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The Netherlands

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

Berge, W. van den

### **Citation**

Berge, W. van den. (2024, November 22). *Armed non-state actors in conflict: strategic decision-making in the 2014 IS-KRI conflict*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4150279>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Chapter 8

# Conclusion

**T**his study explained the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during their mutual conflict in 2014. No methodological objections exist to apply well-established IR paradigms to ANSAs. The paradigms – especially when combined – offer insight into IS’ and the KRI’s strategic decisions. As such, this study contributes to understanding the under-researched subject of ANSAs’ strategic decision-making within IR. This chapter links the theoretical and the empirical parts of the study, and answers the main research question: how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during three key events in their mutual conflict in 2014? Furthermore, the chapter reflects on the study’s methodological findings, explores avenues for future research, suggests implications for future policy making, and describes IS’ and the KRI’s situation since 2014.

### 8.1 Explanations

The strategic decisions of ISIS and the KRI to fill the vacuum in northern Iraq can be largely explained by Iraqi prime-minister Nouri al-Maliki’s self-fulfilling statements and behavior, which alienated Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds alike during 2013-2014. The outcome of the April 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections confirmed Maliki’s policies. Between the Iraqi state and Iraqi Sunnis, a cycle of mutual alienation emerged. Sunni support for ISIS increased, which threatened Maliki’s powerbase. In response, Maliki took anti-Sunni measures, leading to more Sunni support for ISIS. ISIS further benefitted from the ISF’s relative weakness in northern Iraq. Furthermore, the ISIS doctrine allowed its units to exploit unforeseen opportunities to achieve strategic effects. ISIS’ propaganda exploited the strategic effects of individual’s acts, thus contributing to its battlefield momentum and guiding the jihadi-salafist goal of re-establishing the caliphate.

The ISF’s weak position in northern Iraq – weakened further under ISIS’ pressure – created an opportunity for the KRI to gain control over disputed territories. The KRI’s strategic decision to enter the disputed territories in June 2014 marked a significant shift in approach from

reluctant, diplomacy-oriented in 2003-2014, to assertive, in which the KRI was willing to take risks via its *peshmerga*. The KRI in particular aimed for the oil-rich areas surrounding Kirkuk, considered by many Iraqi Kurds a precondition for establishing an autonomous Kurdish state. Whereas Kurdish studies scholar David Romano observed an assertive KRI in relation to its 2017 independence referendum<sup>1901</sup>, this study indicates that the KRI acted assertively in June 2014, when entering the disputed territories. The KRI's unitary decision was remarkable. Whereas the differences between the KDP and the PUK historically created intra-Kurdish struggles, they ostensibly operated as a united Kurdish bloc when filling the power vacuum in northern Iraq. The KRI leader Masoud Barzani – without his incapacitated political rival Jalal Talabani – was able to quickly mobilize the *peshmerga* to advance.

A new status quo seemed to have emerged in June 2014. Still, IS took the strategic decision to attack the KRI on August 1, 2014. The KRI decided to defend. IS' strategic decision to attack the KRI can be explained from a threat that IS perceived, acknowledged by the mid-June announcement of operation "Inherent Resolve" and the KRI's independence referendum on July 3. The IS attack, thus, was a tactical offensive in light of a defensive strategy – presented by IS propaganda as such – aimed to deter or defeat the *peshmerga*. Additionally, IS could gain natural resources, recruits, and strategic depth. Still, IS advanced towards Baghdad and perhaps the KRI was an intermediate goal. Nevertheless, IS conducted – and initially succeeded in – a surprise attack. Its two senior *emirs*, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Mohannad al-Suwaydawi, with experience in special operations forces and intelligence, were well equipped to achieve a surprise attack.

The KRI's focus on the Iraqi state, as well as the KRI's internal fragmentation – leading to two different intelligence estimates regarding the threat of IS towards the KRI – benefitted IS. The KRI again switched from striving assertively for autonomy to survival. To survive, the KRI had to cooperate with the Iraqi state, as well as international allies. Conducting the defense mainly occurred along party lines, though. The KDP and the PUK fought separately against IS. Still, the KRI succeeded. From August 7, 2014 onwards, the KRI – coordinated with the ISF and supported by coalition partners – gradually pushed back IS.

While the northern Iraqi battlefield was not yet fully secure, the KRI in October 2014 decided to assist Syrian Kurdish forces in Kobani, which had been under siege of IS since September 2014. Despite coalition air strikes, IS kept reinforcing. IS' strategic decision regarding Kobani can be explained from threats posed by the YPG/YPJ to its lines of communication, as IS had threatened theirs. When the air strikes increased, the odds turned. Still, IS continued the attack and brought in reinforcements, including groups that recently pledged allegiance to IS

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1901 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 366.

leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. One of these groups, *Liwa Dawud* was prominent among IS' ranks, partly due to a reputation of successfully ending sieges by fierce attacks, partly because its *emir*, Abu Umar al-Shishani, was well-known. For IS, the fanatic jihadi-salafist IS *emirs* in Kobanî stressed the importance of ideology. Both sides used propaganda and Kobanî as a symbol became a strategic aim.

