

The Northern Front of the Combat against ISIS: Peshmarga-Western Alliance

CAN ACUN

- What is the ISIS strategy in the north of Iraq?
- In which regions do the Peshmerga-ISIS clashes intensify?
- What are the short-term implications of skirmishes?
- Who are the partners of the prospective coalition against ISIS and what do they aim for?

The wave of rebellions against the Nouri al Maliki government in Iraq continuing for quite some time, has gained momentum under the leadership of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS/IS - Devlet'ul Islamiyye fil'l Irak ve's Şam)¹ with the participation of Ansar al Islam (AI, Cemaat Ensar'ül-İslam), The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (Jeyş'ur Rical et-Tarikat'un Nakşibendiyye), The Islamic Army in Iraq (Al Ceyş'ul-İslam fi'l Irak), The Military Council of Tribal Revolutionaries of Iraq, and the 1920s Revolution Brigades (Ketaib es-Sevret'ül-İşrin)². These groups have managed to take over Mosul, the largest northern city in Iraq, and drove out a big part of the Central Iraqi Army from provinces mostly populated by Sunni Arabs, such as Nineweh, Anbar, Diyala and Salahaddin. Nearly 500,000 people only from Nineweh, fled to other regions in Iraq.³ Some of those who left Mosul returned later, as the groups, ISIS in

particular, taking over the administration in the city have begun to act like a pseudo-state, provided security in a short time, formed administrative bodies and undertaken municipality services.

The ISIS-led Sunni insurgency has changed direction to the south after capturing the city of Nineweh, yanked Tikrit⁴ and Bayji⁵ from the Central Iraqi Army under al Maliki's command and tried to proceed towards the province of Baqubah.⁶ The ultimate goal of ISIS and other Sunni groups is to take over capital Baghdad by reviving the "Baghdad Belt" battle plan, which had been outlined while Al Qaeda in Iraq's leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi was alive. However, the groups have failed to enter Samarra despite heavy clashes, to have absolute control in the Anbar province and to proceed in Baghdad environs. Consequently, ISIS has lost the upper-hand, which it gained in the early days and engaged in regional hot encounters with the Iraqi Army on this front. ISIS and its allies then headed to the north feeling confident after establishing control

1. For detailed information about ISIS, see: Can Acun, "Neo el-Kaide: Irak ve Şam İslam Devleti (İŞİD)", SETA Perspektif, Ankara, June 2014.

2. Can Acun, "Irak'ta İsyanın Haritası: Silahlı Gruplar", SETA Perspektif, Ankara, June 2014.

3. How ISIS stormed Iraq: a chronology of the militant offensive, Al Arabiya, June 16, 2014.

4. Mosul'dan sonra Tikrit de düştü, Sabah, 12.06.2014.

5. Irak Ordusu Beyci'yi vuruyor, Al Jazeera Türk, June 24, 2014.

6. İŞİD Bakuba'da, Al Jazeera Türk, June 13, 2014.



over the Sunni regions, following the declaration of Chaliphate⁷ and realizing that it would be impossible for them to take over Baghdad in a short time. In parallel with the pullout of the Central Iraqi Army, the same groups posing a threat to the Kurdish capital in Northern Iraq, Arbil, took over Zumar⁸, Rabia⁹, Sinjar¹⁰ and Jalawla cities, which are stated in the Iraqi Constitution as controversial regions where Peshmerga are deployed. Iraqi Kurdish forces withdrew due to failure against ISIS and its allies as more than 500,000 people, consisting of Kurds and Shiites, took shelter in the city of Dohuk in particular. This presented a clear question about the effectiveness of Peshmerga and the Kurdish Regional Administration (KRG). Exploiting the situation, the Democratic Union Party (Kurdish: Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) and a PKK affiliate People's Protection Units (Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) and the People Defense Forces (Kurdish: Hêzên Parastina Gel, HPG) militia deployed at several points within Rabia and Sinjar regions, and battled against ISIS militants. Although the Kurdish administration in the north has turned down an offer by the PYD and PKK to form a joint command of Kurdish forces, a joint front has been set up against ISIS in certain areas. The Western states, United States in particular, overwhelmed by the ISIS threat against Arbil have launched air strikes against certain ISIS positions and vehicles.¹¹ In addition to this rapid reaction, they have armed the Iraqi Kurdish administration and exerted efforts to set up a regional and international coalition against ISIS.

