symbolic and partly served domestic interests: '[s]upportive sentiments among the Iraqi Kurds have been assuaged by gestures such as the dispatch of a modest number of *Peshmerga* to fight alongside the PYD forces in Kobanê in late 2014.'[1800] The KRI support also had an external element: '[a]fter thwarting the immediate danger, the KRI intensified its public relations campaign using the Kurdistan Region Security Council, the KRG Department of Foreign Relations, its representative offices abroad, lobbying firms, friendly ex-officials, and political allies to solicit Western support, arms, and equipment.'[1801] The main message was that 'the *Peshmerga* are on the frontline; the war is costly, we have given huge sacrifices with the *Peshmerga* giving the ultimate sacrifice, the war is not over yet, and we need your support.'[1802] The external message explains why the KRI were eager to send the *peshmerga*, whereas the YPG and the YPJ requested weapons and munitions, not extra manpower.[1803]

The rivalry between the KDP and the PUK caused differences on how to effectuate assistance. The KDP had established beneficial economic ties with Turkey and was reluctant towards the PYD, an affiliate of its domestic rival, the PUK. The PUK supported the PYD unequivocally,

1797 "Kurdistan MPs debate hurdles to aiding Kobane," *Rûdaw*, October 5, 2014.
1798 Gareth Platt, "A Kurdish female fighter's war story: 'I don't know how many I've killed in Kobani - I don't see Isis as human,'" *International Business Times*, October 23, 2014.
1799 Coles, "Kurds' battle for Kobani." Cf. Cheterian, "Turkey in 2017," 142.
1800 Ismaeel, "Kobane." Italics added.
1801 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 9.
1802 Falah Bakhtiar, in Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 9. Italics added.
1803 "Interview with YPJ commander in Kobanê"; "Islamic State. Turkey to let Iraq Kurds join Kobane fight."

but – associated as an affiliate of the PKK – struggled with how to gain Turkish consent to support the Syrian Kurds in Kobanî.

7.3.3   Reflections

With its focus on how an actor is organized, assuming internal bureaucratic struggle and an emphasis on doctrine, the organizational behavior paradigm in this case found that IS' modus operandi of combining conventional and unconventional warfare remained largely unchanged, compared to IS attacking Nineveh in June 2014. Yet, *Liwa Dawud*'s preferred fierce attacks to break sieges and the simultaneous offensives in Kobanî and Ramadi – risking overreach –, deviated from IS' usual cautious modus operandi (politics, strategic theory and doctrine, culture). In 2015, analysts observed that 'at the operational level they [IS] lack strategic coherence,' adding that 'the Islamic State seems to be effectively led at the strategic level by some genuinely capable planners, but at the operational level there is seemingly much less opportunity for centralized control. Instead, the Islamic State's military operations have become gradually more disjointed and localized in their scope and scale since the fall of Mosul.'[1804] For the KRI, the deployment of *peshmerga* beyond the KRI's borders, was a deviation from its earlier foreign policy (politics, strategic theory and doctrine, culture). Within the KRI, the split between the KDP and the PUK caused differences on how to effectuate assistance of the Syrian Kurds in Kobanî (organization, command, politics). The differences focused on maintaining relations with Turkey versus supporting the PYD (allies). Eventually, a compromise emerged. Additionally, and unverified by this study[1805], some analysts suggested that IS' jihadi-salafism was inherently anti-Kurdish[1806], whereas the KRI showed solidarity with Syrian Kurds (identity, ideology).

The organizational behavior paradigm simplifies the strategic dimensions mentioned above, by considering them linear, instead of non-linear, thus overlooking how they influence one another, for example how the KRI's solidarity with the Syrian Kurds led to adapting its foreign policy. Furthermore, the organizational behavior paradigm cannot fully explain IS' strategic decision-making, as IS was fragmented but largely acted as a unitary actor.

Overall, as the actors involved in Kobanî were highly fragmented, the organizational behavior paradigm is helpful to explain strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI. Yet, in this case,

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1804 Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 2.
1805 For example: "Kurdish language shar'i session, Raqqa province," *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi;
     "Notice to soldiers of Raqqa on vacated Kurds' homes," *Islamic State*, June 26, 2015, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi;
     "Prohibition on attacking Kurdish property in Raqqa," *Islamic State*, July 18, 2015, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.
1806 Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 6-7, 17. For example: "Notification for Kurds to leave
     Raqqa city."

overlooking the interactions between the strategic dimensions, the paradigm is insufficient to fully explain strategic decision-making.

7.4   Governmental politics paradigm

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

7.4.1   IS

Baghdadi's reputation and prestige remained unchallenged among IS' ranks, despite the first setbacks in August 2014. While his military style was described as 'robust and confrontational'[1807], Baghdadi left the conduct of operations to local commanders.[1808] That approach can be expected to have increased with the establishment of the caliphate, including its governance, and the exposure since.

Late 2014, Anbari was the governor for Syria.[1809] He was responsible for IS' Syrian affairs and intelligence cells.[1810] Anbari had become involved in several jihadi-salafist groups during the time of JTJ and had assisted transferring JTJ into AQI. He was arrested and detained twice, but released early 2012. ISI tasked him to establish lines of communication with *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates. He was closely involved in the decision to dissolve JaN and establish ISIS. Later, Anbari became responsible for the *shari'a* council and joined the delegated committee in Syria.