For the Syrian Kurds, Kobanî symbolized the fight for Kurdish nationalism. The KRI was unified in its wish to support Kobanî, but differed in its perceptions regarding the role of the PYD – associated with the PUK. Masoud Barzani was eager to play his part, to show that he was the pan-Kurdish leader. Also, the PUK's role in coordinating the assistance to Kobanî was downplayed, not to stir up Turkish domestic politics. Turkey considered the KRI *peshmerga* the only acceptable military reinforcements for Kobanî. Still, whereas the YPG/YPJ requested weapons and munitions, Kobanî received limited manpower, indicating that political concerns and symbolic support was more important than requirements in the field.

The findings above acknowledge Heuser and Duyvesteyn's observation of the importance of the strategic dimensions of geography, people, and economics and logistics, as well as allies, and decision-making processes.<sup>1902</sup> However, more strategic dimensions are involved and the dimensions are interconnected.<sup>1903</sup> The findings further indicate that successes at the operational or tactical levels do not necessarily translate into success at the strategic level. For example, benefiting from weaknesses of opponents in 2014, IS was doing well tactically and operationally, applying its jihadi-salafi ideology to military strategy, and making use of social media to spread information. Strategically, those successes brought opponents together into alliances against IS. Instead of provoking a Sunni revolt against the Shia and Kurdish populations, IS brought some Sunni tribes in Nineveh closer to the KRI. Some tribal leaders even requested annexation by the KRI. IS' preference for violence made it inherently suitable for winning conflicts, but inherently unsuitable for winning any peace. Considering the four elements of grand strategy – diplomacy, information, military, and economics – IS considered all, but preferred the military instrument, guided by its jihadi-salafist ideology. Armed conflict along multiple fronts at the same time consumed IS' resources in a scale and tempo it could not replenish. As such, this study underlines Hashim's finding that IS' economic strategy proved not viable to sustain a state that was in war continually, despite efforts to do so.<sup>1904</sup>

The KRI could not transfer its tactical and operational successes into strategic gains either. The KRI initially recognized the collapse of the ISF in northern Iraq in 2014 as an opportunity to gain independence. The *peshmerga* – together with the reinforced ISF – acted as the vanguard

1902 Heuser & Duyvesteyn, "Grand patterns of strategy," 20. Also see: Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44.

1903 Cf. Heuser, *The evolution of strategy*, 18. Also see: Snyder, "Anarchy and culture," 31-6.

1904 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 293.

of the international coalition against IS. However, the KRI did not benefit from these efforts. In the long-term, the KRI did not achieve independence. Internally, tensions between the KDP and the PUK remained, and the KRI remained highly dependent on Iraqi authorities.

## 8.2 Paradigms

In this study, the question how to analyze strategic decision-making also refers to methodology. This paragraph evaluates the different paradigms applied in this study, in line with what Blatter and Haverland described as congruence analysis.<sup>1905</sup> While the rational actor paradigm has its value when considering strategic goals, the paradigm cannot explain everything. The organizational behavior paradigm and the governmental politics paradigm provide additional or alternative explanations. Treating the paradigms separately, the question is then when to apply which paradigm? Or should every analysis include all three paradigms, reminiscent of the fourth paradigm, complexity theory?

### 8.2.1 Rational actor paradigm

The rational actor paradigm proved capable of explaining the strategic decisions taken by IS and the KRI from their respective strategic goals. But the rational actor paradigm is often too simple and does not provide conclusive explanations. The paradigm leaves some relevant strategic dimensions unaddressed. Additionally, the paradigm considers strategy static. Yet, strategy can change. For example, IS' August 2014 attack forced the KRI to change its goal from autonomy to survival. While besieging Kobani, IS failed to adapt to the changed situation – that is, the international coalition increased its efforts against IS. So, timing matters. Yet, the rational actor paradigm does not explicitly consider the time-specific factor in its explanation. In fact, the rational actor paradigm fell short in explaining IS' strategic decision to continue besieging Kobani. In general, the rational actor paradigm fell short in providing alternative options. The strategy paradoxes frustrate choosing between alternatives. According to the strategic paradoxes, lesser alternatives might be the best options, or the other way around, because adversaries do not anticipate the lesser alternatives. As such, there is no best-rational decision. Still, this study observed that IS and the KRI preferred the options in which they achieved their strategic goals as quickly as possible. That preference led to strategic decisions that eventually proved counter-productive. For example, the KRI's decision to capture disputed territories and IS' attack on the KRI. The KRI assisting the Syrian Kurds in Kobani out of solidarity or identity created analytical ambivalence within the rational actor paradigm. Although solidarity and identity can be part of a cost-benefit equation, the overlap illustrates that the rational actor

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1905 Blatter & Haverland, *Designing case studies*, 31, 144.

paradigm indeed can – or should – overlap with other paradigms. By treating actors as unitary and rational, policy makers using a rational actor paradigm approach limit themselves from more nuanced approaches in dealing with these actors. As within any actor, different factions existed within IS and the KRI, and they rarely operated as truly unitary actors.