However, armament of Kurds, and the intensity and impact of military offensives have the potential to negatively affect ISIS' military force, but also feed

the ISIS ideology. Formation of an effective coalition including Sunni-Arab tribes in Iraq seems highly unlikely when considering past experiences. Number one condition for a decent, strong response to ISIS is to dysfunctionalize the group in Syria which benefits from its territorial domination of the country. However, the Bashar al Asad regime, Iran and Russia object to unilateral interventions in Syria. On the other hand, members of the international coalition do not have an option to unite forces with Syria against ISIS. In this context, the coalition wishes to see the Syrian opposition and the PYD sub-groups among themselves.¹² Yet, it is another critical question whether or not the Syrian opposition and the PYD elements can work in coordination with the US, or for how long they can make a descent contribution to the coalition.¹³

THE ISIS ATTACKS IN THE NORTH

ISIS have rapidly advanced in the west and northwest of Iraq, starting with Mosul, and north of Baghdad since June 2014 as the organization seeks to consolidate its position in the regions taken over. To this end, ISIS has made attempts since July to capture a part of Nineweh that they do not control. Since the midsts of July, ISIS attacked Tal Afar, a critical crossing point located in west of Mosul and on the road to Syria, where many members of the Iraqi Army sought shelter after the fall of Mosul. ISIS took over the city in the nick of time and committed mass killings.¹⁴

After the fall of Tal Afar, there have remained several settlement areas and border gate vicinities along the road to Syria, such as Rabia and Sinjar which the Peshmerga had taken over in early summer. As is, about a thousand kilometer long border¹⁵ between the Kurdish forces and ISIS in

7. In the last week of June 2014, ISIS Spokesperson Adnani announced that the name of ISIS has been changed to the Islamic State (IS) and that the Head of the Shura Council Abu Bakr al Baghdadi was declared as the Chaliph. In the statement, all Muslims were invited to join in the Islamic State established on the Iraq-Syria frontline and to obey the new Chaliph. Following this, al Baghdadi as the new Caliph delivered a sermon in Mosul.

8. Irak'ın Kürt bölgesinde IŞİD alarmı, AA, August 3, 2014.

9. Kürtler Rabiâda IŞİD ile çatışıyor, BBC Türkçe, August 4, 2014.

10. IŞİD Sincar'ı aldı, Habertürk, August 3, 2014.

11. U.S. Jets and Drones Attack Militants in Iraq, Hoping to Stop Advance, NY Times, August 8, 2014.

12. ABD'nin IŞİD Harekât Planı, Yeni Şafak, September 12, 2014.

13. The U.S. House of Representatives approved the armament of moderate Syrian opponents in a vote by 273 against 156. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry announced in the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee "The moderate Syrian opposition may prove that it could be an alternative to the regime by fighting against ISIS." A Senate Bill of the armament of 5,000 members of the Syrian opposition "against ISIS" passed in the U.S. Senate.

14. Iraq conflict: Militants 'seize' city of Tal Afar, BBC, June 16, 2014.

15. Outgunned and untested for years, Kurdish peshmerga struggle, Reuters, August 14, 2014.

Iraq is formed starting from Rabia-Sinjar in the northwest, including the province of Diyala nearby the Iranian border and stretching to Jalawla-Hanaqin. Peshmerga, benefiting from the vacuum, which occurred during the defeat and rapid withdrawal of the Central Iraqi Army, dominated Kirkuk, Mosul and some parts of Diyala.

ISIS advancing in Iraq in June launched a new operation in order to expand its control over Mosul and its surroundings, and maintain momentum against the Iraqi Army which had rallied back together in the provinces of Diyala and Salahaddin, north of Baghdad. Following the fall of Tal Afar, ISIS took advantage of a corridor opened in Sinjar towards Zumar, in the northeast, and caught Peshmerga off guard and gained the upper-hand.