After ISIS had captured Mosul in June 2014, Anbari requested to join the jihad in Iraq, participating in battles against the PKK and the KRI *peshmerga* in Sinjar. Yet, ISIS summoned him to assume a governance position, which he did. Anbari died at age sixty, during a coalition raid, allegedly by igniting his explosives belt when almost arrested.[1811] Anbari's biographic obituary and other descriptions sketch a fanatic jihadi-salafist who built and maintained relations among like-minded organizations and their leaders and held great authority. He believed in jihad, joining fights near Sinjar despite fulfilling leadership positions. Anbari's

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1807 Atwan, "A portrait of caliph Ibrahim," 69, 72.
1808 Cf. "Bringing down the towns i"; "Bringing down the towns iii"; "Bringing down the towns iv."
1809 Orton, "The Islamic State's official biography of the caliph's deputy," n9, n12.
1810 *Ibid*. Also see: Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 29.
1811 "Der Gelehrte," 10-5. Also see: Orton, "The Islamic State's official biography of the caliph's deputy," n10; Starr *et al*., "Pentagon."

obituary mentioned that he was asked or tasked to perform specific duties within IS, which might have contributed to his authority as a suitable man for the job.

Sources mentioned Abu Umar al-Shishani as the IS military commander in northern Syria in 2014.[1812] Born in 1988 and raised as a shepherd boy by a Christian father and a Muslim mother, Shishani had participated in Chechen rebel operations against Russian forces during the 1990s. He joined Georgia's military in 2006 and was selected for its American-trained special forces.[1813] Shishani served during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, but was discharged from the army due to tuberculosis in June 2010. In September 2010, he was sentenced to three years in a Georgian prison for illegally buying and storing weapons. Shishani was released after sixteen months, because his health deteriorated. Allegedly, it was during his time in prison Shishani became religious and learned the principles of Islam.[1814] During his military service Shishani had shown no dedication to Islam or jihadist tendencies.[1815]

As the *emir* of JMA, Shishani had acted as the leader of ISIS in northern Syria since the summer of 2013, fighting Syrian regime forces, rival jihadist groups, and Kurdish militias. Shishani gained prominence when insurgents, after a two-year siege, captured Menagh Airbase from Syrian regime troops in August 2013.[1816] Shishani was known to apply large-scale assaults that included suicide attacks[1817], as well as small raids to free prisoners or gain resources.[1818] Additionally, his training and experience offered Shishani insights in American-style[1819] and Russian-style doctrine[1820], respectively.

Probably triggered by a decision of *al-Qaeda* leader Zawahiri to disband ISIS[1821], Shishani pledged allegiance to Baghdadi in November 2013, officially joining ISIS.[1822] According to

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1812 Baghdadi, untitled speech, January 19, 2014; Cafarella & Szybala, "ISIS's second front in Syria"; Salafi, in Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi." Also see: Prothero, "'Star pupil.'" Shishani was the *kunya* of Tarkhan Batirashvili.
1813 Blair, "ISIS"; Lucas, "Syria analysis: The 'true' story"; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 38-9; Prothero, "'Star pupil.'"
1814 Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story"; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Chechen fighter Abu Umar al-Shishani 'likes to spend time in jacuzzi in his Aleppo villa,'" *EA Worldview*, December 19, 2013.
1815 Prothero, "'Star pupil.'"
1816 "Iraq. ISIL says Omar al-Shishani killed"; Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story"; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 43; Prothero, "'Star pupil.'"
1817 For example: Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar Shishani shown planning major attack in new ISIS propaganda video," *EA Worldview*, March 10, 2014.
1818 For example: *FiSyria*, no date, transl. unknown, in Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar al-Shishani & ISIS claim advance from Al-Bab to Manbij, capture base," *EA Worldview*, January 20, 2014; *FiSyria*, no date, transl. unknown, in Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Video – Abu Umar al-Shishani & Abu Jihad al-Shishani talk of ISIS battles in Al Bab, Aleppo," *EA Worldview*, January 14, 2014.
1819 Blair, "ISIS."
1820 Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story."
1821 Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. Some north Caucasian militants."
1822 Paraszczuk, "Syria. Where in the world." Also see: Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 41; Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. Insurgent split."

Shishani, 80 percent of his fighters joined ISIS with him. Pledging *bay'ah* to Baghdadi probably was a way for Shishani to consolidate his increasing power as the ISIS *emir* of northern Syria.[1823] The extent of his power remains disputed, though[1824], as well as his leadership skills.[1825]

Shishani expressed no clear vision for Syria's future, apart from establishing an Islamic state and *shari'a*.[1826] Described as a 'relatively poor public speaker'[1827], Shishani, nevertheless, had much exposure via social media. Together with his second-in-command, he released videos discussing battles, jihadi-salafism, jihadi infighting, and the *bay'ah* to Baghdadi.[1828] One video mentioned the expectation to unite the territories under ISIS control 'from Raqqa to ad-Dana in Idlib Province'[1829], thus indicating intentions to control all of northern Syria. In a 2013 interview, Shishani presented his perceptions of Kurds, following fights with the YPG. Shishani mentioned incidents in which the YPG – referred to by Shishani as the PKK – behaved aggressive towards Sunni Muslims and shot jihadi fighters in the back. Also, Shishani saw the female Kurdish fighters among the YPG as proof of the PKK rigidly demanding families to supply fighters for the PKK.[1830]

1823 For example: *FiSyria*, no date, transl. unknown, in Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria, Site close to Abu Umar al-Shishani 'today they want to get rid of ISIS, tomorrow other mujahideen,'" *EA Worldview*, January 10, 2014; *FiSyria*, in Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar al-Shishani & ISIS claim advance"; *FiSyria*, in Paraszczuk, "Syria. Video – Abu Umar al-Shishani & Abu Jihad al-Shishani talk of ISIS battles"; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar Shishani's right-hand man explains ISIS-insurgent conflict," *EA Worldview*, February 6, 2014. Also see: Paraszczuk, "Syria. Chechen fighter Abu Umar al-Shishani."