### 8.2.2 Organizational behavior paradigm

The organizational behavior paradigm adds nuance to the rational actor paradigm, by focusing on organization and internal doctrines. Illustrative was the change, in June 2014, of the KRI's focus from diplomacy to military action and the cooperation between the KDP and the PUK when filling the vacuum, despite their historical intra-Kurdish struggles, as well as explaining the KRI's surprise by the IS attack. Furthermore, the organizational behavior paradigm seemed more appropriate to explain strategic decision-making in the case of the siege of Kobanî, as both sides were fragmented. IS consisted of different fighting factions, such as JMA and *Liwa Dawud*. The jihadi-salafist fanaticism among these factions explained the strategic decision of IS to continue the siege, despite sizeable enemy capabilities. The Kurdish side was fragmented too. The KRI joined the PYD, which was affiliated to the PUK. Yet, the organizational behavior paradigm, separately, was unable to provide sufficient explanations for actors that operate in a unitary way. For example, the KDP and the PUK closely cooperating in filling the vacuum, or IS' strategic decision to attack the KRI in August 2014. As such, Biddle's conclusion that '[i]ncreasingly, the best predictor of a combatant's military methods is not its status as a state as opposed to a nonstate actor, but its internal politics – and especially its institutional maturity and war aims'<sup>1906</sup> seems only part of the story. It is too simple to ignore the interaction with external and internal actors.

### 8.2.3 Governmental politics paradigm

On a more detailed level than the two paradigms above, the governmental politics paradigm explained the battlefield momentum ISIS experienced in capturing Mosul in June 2014. For example, the death of ISIS *emir* Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi on June 5, 2014, which – exploited by ISIS propaganda – provided a morale boost to ISIS' fighters and, thus, contributed to ISIS' momentum. The governmental politics paradigm provided insight in IS' strategic leaders perceptions and background. For example, Turkmani and Suwaydawi for the attack on the KRI and Abu Ali al-Anbari and Shishani for the siege of Kobanî. Their fanatic jihadi-salafist ideology, as well as for some their military or intelligence background, explained why they took specific decisions. Just like the organizational behavior paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm failed to provide explanations for the unitary strategic decision-making.

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<sup>1906</sup> Biddle, "The determinants of nonstate military methods," 714.

When IS attacked the KRI, the lack of explanatory power was due to a combination of the dominance of the KRI's political parties – the realm of the organizational behavior paradigm – and the fact that the KRI was fighting a war of necessity, in which political powerplay was subordinate to the overall goal of survival. That continued when the KRI supported Kobani and the coordinating role of the PUK's intelligence and security chief Lahour Talabani was downplayed, likely not to stir up Turkish domestic politics, which also indicated the overlap between different strategic levels, as well as paradigms.

#### 8.2.4 Complexity theory

The most complete explanation for IS' and the KRI's strategic decisions contain elements of the three paradigms mentioned above. Complexity theory incorporates elements of the other paradigms, as well as other relevant actors and factors. Complexity theory does so by combining different strategic levels into one paradigm. For example, the self-fulfilling statements and behavior of Maliki that alienated Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds alike during 2013-2014, were essential for explaining the strategic behavior of ISIS and the KRI in June 2014. Also, the alleged suicide of Bilawi indicated that a tactical occurrence can have a strategic effect. Perhaps more important than the observation that the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm, either separately or in combination, do not provide sufficient explanations, is that these paradigms assume linear explanations, while non-linear processes occur.<sup>1907</sup> Perhaps this explains why the paradigms do not suffice, as they provide at best partial explanations. An alternative is to adopt complexity theory, which assumes non-linearity, acknowledges time-, space-, and context-specific circumstances, and focuses on multi-level and multi-directional processes. As such, complexity theory is able to explain the battle for the KRI, fought between the unitary operating IS and the fragmented KRI, which fitted the realms of the rational actor paradigm and the organizational behavior paradigm, respectively. Applying complexity theory, allows an analyst to adopt a broad view of a research subject, instead of being guided, if not limited, by a narrow analytical framework, as with the traditional paradigms. Complexity theory offers a solution to strategic paradoxes, considering the time-, space-, and context-specific elements of events and strategic decisions. At the same time, this approach limits complexity theory to reverse engineering strategic decisions, though. Thus, complexity theory is unable to forecast.

Regarding complexity theory, this study underlined the difficulty with that paradigm in limiting the explanation to relevant aspects. As referred to in chapter 3, modeling complexity is difficult, if not impossible, unless the model is as complex as reality itself. This makes it almost impossible to reach conclusive answers using complexity theory, as new insights or new data

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<sup>1907</sup> Venable, "The result is never final," 122.

might emerge. When applying complexity theory, an analyst has to accept that the explanation in practice will never be complete. For this study, for example, the calculations by IS leaders are largely based on propaganda or assumption. Until new evidence emerges, which might lead to new conclusions, the propaganda or assumptions provide the best possible explanation, though. As not all IS documents are recovered, let alone translated, new evidence is likely to emerge. The same is true for the KRI's documents.

Osinga's criticism of fourth-generation warfare, which he described as having a jelly-like character, is partly avoided by offering a structure, albeit a rather abstract structure using time-, space-, and context-specific factors, as well as multi-layered and multi-directional processes. Still, the structure provided an analytical framework that enabled the merging of the traditional paradigms into a useful alternative paradigm. In this study, complexity theory provided an alternative paradigm – implicitly used in IR before –, which enabled elements of different paradigms, with a focus on different decision-making levels, to merge into an analytical framework. As complexity theory for different cases will vary in shape and substance, it will remain jelly-like. Still, adding structure – although abstract – will not only make it recognizable as jelly but might even be enough so that it can be nailed against the wall.