In the early days of August 2014, ISIS taking over Sinjar and Zumar managed to enter Rabia, the border gate, and sieged tens of thousands of Ezidis hiding on the Sinjar mountains near the border. ISIS moved towards the Mosul Dam up in the north, established control and caused serious casualties among Peshmerga forces.¹⁶ Peshmerga in panic began rapidly to withdraw. ISIS used this opportunity and changed its direction towards Mahmour and Gwer regions and took over Karakush, a Christian settlement, then drew near to Arbil (little over 30 minutes' drive from the city).¹⁷

ISIS advancing against Peshmerga on the Kirkuk-Süleiman Beg, Tuz Khurmatu-Havija front and in Jalawla down below, has caused a great deal of panic in the Kurdish region. From there on, the Kurdish Regional Government in the north made announcements calling for international intervention to halt ISIS. The KRG has pushed Yazidi and Christian minorities to the foreground and called the international community to take action against ISIS. The Kurdish Administration has been provided with the support of the U.S.-led broad coalition. Air strikes were conducted to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid at the beginning, but then

coordinated efforts have been transformed into bombardments targeting ISIS.¹⁸

THE NEW POSITION OF THE WEST

Western actors, the U.S. in particular, remained aloof to ISIS for quite some time. However, they have begun to directly target ISIS, following large numbers of westerners joining ISIS, attacking the Yazidis and Christians, and posing a threat to Arbil. As of August 8, 2014, the U.S. has launched imminent attacks¹⁹ coordinated by the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) against ISIS to prevent the group from entry to the Kurdish region in the north, and implicitly reached conciliation with Iran to increase pressure on al Maliki. Therefore, the U.S. has actively involved in the formation of an international coalition against ISIS in a framework of events with the utmost inclusion of Sunnis under the newly appointed Prime Minister Haydar al Ibadī following al Maliki's resignation.

The de facto arms embargo of the West against the Kurdish Administration for some time has been pushed aside (in a way to consider the sensitivities of the Baghdad administration) and the armament of the Kurdish Forces has begun. Excluding Iran²⁰, the German government took the initial step²¹ in September 2014 and decided to transfer arms to the Iraqi Kurdistan Autonomous Region fighting against ISIS. Germany's Milan anti-tank mis-

18. U.S. Military Conducts Airstrikes against ISIL near Amiri and Mosul Dam, CENTCOM, August 31, 2014.

19. Air strikes under the U.S. CENTCOM are usually organized by using drones (unmanned aerial vehicles). As of September 11, 2014, the total of air sorties has reached to 150. However, this indicates strategical point strikes rather than a full-scale intervention.