1824 For example: Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria video feature. The Chechen jihadists & the Islamic State of Iraq,'" *EA Worldview*, September 11, 2013; Umar al-Shishani & Abu Khalid al-Suri, agreement between ISIS and AaS, no date, transl. unknown, in "Syria. Truce between ISIS's Abu Umar al-Shishani & Ahrar ash-Sham on eastern front in Aleppo province," Joanna Paraszczuk, *EA Worldview*, January 8, 2014.

1825 For example: Paraszczuk, "Syria. Where in the world?"; Umar al-Shishani, "Note from Omar al-Shishani," *Islamic State*, early 2014, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

1826 Paraszczuk, "Syria. Where in the world?" Also see: Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story"; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 41; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. ISIS Chechen leader Abu Umar al-Shishani – 'Dokka Umarov financed us,'" *EA Worldview*, December 10, 2013.

1827 Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story"; Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar Shishani's right-hand man."

1828 Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. ISIS military leader Umar Shishani to Syrian people – 'we didn't come to fight you,'" *EA Worldview*, January 21, 2014. Also see: *FiSyria*, in Paraszczuk, "Syria. Site close to Abu Umar al-Shishani"; *FiSyria*, in Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar al-Shishani & ISIS claim advance"; *FiSyria*, in Paraszczuk, "Syria. Video – Abu Umar al-Shishani & Abu Jihad al-Shishani talk of ISIS battles"; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Abu Umar al-Shishani – 'Jaish al-Muhajireen wal Ansar joined ISIS after al-Baghdadi oath,'" *EA Worldview*, December 14, 2013; Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar Shishani's right-hand man."

1829 Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Umar al-Shishani of ISIS on need for unity, & of spoils according to rules of jihad," *EA Worldview*, December 19, 2013.

1830 *FiSyria*, no date, transl. unknown, in "Syria spotlight. Chechen jihad leader Abu Umar Al Shishani on clashes with Kurds," Joanna Paraszczuk, *EA Worldview*, October 12, 2013. Also see: Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. Jihadist sources describe border-region fighting between Kurds, ISIS near Atmeh village," *EA Worldview*, October 6, 2013; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria spotlight. More border-region clashes between ISIS, FSA & Kurdish YPG," *EA Worldview*, October 5, 2013.

On January 22, 2014, a group under command of Shishani successfully participated in an attack on Manbij, approximately sixty kilometers to the southwest of Kobanî.[1831] ISIS did not push through to Kobanî, however.[1832] When IS finally attacked, in September-October 2014, Shishani's whereabouts remained unclear. Reports mentioned him being in western Iraq, as well as in northern Syria. Both could be true, as *Katibat al-Aqsa* operated as a mobile, special operations forces-type unit. Shishani led an IS counter-offensive against the ISF near Fallujah in September 2014.'[1833] On October 26, Kurdish media reported that IS ordered Shishani to leave Ramadi for Kobanî.[1834]

Shishani's subordinate for Kobanî was Abu Khattab al-Kurdi, a Kurd himself, originating from Halabja in the KRI. Kurdi had been a member of AaI before joining IS and allegedly was an expert in mountainous areas.[1835] Little documentary evidence exists regarding Kurdi.

The profiles of IS' strategic leadership regarding Kobanî, show fanatic jihadi-salafists, of whom in particular Shishani had military experience. Shishani's military experience explained IS' recognition of the YPG and the YPJ as threats to IS' lines of communication. Their common ideology and fanatism, together with past results, such as at Menagh Airbase, explained continuing the attack – although circumstantial, as documentary evidence is lacking – even when the odds turned against IS.

7.4.2   The KRI

Within the KRI, Masoud Barzani took the strategic decisions on military affairs within the General Command Staff.[1836] Early August 2014, the KRI's position changed from aiming for independence to self-preservation in an existential conflict. The changed situation for the KRI confronted Barzani with IS as the KRI's main enemy, instead of the Iraqi state. The situation further showed the KRI's dependence on Western military support for the KRI's survival.[1837] However, late August, the IS threat towards the KRI had disappeared.

1831 *FiSyria*, January 23, 2014, transl. unknown, in Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria. Details of Umar al-Shishani & ISIS attack on Manbij," *EA Worldview*, January 25, 2014.
1832 Lucas, "Syria analysis. The 'true' story."
1833 Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 43.
1834 "ISIS sends Chechen commander to Kobane," *Rûdaw*, October 26, 2014.
1835 Speri, "Not all Kurds"; Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*, 158. According to Weiss and Hassan, Kurdi was joined by Kurds from the Syrian cities Aleppo, Hasaka and Raqqa. Kurdi being an expert in mountainous areas seemed utterly irrelevant due to a lack of mountains in northern Syria.
1836 Gruber, "Revisiting civil-military relations theory," 39; "President Barzani inaugurates the security council"; Wilgenburg & Fumerton, "Kurdistan's political armies," 9n28.
1837 Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 14.