The complexity theory structure adopted in this study, offered points of reference to compare the three cases within this study. Although the cases were unique, the relevant strategic dimensions that influenced the strategic decision-making could be compared. Applying complexity theory to other cases is possible when adopting the same analytical framework. These concern historical cases, as complexity theory recognizes the fact that forecasting strategic decision-making is impossible, due to the time-, space-, and context-specific factors and the multi-level and multi-directional processes that occur when making such a decision.

The bounded rationality of decision-makers implies they cannot oversee all possible consequences of their actions, do not acquire a full information position, might have conflicting goals, and might sometimes reach a goal by accident. Several events studied here acknowledged this characteristic of complexity, for example, ISIS, which captured Mosul unforeseen, or the KDP and the PUK, which held different views on the threat posed by IS.

### 8.2.5 Reflections

Some authors, like Black and Gunter, in 2014 called for a new paradigm due to ANSAs' increasing influence.<sup>1908</sup> These scholars were right that traditional paradigms proved incapable of providing full explanations for ANSAs' strategic decision-making. Still, their calls for new

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<sup>1908</sup> Black, *Geopolitics*, 272; Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 78.

paradigms deserve nuance. The rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm each have their merits, be it in a limited scope. Complexity theory encompasses most strategic dimensions of the IR paradigms in this study, illustrated in table 8.1, which combines tables 5.1, 6.1, and 7.1 and shows the relevant strategic dimensions in each of this study's case studies. Complexity theory also recognizes that the strategic dimensions influence one another. Multi-level and multi-directional processes occur, sometimes simultaneously, across the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Such non-linearity makes complexity theory the most appropriate paradigm to analyze strategic decision-making. Taking a state-centric approach, Heuser observed a 'complex decision-making process within states and among states,' and added that '[d]ifferent "black boxes" in which Strategy is made produce such varied results that they can no longer be explained in the simple terms of old definitions of Strategy. Strategy-making becomes absorbed by all forms of political interplay, which can be distinguished from normal politics only in that the use of force or the threat of the use of force play a central role.'<sup>1909</sup> Assuming universal non-linearity, not only in Middle Eastern cases, or ANSAs, benefit from complexity theory analysis. Complexity theory seems applicable beyond that scope. In that respect, Black and Gunter were incorrect that the rise of ANSAs – IS and the KRI in particular – marked the need for a new paradigm. In fact, any strategic decision-making of any actor within international relations – and possibly beyond – requires better understanding. Thus, Black and Gunter limited themselves to ANSAs, whereas their potential scope was larger.

Table 8.1 illustrates that the governmental politics paradigm incorporates the least strategic dimensions of the paradigms applied in this study. The rational actor paradigm and the organizational behavior paradigm involve more strategic dimensions than the governmental politics paradigm. Complexity theory's scope of strategic dimensions is the largest of the paradigms applied in this study. That strength is also complexity theory's weakness. Next to the large number of strategic dimensions, if strategic dimensions interact and change themselves, conducting analysis becomes challenging, if not impossible. To cope with the challenge, this study applied a rather abstract structure based on time-, space-, and context-specifics, focusing on multi-level and multi-directional processes. Yet, such an abstract approach can become too complex to be scientific or societal relevant. The challenge for complexity theory is to narrow it down.

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<sup>1909</sup> Heuser, *The evolution of strategy*, 495.

**Table 8.1:** strategic dimensions identified in this study per paradigm.<sup>1910</sup> The numbers indicate whether the strategic dimensions were incorporated by the respective paradigms to explain strategic decision-making in this study's cases, using 1 for filling the vacuum (see table 5.1), 2 for the battle for the KRI (see table 6.1), and 3 for the siege of Kobani (see table 7.1).

Strategic dimension	Rational actor paradigm		Organizational behavior paradigm		Governmental politics paradigm		Complexity theory
	IS	KRI	IS	KRI	IS	KRI	IS/KRI
<i>politics</i>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<i>geography</i>	1 2 3	1 2 3					1 2 3
<i>people</i>	1 2	1 2 3			1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<i>economics and logistics</i>	1 2 3	1 2 3					1 2 3
<i>military operations</i>	1 2 3	1 2 3	2	2			1 2 3
<i>friction, chance and uncertainty</i>	1 2 3	1	1	1	1	1	1 2 3
<i>strategic theory and doctrine</i>	1 2 3		1 2 3	1 2 3			1 2 3
<i>culture</i>			1 2 3	1 2 3			1 2 3
<i>organization</i>			1 2 3	1 2 3			1 2 3
<i>information and intelligence</i>	2		3	2 3	1		1 2 3
<i>command</i>			3		1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<i>military administration</i>					2 3		2 3
<i>time</i>	2 3						2 3
<i>adversary</i>	1 2 3	1 2 3	2	2			1 2 3
<i>allies*</i>		1 2 3		2			1 2 3
<i>exogenous pressure*</i>	3	3					1 2 3
<i>interconnection*</i>							1 2 3
<i>emergence*</i>	2 3						2 3
<i>ideology*</i>	1 2 3	3	3	3	1 2 3		1 2 3
<i>identity*</i>				3			3
<i>decision-making processes*</i>				1 3	3		1 3
<i>symbolism*</i>	1 3	3		3	3	3	1 3

### 8.3 Evaluation

Assessing the chosen method – that is, paradigms based on state actor decision-making – and the value of empirical data in a (self-) critical reflection contributes to positioning this study among the field of study focusing on ANSAs.