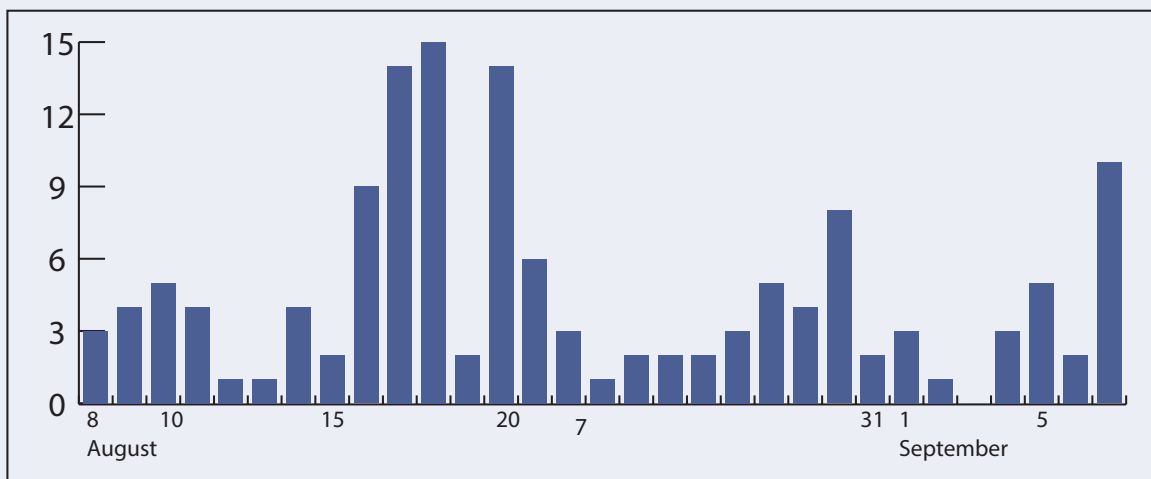
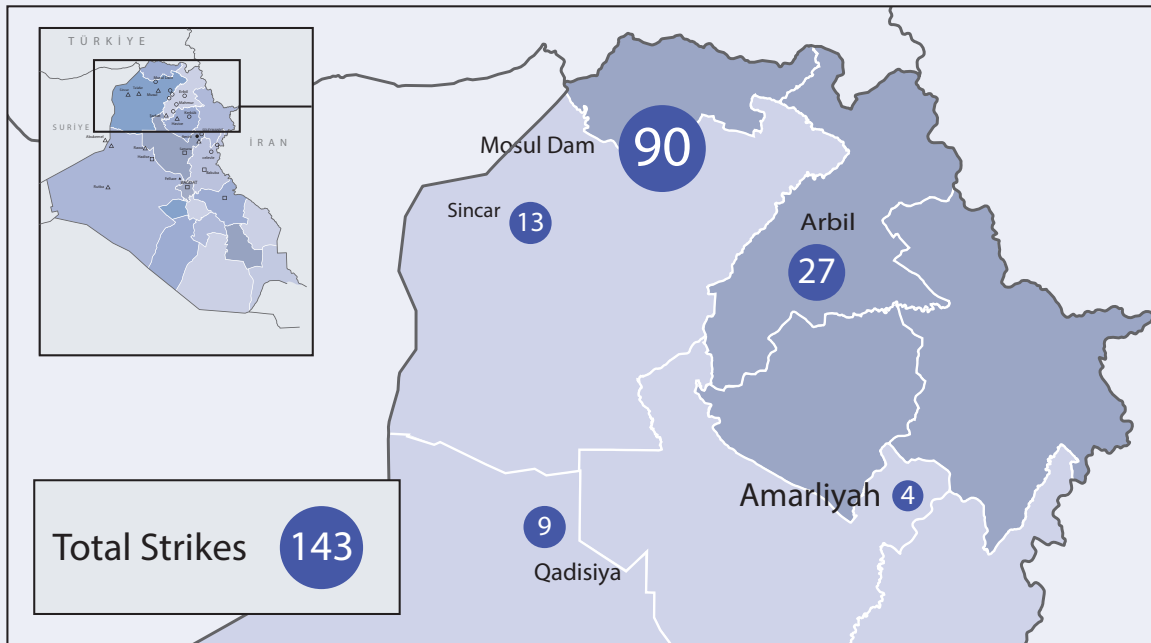
20. The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Administration (KRG) leader Massoud Barzani announced during a press meeting with the Iranian Foreign Minister Jawad Zarif that Iran is the first country which provided military assistance to the KRG for fighting against ISIS.

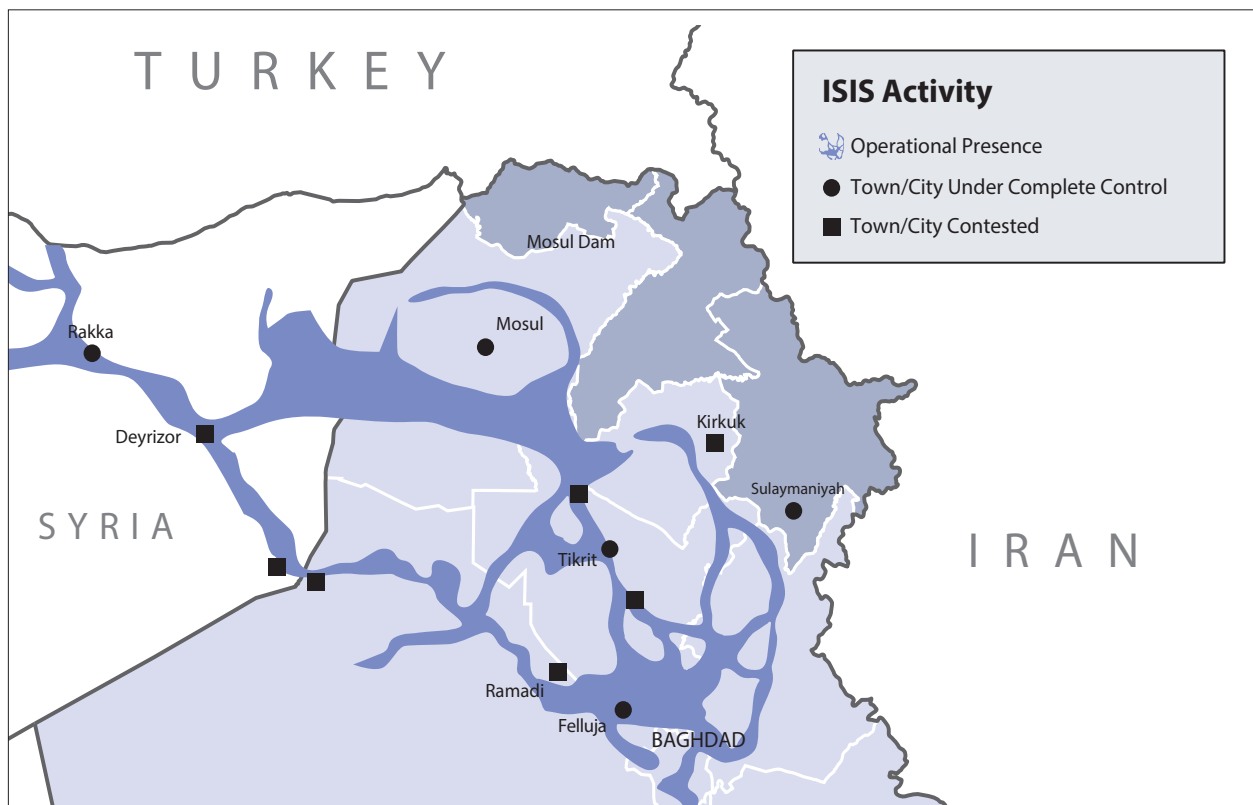
21. German officials announced to send weapons and munitions to meet the needs of 4,000 Peshmerga troops battling against ISIS in the first tranche which includes, 4,000 G3 infantry rifles, 4,000 P1 handguns, one million bullets, 20 Milan type anti-tank system and 300 anti-tank missiles, 100 rocket guns, 5,000 hand grenades, 50 military vehicles. German Defense Minister Leyen said Germany can provide anti-tank training to the Kurdish forces and other kinds of training may be held in Arbil or in a third country if needed. After Germany, France and the U.S. announced the delivery of weapons to the Kurdish Administration through a formula not hurting sensitivities of the Baghdad Government.