Despite the emphasis on the KRI's survival a month earlier, Masoud Barzani's statement of September 19, 2014, illustrated his stand on supporting Syrian Kurds in Kobanî: '[t]he Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's brutal attacks against our brothers and sisters in Kobane are part of a larger plan perpetrated by the terrorists against the people of Kurdistan. The barbaric and terrorist attacks of ISIS on Kobane and the Western part of Kurdistan threaten the whole entirety of the Kurdish nation and it has targeted the honor, dignity and existence of our people.'[1838] In the statement, Masoud Barzani requested unity among and contributions of 'all the political entities of Kurdistan'[1839], prioritizing the defense of Kurdistan. References of Masoud Barzani to a Kurdish nation under threat by a common adversary acknowledged suggestions that identity influenced strategic decision-making.[1840] Apart from identity, he mentioned cultural factors, such as honor and dignity, as well as a perceived existential threat, indicating urgency and necessity. Thus, Masoud Barzani – as his preferred course of action – urged to defend all Kurdish territories against IS and eliminate IS as a threat.

Remarkably, it might have been the situation in Sinjar, which had led to Masoud Barzani supporting the Syrian Kurds in Kobanî. Domestically and externally, Masoud Barzani received criticism for not acutely reacting to the Sinjar crisis in August 2014, which the PKK had done. He might have been eager to repair his image as a leader for all Kurds.[1841] The 800 Turkish Kurds from the PKK who came to Kobanî in July, responded to a request by the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan[1842], with whom Masoud Barzani competed over pan-Kurdish leadership.

While Masoud Barzani framed Kobanî as a symbol of Kurdish identity under threat of IS, Nechirvan Barzani later emphasized that Kobanî was 'a strong symbol of resistance and defiance to the IS terrorist organization.'[1843] Nechirvan Barzani explicitly thanked Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, for allowing *peshmerga* to reinforce Kurdish forces in Kobanî. Despite Nechirvan Barzani's more precarious stance – possibly also due to the fact that the siege was finished by the time he made his statement –, he explicitly congratulated Masoud Barzani 'who treated Kobane the same as Sinjar and other parts of Kurdistan'[1844], thus indicating ideas of a greater Kurdistan.

1838 Masoud Barzani, "A statement from the president of the Kurdistan Region on terrorist attacks on Kobane," *Kurdistan Regional Government-Iraq Representation in Austria*, September 23, 2014.

1839 *Ibid*.

1840 Abbaszadah, "KRG's military help to Kobane"; Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained."

1841 Wilkens "A Kurdish Alamo."

1842 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

1843 Nechirvan Barzani, "KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani lauds Kobane liberation," *Kurdistan Regional Government-Iraq Representation in Austria*, January 26, 2015.

1844 *Ibid*.

A former YPG commander from Kobanî stated that he only later learned that Lahour Talabani, a prominent PUK leader and the head of the PUK's intelligence service 'was the coordinator and initiator'[1845] of the KRI's assistance to Kobanî. Lahour Talabani played a prominent role in the coalition against IS.[1846] The former YPG commander remarked that the KDP, nor the PUK, corrected the existing image by explicitly mentioning Lahour Talabani's involvement.[1847]

According to KDP-affiliated news agency *Rûdaw*, Turkey accepted a proposal by Masoud Barzani to allow KRI *peshmerga* pass through Turkish territory to relieve YPG fighters in Kobanî. Barzani further coordinated the proposal in the Duhok Agreement, with the Minister of *Peshmerga* Affairs Qader, the PYD leader Salih Muslem, and YPG commanders.[1848] Muslem warned of attritional warfare in Kobanî and urged for international support.[1849] Despite being wary of Masoud Barzani attempting to exercise influence over the Syrian Kurds[1850], Muslem called for unity among the Kurds.[1851]

Noteworthy was the role of women fighters among Syrian Kurdish ranks. In particular the military commander of the all-female YPJ, Meysa Ebdo[1852], gained global media attention. Ebdo, at the time, was around forty years old[1853] and originated from the Afrin region.[1854] She had been at Kobanî for about a year and a half, after approximately twenty years of fighting among the PKK ranks.[1855] During her time with the PKK, Ebdo met Öcalan and received ideological training from him. Ebdo was known for her bravery and intellect in defending Kobani. She was described as 'a humanist and a realist and also very courageous.'[1856]

In 2014, Ebdo shared command over the YPG and the YPJ in Kobane with the YPG commander, Mahmud Barkhodan.[1857] In an early October 2014 interview, Ebdo explained that 'our goal is protect our people and our land,' but also that the 'politics of denial and extermination have been broken and a system for a free life has been founded. The Kobanê

1845 YPG commander.
1846 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."
1847 YPG commander.
1848 "Turkey gives Peshmerga forces passage to Kobane," *Rûdaw*, October 20, 2014.
1849 Scott Lucas, "Syria daily, Oct 26. Kurdish leader warns of 'war of attrition,'" *EA Worldview*, October 26, 2014.
1850 Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."
1851 Ismaeel, "Kobane."
1852 Bejan Ciyayi, in Platt, "A Kurdish female fighter's war story"; Samuel Smith, "ISIS militants fear being killed by woman and losing 72 virgins for martyrdom; Kurdish co-commander defending Kobane is female," *The Christian Post*, October 15, 2014. Ebdo was also known under the *kunya*'s Narin Afrin and Narin Engizek.
1853 Uzay Bulut, "Frontline Isis. The real story of Narin Afrini and the Kurdish female 'Lions' terrorising Islamic State," *International Business Times*, October 15, 2014.
1854 Platt, "A Kurdish female fighter's war story."
1855 Bulut, "Frontline Isis."
1856 Bejan Ciyayi, in Platt, "A Kurdish female fighter's war story."
1857 "Interview with YPJ commander in Kobanê"; Smith, "ISIS militants fear being killed by woman."