<sup>1910</sup> Cf. Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44. Strategic dimensions not mentioned by Gray are indicated with an asterisk.

This study contributes to understanding ANSAs. ANSAs potentially have a significant impact on international relations, as IS and the KRI illustrated in 2014. Still, ANSAs are insufficiently researched in the predominantly state-centric field of IR, despite the many intra-state conflicts compared to inter-state conflicts in recent decades. By analyzing IS and the KRI and using IR paradigms, this study added to the extant knowledge concerning ANSAs' strategic decision-making and decision-making theory in general. Like state actors in international relations, these ANSAs operated to achieve goals, were structured in smaller organizations, and occasionally were guided by the actions of individuals. This study follows a trend within contemporary IR, acknowledging that these different levels interact, as suggested by complexity theory, making complexity theory an interesting avenue for analysis in IR.

This study applied IR paradigms, based on state actor decision-making to ANSAs, assuming similar decision-making processes to occur within ANSAs, as in states. By choosing IR paradigms to analyze ANSAs, this study implicitly assumed that ANSAs have foreign policies and grand strategies. Academic debate on these concepts is ongoing and it depends on which definition or approach is used to accept whether ANSAs have foreign policies or grand strategies.<sup>1911</sup> Alternative approaches might avoid these IR discussions, for example by connecting strategic decision-making to a social movement approach.<sup>1912</sup>

Although the paradigms offer analysts frameworks for analysis, they are also prone to bias, if only limiting the analysis to the key issues: cost-benefit calculation for the rational actor paradigm, SOPs in the organizational behavior paradigm, and individuals' preferences in the governmental politics paradigm. Using these paradigms as input for complexity theory, thus potentially limits complexity theory. The complexity theory approach would benefit from collecting empirical data without guidance from other paradigms.<sup>1913</sup> To enhance feasibility, the traditional IR paradigms were used as input for complexity theory. However, using the traditional IR paradigms as input for complexity theory limits complexity theory's methodological rigor.

Strictly adopting complexity theory, the external validity is limited to the cases at hand, because of specific circumstances. Within the cases, the empirical data – that is, primary sources, such as the *Dabiq* magazines and translated documents – offered valuable insights. Still, the specific, usually propagandistic function of many of these documents invites further research, as does the relatively small number of captured, translated documents.

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1911 For example: Strachan, *The direction of war*, 11.

1912 For example: Opp, *Theories of political protest*, 127-303.

1913 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 65; Holland, *Complexity*, 9-12, 25, 89-90.

## 8.4 Future research

Future research, following from this study, can deepen and broaden the findings above. In general, further research is needed on ANSAs and their strategic decision-making. More in-depth research would consider to what extent the strategic dimensions observed in this study impact strategic decision-making, possibly regarding the same case studies. Newly available sources can be helpful. A huge amount of primary – increasingly translated into English –, secondary and tertiary sources are available on IS. However, sources on the KRI are significantly less. In particular, there is a lack of primary KRI-sources translated into English. This is all the more remarkable given the KRI's close cooperation with Western allies in its conflict with IS, and Western presence within the KRI. It offers opportunities for future research on the KRI's strategic decision-making, for example to refute findings from this study and to advance explanations regarding the KRI's strategic decision-making. In general, the governmental politics paradigm suffered from a lack of reliable resources regarding the strategic leaders' perceptions regarding decision-making. Propaganda-infected sources dominate the analyses, such as reports on Bilawi's alleged self-detonation, or Shishani's video appearances. Other sources need to provide context. Complexity theory, taking a broad approach and combining available sources, provides a suitable analytical framework to do just that.

Apart from more in-depth research, the scope could also be broadened to other strategic dimensions than the ones identified in this study. Three strategic dimensions, out of the seventeen mentioned by Gray, were not observed during the cases in this study: ethics, society, and technology.<sup>1914</sup> Future research could focus on the impact of these three strategic dimensions within ANSAs' strategic decision-making. Another approach would be to further explore additional strategic dimensions. This study found a significant impact of ideology on strategic decision-making, in particular in the case of IS. This study touched on religion as part of ideology, without further elaboration. Yet, to address a lack in existing research<sup>1915</sup>, incorporating religion into IR paradigms might be an interesting future research avenue, as suggested by historian Christopher Dawson during the 1930s. Dawson observed a secular tendency among social scientists, leading them to neglect religion as a variable within their theories.<sup>1916</sup> In 2011, political scientist Jack Snyder addressed the absence of religion among IR paradigms<sup>1917</sup>, while observing a significant impact of religion on IR.<sup>1918</sup> Given religion's

1914 Cf. Gray, *Modern strategy*, 23-44.

1915 Jack Snyder, "Introduction," in *Religion and international relations theory*, Jack Snyder (ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 1.

1916 Christopher Dawson, *Enquiries into religion and culture* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), xviii-xx. Also see: Heuser, *War*, 274, 397.