16. According to a statement issued by Massoud Barzani, a total of 1200 Peshmerga died in the clashes with ISIS.

17. Islamic State surges in North Iraq, near Kurdistan border, Reutersa, August 7, 2014.

US Air Strikes on ISIS Positions in Iraq, 8 August - 7 September 2014





siles appear to have a vital role for Kurds to stop ISIS tanks and armored vehicles.²² As the efforts continue to form an International Coalition against ISIS, the video shootages of the group beheading the American journalists James Foley and Joel Sotloff has caused a big trauma in the U.S., but prepared grounds for intervention.²³ As

22. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said in a statement that ISIS poses a threat not only to Northern Iraq but also to the entire region. Steinmeier said “We should assist Kurdish security forces for self-defense. We need an internationally approved strategy for this.” The remarks of Steinmeier have brought to the agenda intentions to form an international coalition against ISIS. “Almanya’dan peşmergeye silah,” *Al Jazeera Türk*, September 1, 2014.

23. A video footage, named “A Message to America”, depicting ISIS beheaded American journalist James Foley, was posted in social media; the event which has been viewed as the biggest trauma felt in the U.S. after 9/11 according to some experts. Foley was abducted on duty in 2012 by ISIS in Syria. It was told in another video released by ISIS again that the fate of another journalist seen in the images, Steven Sotloff, was in the hands of U.S. President Barack Obama. According to ISIS, the next move of Obama was to determine the beheading of Sotloff. Sotloff, a correspondent who worked in Syria, Yemen and Libya had disappeared in July 2013. Yet another video shows the head of Sotloff removed from his body and the “next person” was announced to be the British hostage David Haines. In the same footage, ISIS warned countries planning to join forces with the U.S. against the group and used the expression “Evil alliance with America”.

the U.S. President Barack Obama has been pressured to take action, the U.S. administration used the ISIS phobia felt in the international community during the NATO Summit held in the Wales on September 4-5, 2014 for the formation of the international coalition against the group. The U.S. took charge of the formation of a coalition consisting of Western allies, such as Britain, Germany, France, and regional countries, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. To this end, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel sought support in Ankara as the Secretary of State John Kerry took a Middle East tour including Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

After Obama announced his four-step strategy²⁴ against ISIS, a “Counter Terrorism Meeting” was held in the Saudi city of Jeddah with the participation of Turkey, U.S., Egypt, Jordan and member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Ten Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, expressed willingness to do their best in the subject matter and announced support for the U.S. plan.