resistance is for the Kurds the name of free life.'[1858] Ebdo further explained that the YPG and the YPJ applied 'ambushes and traps, creative defence tactics and a sacrificial determination.'[1859] An example of the sacrificial determination, mentioned in media reports was the YPJ fighter Arin Mirkan, who reportedly killed tens of IS fighters on October 5 in a suicide bombing outside of Kobanî.[1860] Still, suicide attacks were no modus operandi of the YPG and the YPJ, but individual actions.[1861] The occurrence of such individual acts do indicate a lack of control among the YPG and the YPJ fighters, as individual acts can have strategic effects. Allegedly, IS avoided attacking positions with female fighters. According to some accounts, IS fighters killed by women were no martyrs and, thus, would not go to heaven. Other accounts emphasized the ferocity with which female fighters fought IS, possibly because these women were extra motivated, as IS saw women as sex objects.[1862] More broadly, the YPJ were considered as role models for women's rights in the Middle East[1863] and symbols against the misogynistic IS.

By brokering a deal between the PYD and Turkey, Masoud Barzani renewed his position as the paramount leader of Kurds. Given Lahour Talabani's role in the coalition against IS, his involvement seems plausible. Downplaying his role seems plausible too. Lahour Talabani, as a prominent leader of the PUK – considered an affiliate of the PYD and the PKK by Turkey –, coordinating assistance by *peshmerga* along the Turkish border, could potentially stir up Turkish domestic concerns. The demands of the YPG and the YPJ – requesting weapons and munitions, instead of manpower – seemed ignored, which suggests that the Syrian Kurdish leaders were only indirectly involved in the KRI's support for Kobanî. Symbolism seemed important, not only for the KRI to address Kurdish identity, but also for Kurdish secularism – emphasized by the role of women fighters, such as Ebdo and Mirkan – against fanatic jihadi-salafism.

7.4.3   Reflections

With its focus on key leaders' perceptions and assuming powerplay among those key leaders, the governmental politics paradigm observed strategic opportunities for the leaders on both sides. Baghdadi as IS' caliph left the Syrian affairs to his deputy for Syria, and the military affairs to the *emir* for northern Syria, the fanatic jihadi-salafists Anbari and Shishani, respectively, whereas on the KRI's side Masoud Barzani, as the KRI's leader, worked closely together with the PUK's Lahour Talabani (people, command). The military leaders on both sides were capable in military and security affairs (military administration). On IS' side, jihadi-

1858 Meysa Ebdo, cited in "Interview with YPJ commander in Kobanê."

1859 *Ibid.*

1860 Platt, "A Kurdish female fighter's war story"; Smith, "ISIS militants fear being killed by woman." Also see: Meysa Ebdo, in "Interview with YPJ commander in Kobanê."

1861 Platt, "A Kurdish female fighter's war story."

1862 *Ibid.*

1863 Bulut, "Frontline Isis."

salafist beliefs seemed important, perhaps too much, as an IS internal evaluation allegedly – and unsurprisingly – found that 'the fanatics in the Islamic State had the upper hand'[1864] (ideology), indicating flawed internal processes (decision-making). The KRI's military leaders involved, represented the two dominant political parties (politics), and seemed wary of too much exposure for Talabani, possibly because of Turkish reluctance (allies).

The governmental politics paradigm's strength as an explanatory model lies in the powerplay-assumption, which involves a process among key leaders. The lack of reliable sources with such a level of detail undermines the paradigm's explanatory power, as most explanations are circumstantial.

Overall, the governmental politics paradigm offers insights into IS' and the KRI's strategic leadership, the paradigm provides explanations, based on political powerplay, but is unable to explain by itself strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI, regarding the siege of Kobanî. The differences among the KRI's key leaders occurred along party lines, suggesting an overlap with the organizational behavior paradigm. The demands of its coalition partners made the KRI's *peshmerga* the only acceptable reinforcement for Kobanî and the leaders of the KRI paused their powerplay for this greater interest.

7.5 Complexity theory

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

7.5.1 Time, space, context, and processes

The time-specific element of IS' decision to attack Kobanî is partly the sequential outcome of earlier developments on the northern Syrian battlefield. The proclamation of Syrian Kurdish and FSA groups to coordinate their efforts against IS[1865] possibly influenced IS' strategic decision to attack Kobanî. The KRI's decision to support the PYD followed from IS besieging Kobanî and Turkey joining the coalition against IS on October 2, 2014, which created the opportunity for reinforcing Kobanî via Turkey.

1864 Qardash, in "Captured senior ISIS commander."
1865 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

Kobani's strategic location was another critical element. The town was located along the Syrian-Turkish border – offering a potential gateway to and from Europe –, but also along crucial lines of communication. For IS, the lines of communication concerned the connection between Raqqa in northeastern Syria and Aleppo in northwestern Syria. For the PYD, Kobanî was important for connecting the western and eastern Syrian-Kurdish cantons.