1917 Snyder, "Introduction," 2-20.

1918 Jack Snyder, "Conclusion. Religion's contribution to international relations theory," in *Religion and international relations theory*, Jack Snyder (ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 201.

transnational character and emphasis on symbolism<sup>1919</sup>, complexity theory in particular provides a suitable framework to incorporate religion. The same might be true for the concept of *asabiyya* (kinship) as developed by fourteenth century Islamic scholar Abd ar-Rahman ibn Khaldun. Different scholars suggested including *asabiyya* as a significant social factor in Middle Eastern contexts, omitted by Western-centric theoretical approaches.<sup>1920</sup> Yet, referring to anthropological insights, Snyder argued that kinship sometimes facilitates decision-making structures.<sup>1921</sup> While the anthropological research occurred at village level, the effect of kinship in relatively small social structures, like ANSAs and in particular dynastically organized ANSAs, arguably such as the KRI, offers interesting new research avenues.

Finally, including ANSAs in the study of IR and the practice of international relations, implicitly recognizes that ANSAs have something like a grand strategy and foreign policy. This study found some implicit evidence of both IS and the KRI being well aware of the interaction of the different (foreign) policy instruments to achieve policy goals, varying from economic strategy<sup>1922</sup> to domestic policies to gain public support.<sup>1923</sup> More explicit research on ANSAs' policies, grand strategies, or strategies, will further expand understanding of the concept beyond the dominating Western-centric and state-centric views.<sup>1924</sup> Broadening understanding of grand strategy and strategy beyond traditional views will also benefit practical implications, elaborated on below.

## 8.5 Practical implications

This study assumed similarities between states and ANSAs in IR. Researchers have indicated that by labeling an actor within international relations as an ANSA, withholds the actor access to potential recognition as a legitimate actor. Suggestions to apply some form of acknowledgement – as small as these may seem – might open up lines of communication.<sup>1925</sup> In 2014, the KRI was labelled as a de facto state by many Western states. However, while the international coalition used the KRI's *peshmerga* as a vanguard to fight IS, the KRI could not

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1919 *Ibid.*, 207.

1920 Lawrence, *Zeven zuilen van wijsheid*, 93-99; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 17-21; Rabi', *Contemporary Arab thought*, 140-1; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 90-1; Beyza Sümer, "Ibn Khaldun's *asabiyya* for social cohesion," *Electronic Journal of Social Sciences* 11:41 (2012), 253-67; Umunc, "A hope so transcendent," 189. Also see: Kiras, "Key concepts," 302; Kiras, "The historical practice," 333.

1921 Snyder, "Anarchy and culture," 14.

1922 For example: Kulaksiz *et al.*, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 1-2; Mahmoud, "Iraqi Kurds worry"; Shapland, "Iraqi Kurds' aim of statehood stays out of reach."

1923 For example: Naji, *The management of savagery*, 16-22. Also see: Graaf & Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance," 17; Orton, "Governing the caliphate," 3.

1924 Black, review of *The direction of war*, 473, 475; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 4, 9.

1925 Pfeifer *et al.*, "The politics of recognition," 20-2.

purchase military equipment that required end-user certificates, because the KRI was not an independent state.<sup>1926</sup> This example indicates the state-centeredness of international relations, including its international judicial agreements. As ANSAs do exert influence in international relations, either by themselves or indirectly by influencing state actors, IR analysis needs to include ANSAs in analyses. By excluding ANSAs, opportunities are lost to mitigate conflict and potentially reduce suffering for the population involved. While Strachan argued that applying concepts like strategy and policy to ANSAs creates leverage for ANSAs in their struggle against states<sup>1927</sup>, the KRI's example indicates that ANSAs are hampered when acting on behalf of states too. Acknowledging ANSAs' grand strategies and foreign policies creates opportunities to deal with ANSAs along their policy goals and strategic instruments. It also means a further step in transferring from a state-non-state dichotomy towards a state-non-state continuum, with judicial implications.

Including ANSAs in IR analysis requires more academic attention for ANSAs in IR, as well as in military studies, intelligence studies, economics, and international law. Scientific analysis on ANSAs is necessary to assess their impact on, and relevance for, IR in general, and foreign policy analysis in particular. Beyond scientific analyses, other stakeholders involved need to address ANSAs, adding practitioners' insights to the scientific views. Non-governmental organizations and private companies – non-state actors themselves – need to share the effect of ANSAs on their activities and businesses to assess the societal and economic impact, respectively. Military organizations and intelligence agencies need to share their knowledge on ANSAs to assess their capabilities and intentions. If possible, and only when safe enough for the researchers, ANSAs themselves – as a line of communication – could invite impartial researchers to explain their position and intentions, thus, avoiding their statements to be dismissed as propaganda. Additionally, ANSAs could exchange diplomatic, military, and intelligence liaisons, to establish additional lines of communication with other ANSAs, but also with states. This requires a paradigm shift in many states' state-centric approach to diplomacy. The KRI tried such an approach, but failed, as the next paragraph indicates.

## 8.6 Situation since

The 2014 conflict involving IS and the KRI left both ANSAs in very different, but little promising positions. With the benefit of hindsight, IS overstretched, which became clear from 2015 onwards.<sup>1928</sup> Since the August 2014 attack, along the northern-Iraqi frontline, IS was gradually pushed back by the *peshmerga*, which received air support, training, and

1926 Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan?" 21n61; Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 430-2.