The context was the third complexity element. While ISIS had tried to capture Kobanî since March 2014, it had suffered setbacks by Syrian Kurds. In August 2014, IS suffered another setback while conquering Kurdish territories, in Iraq. IS propaganda increasingly spurred animosity against Kurds, by focusing on Kurdish secularism[1866] and potentially attracting new groups to join IS, such as JMA and *Liwa Dawud*. On the Kurdish side, the conflict increasingly became a symbolic fight, as illustrated by the 800 Turkish Kurds from the PKK who came to Kobanî in July.[1867] The KRI's decision to send 150 *peshmerga* is sometimes depicted as merely symbolic, as the impact was disputed.[1868] The KRI's *peshmerga*, despite intra-Kurdish disputes over the PYD's political system and relations with Turkey, seemed the only possible reinforcements acceptable for Turkey.[1869] Yet, for the KRI, it created an opportunity to regain its position as the vanguard of pan-Kurdish nationalism, of which Masoud Barzani longed to be the leader.[1870] The PUK security chief Lahour Talabani seemed to accept a less prominent role[1871], potentially not to disturb domestic Turkish politics. The context indicated a complexity feedback loop, in which the interests over Kobanî increased, as well as the perceived, symbolic interests. The interests potentially dragged both sides in an attritional conflict.

Regarding Kobanî, multi-directional and multi-level processes occurred, starting with the mutual threats experienced by IS and the YPG/YPJ, where the adversary threatened the other actor's lines of communication. As the fight over Kobanî dragged on, it increasingly received media attention. The increased media attention turned Kobanî into symbols for both sides, possibly believing that the attritional character of the siege would wear out the adversary. Key figures and their acts became part of the symbolism – Anbari and his alleged suicide and Shishani on IS' side, Mirkan and her alleged suicide and Ebdo on the Syrian Kurdish side –, seemingly created and emerged, and used by propaganda. The symbolism potentially made it important for external actors to support their proxies. Turkish domestic reluctance limited

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1866 Masri, "Islamic State caliphate on the prophetic methodology"; Qaraman, "The representation of Kurds," 12-3. For example: "Indeed your lord is ever watchful," 9; "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 4, 12. Cf. Zarqawi, untitled letter to *al-Qaeda* leadership. Also see: Ingram *et al*., *The ISIS reader*, 37-54; Mustafa & Darwesh, "The anti-Kurdish thoughts of ISIS," 6-17; Salih, "The Islamic State's visions of political community," 14.

1867 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."

1868 "Grant, "The siege of Kobani"; "Interview with YPJ commander"; "Islamic State. Turkey to let Iraq Kurds join Kobane fight."

1869 "Turkey gives Peshmerga forces passage to Kobane"; Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."

1870 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 7, 7-8n30.

1871 YPG commander.

the international coalition in options for supporting the Syrian Kurds. Agreements between the PYD and Turkish intelligence and between the PYD, the KDP, and the PUK created the necessary preconditions to do so.

7.5.2   Reflections

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

On the strategic level, following the rational actor paradigm, in this case IS aimed to control northern Syria and the KRI preferred Kurdish control over northern Syria (geography), to expand or to support an independent political entity, respectively (politics). Kobanî offered a border town with oil infrastructure (economics and logistics). IS' jihadi-salafism versus Kurdish secular nationalism prevailed to the point that Kobanî became a goal by itself (ideology). Thus, besides IS fearing the Syrian Kurds and the other way around, and the KRI fearing the influx of more refugees, both sides feared losing the eventually symbolic Kobanî (adversary, symbolism). IS benefitted from Iraqi war spoils, Kobanî's proximity, and its central location, while for the KRI, Kobanî created strategic depth (friction, chance, and uncertainty). The KRI and its Syrian Kurdish allies benefitted from Western partners, which pushed the KRI to support Kobanî (allies), and were joined by Turkey (time). Following the organizational behavior paradigm, IS' factions took strategic decisions, as the KRI's fragmentation influenced theirs (organization). Thus, IS' factions and the KRI's parties, each with their own modus operandi, influenced strategic decision-making (strategic theory and doctrine), causing IS to become more reckless and the KRI to become expeditionary in character (culture). It also indicated a lack of 'strategic coherence'[1872] within IS (command) and an outcome of political debate within the KRI (politics), where differences focused on maintaining relations with Turkey versus supporting the PYD (allies), the latter out of solidarity with Syrian Kurds (identity, ideology). The governmental politics paradigm, on IS' side, adds fanatic jihadi-salafi beliefs among its key leaders[1873] (ideology), although in military affairs they seemed capable, as were the leaders on the KRI's side (people, command, military administration). Still, indications exist pointing out flawed internal processes within IS, whereas the KRI seemed well aware only to expose Masoud Barzani (decision-making processes), to avoid Turkish objections to supporting Kobanî (politics, allies).

Complexity theory added to the analysis the likely pressure by the United States (exogenous pressure), on the KRI as the only acceptable reinforcement for Kobanî, according to Turkey, as

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1872 Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 2.
1873 Qardash, in "Captured senior ISIS commander."

long as the KRI did not pose a threat south of the Turkish border. For that precondition, the KDP and the PUK ceased their differences and acted pragmatically, limiting the number of *peshmerga* to 150, only allowing artillery and air-ground directing activities (interconnection). Both IS and the Kurdish side played the media during the Kobanî siege (information and intelligence), to the point that Kobanî became a goal in itself (ideology, emergence).

Complexity theory's application of multi-level and multi-directional processes explain well the KRI's process of supporting Syrian Kurds in Kobanî. Also interesting, is the emergence of Kobanî's importance for both sides, which – through media-reports and propaganda – became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Only in hindsight would an analyst be able to narrow down the infinite number of variables leading to strategic decision-making and explain why IS continued a siege it could not win and why the KRI decided to send *peshmerga* to Kobanî.

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

7.6   Conclusion

In September 2014, IS took the strategic decision to renew its attack on Kobanî. The attack turned into a siege, which lasted from October 2014 to January 2015. Thus, after the strategic decision to attack Kobanî, IS took the strategic decision to continue the advance on Kobanî. From a military strategic level point of view, initially, the IS attack on Kobanî made sense for protecting IS' lines of communication. When the odds turned against IS, though, the siege of Kobanî turned out to be a 'significant defeat for ISIS,' losing 'personnel, territory, and its command and control safe haven.'[1874] On the policy level, the siege strengthened cooperation between the international coalition against IS and its local allies, in particular the Syrian Kurds.[1875]

Another local ally of the international coalition was the KRI, which took the strategic decision to assist the beleaguered Syrian Kurds in Kobanî. From a military strategic point of view, the decision to send 150 *peshmerga* – despite their expertise in air-ground coordination – seemed marginal. From a policy point of view, the decision seemed important as the KRI appeared

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1874 Grant, "The siege of Kobani."
1875 *Ibid.*

the only reinforcements acceptable to all coalition partners. As such, the KRI's assistance confirmed its pivotal regional role in the fight against IS.

This chapter focused on how to explain the strategic decisions of IS to attack Kobanî and to continue, and the KRI's strategic decision to assist the Syrian Kurds besieged in Kobanî. The chapter used four paradigms, each offering different perspectives. The section below combines the approaches of different IR paradigms on how to explain the strategic decision-making of both ANSAs concerning Kobanî. Section 7.6.2 focuses on the different paradigms themselves. The last section looks forward.

7.6.1   Explanations

The siege of Kobanî started from IS' interests that were threatened by a rival. In this case, the conflict was about lines of communication between east and west in northern Syria.[1876] When the conflict escalated, local, regional, and global actors – each with their own interests – got involved. Thus, the Kobanî siege also illustrates that events in international relations do not occur isolated. Turkey's role proved pivotal. Turkey was possibly pressured by the United States to continue the pushback of IS, despite disagreements among American allies.[1877] The PYD's dominant position in Syrian Kurdish politics caused reluctance.[1878] Turkey likely allowed the KRI's *peshmerga* to go to Kobanî to increase the KRI's influence and decrease that of the PKK and the PYD.[1879] Thus, it makes sense to assume that Turkey aimed at suppressing Kurdish nationalism, instead of IS extremism.[1880]

The KRI – next to the FSA[1881] – was one of the local actors that responded to fight IS and which had their own interests, such as re-enforcing international support. The KRI proclaimed to react out of solidarity and identity[1882], which became part of a cost-benefit equation. Kobanî's proximity to the Turkish border – enabling observers from relative safe positions to monitor the siege – brought disproportionally high media attention to the battle, in which symbolism eventually overtook strategic objectives.[1883] Symbolism became a strategic objective.

1876 Sax, "YPG and rebel forces challenge ISIS in northern Syria."
1877 Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo."
1878 "Kurdistan MPs debate hurdles to aiding Kobane."
1879 John Saleh, "The battle for Kobane is also political," *Fikra Forum*, December 5, 2014.
1880 Eyal, "Introduction," 5.
1881 Tamimi, "The factions of Kobani."
1882 Abbaszadah, "KRG's military help to Kobane"; Barzani, "A statement from the president"; Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained."
1883 Flood, "Victory at any cost"; Tamimi, "The factions of Kobani."

While IS' decision to attack Kobanî seems rational, given the interests at stake, the decision to continue what eventually became a siege – despite overwhelming enemy capabilities – was not rational[1884], especially taking into consideration that IS conducted two large-scale offensives at the same time – that is, Kobanî and Ramadi – with the danger of overreach. Despite strategic coordination, 'at the operational level there is seemingly much less opportunity for centralized control.'[1885] Apart from suffering casualties, IS suffered recruitment problems since the second half of 2014.[1886] Yet, IS continued to grow. Sometimes battle-hardened and well-equipped groups pledged allegiance to Baghdadi, for example *Liwa Dawud* in July and JMA in August. Despite their *bay'ah*, these groups largely maintained their own identities, which explained internal discrepancies among IS' units. The jihadi-salafist fanatics among IS' key leadership were dominant[1887], of whom Shishani was perhaps most prominent.[1888] The fanatism likely contributed to the decision to continue the siege of Kobanî, even when the odds changed against IS.

Differences also occurred among the KRI's entities. While the KRI wanted to help the Syrian Kurds in Kobanî, the split between the KDP and the PUK caused differences on how to effectuate assistance. The KDP had established beneficial economic ties with Turkey and was reluctant towards the PYD, an affiliate of its domestic rival, the PUK. The PUK supported the PYD unequivocally, but – associated as an affiliate of the PKK – struggled with how to gain Turkish consent to support the Syrian Kurds in Kobanî. Masoud Barzani could renew his position as the pan-Kurdish leader. He was acceptable for Turkey. The downplayed role of PUK intelligence service chief Lahour Talabani might be explained as a way to avoid Turkish domestic concerns. Supporting fellow-Kurdish groups in Kobanî was only possible if Turkey allowed passage to Kobanî, which was complex, given Turkey's animosity towards the PYD, as an affiliate of the PKK.