1927 Strachan, *The direction of war*, 45.

1928 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 5-6, 11, 185.

equipment from the international coalition and coordinated operations with the ISF.<sup>1929</sup> Knights and Mello observed that ‘Islamic State has lost every time they faced a determined and well-resourced ISF or *Peshmerga* attack.’<sup>1930</sup> By April 2015, the *peshmerga* had recaptured approximately 95 percent of territory lost to IS in August 2014. Still, IS proved difficult to defeat<sup>1931</sup> and tensions between IS and the KRI remained.<sup>1932</sup> It took until summer 2017 for the ISF – supported by the international coalition and the *peshmerga* – to recapture Mosul. The Hawija-pocket south-west of Kirkuk remained under IS control. By 2019, the IS caliphate had ceased to exist.<sup>1933</sup> Still, since 2019, IS has reemerged in the region, benefitting from foreign powers withdrawing their militaries due to inter-state tensions.<sup>1934</sup> Iraq remained IS’ main area of operations in 2022. Since 2023, Iraq was no longer IS’ main area of operations.<sup>1935</sup>

Within the KRI a political crisis erupted in late 2015. President Masoud Barzani did not want to leave office, according to him due to the threat of IS. Some analysts feared tensions might lead to a new intra-Kurdish civil war.<sup>1936</sup> In March 2017, a proxy-clash occurred in Sinjar between KDP-affiliated Syrian-Kurdish fighters and an Iraqi-Yezidi group backed by the PKK, the PUK and *Gorran*.<sup>1937</sup> The clash faded away, as attention focused on an independence referendum in the KRI – and within the disputed territories that the KRI controlled since June 2014 – on September 25, 2017.<sup>1938</sup> The KDP and the PUK supported the referendum, *Gorran* argued for strengthening the democratic institutions in the KRI first, and several minority parties rejected the referendum as unconstitutional. Parties occasionally switched their positions, though.<sup>1939</sup> The outcome of the referendum was overwhelmingly in favor of independence. Supported by this outcome, Kurdish officials tried to restart autonomy negotiations with the Iraqi state. Yet, tensions between Baghdad and Erbil rose again, as Iraq’s prime minister Haider al-Abadi rejected the referendum and stated that the KRI’s borders, were the 2003 borders. In response, the Iraqi state, as well as Turkey and Iran, ceased the KRI’s commercial flights, concentrated military capacity close to the KRI’s borders, and threatened the KRI with a full embargo. In October, 2017, the ISF retook Kirkuk and nearly all disputed territories the

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1929 Roggio, “US Special Forces.”

1930 Knights & Mello, “The cult of the offensive,” 3. Italics added.

1931 *Ibid.*, 4; Shapland, “Iraqi Kurds’ aim of statehood stays out of reach.”

1932 For example: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “March forth whether light or heavy,” audio speech, May 14, 2015, transl. unknown, in “Islamic State leader attacks Saudi Arabia, claims to be the Sunni vanguard,” Kyle Orton, *Kyle Orton’s Blog*, May 15, 2015.

1933 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 164.

1934 Ghadhawi, “Revenge for the two sheikhs.”

1935 Palani, “The low likelihood of ISIS resurgence in Iraq,” 2.

1936 Patrick Martin, “Political crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan escalates into violence,” *Institute for the Study of War*, October 15, 2015. Also see: Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan?” 23.

1937 Hadad & Wallace, “The Iraqi Kurdish security apparatus.”

1938 “The Kurdish vote for independence,” *The Soufan Center*, September 25, 2017.

1939 Sadoon, “The Islamic State and the independence referendum,” 11-2.

KRI had captured in 2014.<sup>1940</sup> The return of *peshmerga* forces from the disputed territories led to renewed repartitioning of the *peshmerga* along party lines.<sup>1941</sup> Sadoon viewed the KRI remaining a political entity – despite the referendum – as a success for the KRI.<sup>1942</sup> Tamimi concluded that Masoud Barzani and the KDP miscalculated by continuing the referendum, despite fierce opposition among neighboring states. Additionally, the KRI’s weak financial position and internal fragmentation provided Barzani very little leverage on his side, and it was obvious that a unilateral independence referendum at the time would not change that.<sup>1943</sup> Internal fragmentation, a hampering economy, and involvement of the Iraqi state and regional powers have frustrated the KRI’s ambitions for autonomy since 2017.<sup>1944</sup> As such, the KRI will remain an ANSA in the near-future.

## 8.7 Final remarks

At the time of writing, despite – or because of – global attention focusing on inter-state rivalries, the relevance of ANSAs seems higher than ever. This study started with the notion that ANSAs have been the historical continuity that challenged states. Black noticed an ongoing historical increase in political actors and, therefore, in military actors.<sup>1945</sup> Thus, despite attention in IR in the late 2010s and early 2020s moving away from ANSAs to inter-state tensions, notably the Russo-Ukraine war (2014-present) and tensions between Western states and China over Taiwan, Black foresees that ‘strategic practice in the future will perforce focus more on civil warfare across much of the world.’<sup>1946</sup> Earlier, Heuser had reached a similar conclusion.<sup>1947</sup> In practice, the major war-small war binary is non-existent and various types of warfare overlap.<sup>1948</sup> Yet, states’ militaries ceased conducting, or preparing for, counterinsurgencies.<sup>1949</sup> This likely means that ANSAs can benefit from new power vacuums. In Syria, a new power vacuum

1940 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 155; Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 362; Aymenn al-Tamimi, “Iraqi Kurdistan’s crisis. A failure of strategy,” *American Spectator*, October 22, 2017.