7.6.2   Paradigms

Whereas the rational actor paradigm explained the initial combat between ISIS and the PYD over lines of communication, the paradigm falls short in explaining the strategic decision of IS to continue the siege. Strategy can change.[1889] As the situation changed – for example, the international coalition increased its efforts against IS – IS should have changed its strategy. The KRI, acting out of solidarity or identity[1890], created analytical ambivalence within

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1884 Cf. Welch, "The organizational process," 117.
1885 Knights & Mello, "The cult of the offensive," 2.
1886 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 269.
1887 Qardash, in "Captured senior ISIS commander."
1888 Saleh, "The battle for Kobane is also political."
1889 For example: Freedman, *Strategy*, xi.
1890 Abbaszadah, "KRG's military help to Kobane"; Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained."

the rational actor paradigm. Although solidarity and identity can be part of a cost-benefit equation, the overlap illustrates that the rational actor paradigm indeed needs to be merged with the organizational behavior paradigm and the governmental politics paradigm. The organizational behavior paradigm seems more suitable to explain strategic decision-making in case of the siege of Kobanî, as both sides were fragmented. IS consisted of different fighting factions, such as JMA and *Liwa Dawud*. The jihadi-salafist fanaticism among these factions explained the strategic decision of IS to continue the siege, despite large enemy capabilities. The fragmentation among IS' groups – by themselves operating on the operational level – explained the lack of an overarching, strategic approach. The Kurdish side was fragmented too. The PYD was affiliated with the PUK, which made the KDP initially reluctant to help out, as long as the PYD remained in power in Syrian Kurdistan. Parallel to the organizational behavior paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm explained the strategic decision-making from the political powerplay among the key leaders of the sub-organizations that constituted the actors. For IS, the fanatism among the key leaders explained the outcome. For the KRI, the political bargaining within the political realm. Complexity theory combines the explanations of the other paradigms and adds the time-specific element, as well as the feedback loops, that the other paradigms generally lack. Here, the timing followed from previous occurrences, but also from other decisions, such as Turkey's decision to join the coalition against IS, which created the opportunity for the KRI to support Kobanî.

The rational actor paradigm in this case found the relevance of the strategic dimensions of politics, geography, strategic theory and doctrine, ideology, adversary, friction, chance, and uncertainty, allies, and time. To a lesser extent economics and logistics played a role. The organizational behavior paradigm in this case added organization, culture, command, identity, and ideology. These strategic dimensions overlapped with the governmental politics paradigms' emphasis on command, which further added military administration, and decision-making. Finally, complexity theory added exogenous pressure and interconnection regarding the KRI, as well as the role of information and intelligence and emergence, in Kobanî becoming a pivotal symbol. Table 7.1 indicates the factors identified per paradigm for the siege of Kobanî, showing complexity theory as the most encompassing.

Table 7.1: strategic dimensions identified in this study per paradigm regarding the siege of Kobanî.[1891]

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

7.6.3   Next

IS overreached in Kobanî. It issued a document in the Iraqi-Syrian border town of Abu Kamal on January 15, 2015, offering repentance to former adversaries on the condition that these individuals would head 'to the military/training camps and from there to the fighting fronts.'[1892] Although IS offered repentance to (former) adversaries, the timing of the document was striking given IS' struggle in Kobanî, leading to the question whether IS leadership worried

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1891 Cf. Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44. Strategic dimensions not mentioned by Gray are indicated with an asterisk.
1892 "Invitation to repentance. Euphrates province," *Islamic State*, January 8, 2015, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.

about the shortage of personnel. By March 2015, reports indicated that IS had overstretched and faced setbacks.[1893] IS issued a more desperate offer of repentance, aimed at a more general audience, on April 27, 2015.[1894] IS had not succeeded in unifying Sunnis in a sectarian conflict against Shia or Kurds.[1895] Still, fragmentation amongst its opponents created new opportunities.[1896] After its defeat in Kobanî, 'IS succeeded on the offensive only when it either targeted the Syrian regime or took advantage of adverse weather conditions that limited the effectiveness of air support. Otherwise, it shifted over to the strategic defensive, undertaking only limited counterattacks.'[1897] Nevertheless, despite less recruits, compared to July 2014[1898], IS continued to attract jihadi-salafists worldwide and Baghdadi openly acknowledged *bay'ah* of groups outside of Iraq and Syria.[1899]

The KRI remained politically fragmented after supporting the Syrian Kurds. In January 2015, the KDP conducted military operations in Sinjar, aimed to harass IS's Syria-Mosul supply line and to create a connection to the KDP-affiliated Syrian Kurds to counterbalance the PYD. In response, the YPG increased its activities in Iraq, supported by the PUK. The YPG urged for a self-administered canton in Sinjar and supported the establishment of a Yazidi-militia there. As such, the YPG prevented the KDP taking over the area. It led the International Crisis Group to conclude that, since Kobanî, instead of rapprochement, the 'KDP, PUK and PYD/YPG have spread their rivalry across Iraq and Syria.'[1900]

1893 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 163-4.
1894 "Call for reinforcements from Aleppo province to Anbar and Salah ad-Din provinces," *Islamic State*, April 27, 2015, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi.
1895 Meda al-Rowas, "Request by Nineveh tribes to join KRG indicates ineffective Iraqi Sunni leadership and hinders reconciliation with Baghdad," *Jane's Country Risk Daily Report*, March 19, 2015.
1896 Firas Ali, "Iraqi Sunni participation in fighting against the Islamic State likely to fail, strengthening the group," *Jane's Country Risk Daily Report*, March 13, 2015.
1897 Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 81.
1898 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 269.
1899 Baghdadi, "Even if the disbelievers despise such," in Orton, "The Islamic State creates foreign 'provinces."
1900 "Arming Iraq's Kurds," 28.