1941 Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan?” 16.

1942 Sadoon, “The Islamic State and the independence referendum,” 15.

1943 Tamimi, “Iraqi Kurdistan’s crisis.”

1944 Bekir Aydoğan & Mehmet Alaca, “Kurdistan’s fading dream. The struggle and despair behind Erbil-Baghdad relations,” *Gulf International Forum*, no date.

1945 Jeremy Black, “Strategies for the twenty-first century,” in *The practice of strategy. A global history*, Jeremy Black (ed.), (Società Italiana di Storia Militare, 2024), 543-5.

1946 *Ibid.*, 544.

1947 Heuser, *The evolution of strategy*, 450.

1948 Heuser, *War*, 29-34, 58, 397-401. Also see: Anneleen van der Meer, “Strategies of chemical warfare. Understanding the purpose of norm transgression in war,” PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2023, 132-3.

1949 Frans Osinga & Tim Sweijs, “Conclusion. Insights from theory and practice,” in *Netherlands annual review of military studies 2020. Deterrence in the 21st century – insights from theory and practice*, Frans Osinga & Tim Sweijs (eds.) (The Hague: Asser Press, 2021), 524-5.

possibly allows IS' re-emergence; in Iraq, the KRI's next bid for autonomy; and, in either country the rise of other ANSAs.

Beyond Iraq and Syria, Palestinian ANSA *Hamas'* October 7, 2023 attack on Israel triggered a counter-attack of Israel Defense Forces in Gaza. The Israeli response triggered attacks of Yemenite Houthi's on cargo-vessels in the Red Sea in support of *Hamas*. The Houthi attacks, in turn, triggered the formation of an international maritime mission to protect cargo-vessels in the Red Sea. Furthermore, the conflict polarized societies across the globe over which side to support. *Hamas* and Houthi operations illustrate ANSAs' potential and their impact, but also the complexity of such conflicts. Other contemporary conflicts involving ANSAs receive less global attention than the fight between Israel and *Hamas*. In Sudan, a vicious civil war broke out between the army and ANSA Rapid Support Forces in April 2023, the former supported by Egypt, the latter by the United Arab Emirates. Nearby, Ethiopia struggles with an ongoing civil war with Tigrayan insurgents and in 2023 military coups occurred in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. In Myanmar, different mainly ethnically organized ANSAs fight the military junta in power, while China occasionally gets involved to protect its interests. In the Russo-Ukraine war, ANSAs are involved too, most notably – until its leadership turned shortly against Russia – Russian private military company Wagner Group.<sup>1950</sup>

What these conflicts have in common, apart from ANSA-involvement, is the enormous human suffering: '[a]round the globe, more people are dying in fighting, being forced from their homes or in need of life-saving aid than in decades.'<sup>1951</sup> In a 2024 report on contemporary conflicts, the International Crisis Group president and vice-president, Comfort Ero and Richard Atwood, blamed the unstable global political environment, which created opportunities for states and ANSAs alike, to seize territory or conduct ethnic cleansing.<sup>1952</sup> Their observation underlines this study's findings on ANSAs seizing opportunities. Their observation also points out the limitation of this study in addressing a conflict from IR-perspectives. Contemporary conflicts are too complex to analyze solely by IR. IR forms part of the analysis and, in addition, other fields, varying from cultural and religious studies, to economics and governance, also need to be included.

As the title indicates, this study focuses on conflicts involving ANSAs, in particular on the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI in 2014. Yet, the traditional paradigms suggest clear boundaries between entities – states in the rational actor paradigm, states and sub-state entities in the organizational behavior paradigm, and individuals in the governmental politics paradigm. In practice, the boundaries are blurred. Both IS and the KRI sometimes made

1950 Comfort Ero & Richard Atwood, "10 conflicts to watch in 2024," *International Crisis Group*, January 1, 2024, 4-13.

Also see: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, "ACLED conflict index," accessed March 17, 2024.

1951 Ero & Atwood, "10 conflicts to watch in 2024," 1.

1952 *Ibid.*, 2.

strategic decisions unitarial, sometimes along sub-entities, and sometimes along individual's lines. Occasionally, overlap occurred with other entities. Explaining strategic decision-making, thus, requires a broad approach and inherently leads to overlap between the traditional IR paradigms. Complexity theory incorporates other paradigms, recognizes non-linearity, and adds relevant strategic dimensions. Recognizing that complexity theory lacks predictive power and can easily become too complex, this study applied an analytical complexity theory framework, which focused on time, space, context, and multi-level and multi-directional processes. The complexity theory framework explained strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI in 2014. Contemporary developments in international relations, involving states and ANSAs alike, and indicating non-linear complexity, requires such a well-suited approach for explaining the under-researched strategic decision-making of ANSAs in conflict.