24. These four steps: Air bombardment of ISIS targets, supports to friends on the ground, economic isolation, and humanitarian aid.

Turkey, on the other hand, has not signed the declaration.²⁵ Representatives of about 40 countries in the coalition met again, this time in Paris, to discuss strategies to be adopted against ISIS.²⁶ However, the representatives failed to reach a decision about the frame of the coalition and the participation level of each country.

THE ADVANCE OF PESHMERGA

Peshmerga recovering from the ISIS defeat with the assistance of the U.S. and international forces has launched an airborne attack against the already damaged ISIS positions, and recapture the positions lost previously. Peshmerga forces driving ISIS out of Mahmour and Gwer regions, proceeded towards the Mosul Dam and successfully regained the control of the dam. Again Peshmerga backed by the U.S. air support in particular, repelled ISIS from the Tuz Khurmatu and Jalawla front in the further south and became successful in some regions.²⁷ It was reported that in addition to U.S. air support, Iran as well backed the Iraqi Kurdish forces at the Jalawla-Amirli front in the south near the Iranian border.^{28 29}

The progress ISIS has made against Peshmerga in advance of these developments, however, may be evaluated under three headings: Firstly, the swift and surprise attacks of ISIS and the Iraqi Kurdish forces being caught off guard. Secondly, the settlements and positions ISIS took over along the process were outside the KRG borders. Thirdly, Peshmerga appeared weak against ISIS, which had already seized humongous storages of munitions and weapons during the fights in Syria and Iraq.³⁰ Without doubt, Peshmerga regained several positions and made an advance thanks to the U.S. air bombardments.³¹

25. Türkiye Cidde'de imza atmadı, Haber 7, September 12, 2014.

26. IŞİD karşıtı koalisyon Paris'te toplandı, BBC Türkçe, September 15, 2014.

27. Iraqi Kurds advance on jihadist militants, Ahram Online, August 25, 2014.

28. Iranian Forces Fight Alongside Peshmerga In Jalawla, Basnews, 17.08.2014.

29. Iran 'sent soldiers to fight in Iraq', Al Jazeera English, August 23, 2014.

30. Iranian Forces Fight Alongside Peshmerga In Jalawla, Basnews, 17.08.2014.

31. Iranian Forces Fight Alongside Peshmerga In Jalawla, Basnews, 17.08.2014.

Other than the frontline where it clashes against Peshmerga, ISIS also fights against the Shiite militia and the Central Iraqi forces in particular near the cities of Samarra and Baqubah starting from the south of Tikrit in particular; and at the same time, keeps the Speicher Base and Baiji Refinery under siege. In addition, skirmishes near the Baghdad belt and bomb attacks continue full speed. ISIS managing to reach the borders in the west and the south has not yet fully gained control of the Anbar province. On-going fights near the strategically important city of Hadisah and the Hadisah Dam in Anbar and the siege by the Iraqi Army and Sahwa groups in Ramadi and Fallujah have not come to an end yet. ISIS tries to take control of this particular frontline in order to siege the city of Baghdad from the west and to make a progress deep in Syria. The group aims to have an area of command along the Euphrate River from the Turkish border to Baghdad. However, ISIS for now appears to be stuck in Anbar (particularly in the cities of Hadisah, Ramadi and Fallujah).

ISIS capturing the city of al Rutba, which is located at the intersection of the road to the Jordanian and Saudi borders, intends to gain power in these regions. On the other hand, increasing and expanding U.S. bombardments prevent ISIS from keeping its positions, and block the group's possible advance. In this sense, it is seen that the U.S. Air Force organizes an average of five assaults per day since August 12, 2014.³² However, it must be noted that these airborne attacks do not adequately harm ISIS forces due to lack of effective intelligence on the ground. It is considered that the U.S. is trying to consolidate the network of intelligence in the region to overcome this weakness.

ISIS transferring powerful weapons and munitions seized in Iraq to Syria launches large-scale operations against the regime, and recently has made critical progress in Syria. In addition to the Tabqa Air Base, ISIS also took over the bases of the 17th Brigadier and the 93rd Division and has managed to dominate the province of

32. A statistics covers only a part of the on-going attacks, until September 9. "Five airstrikes per day in Iraq: The latest breakdown on what has been hit", The Washington Post, September 9, 2014.

Raqa effectively.³³ The prediction is that ISIS may attack soon the settlements and the airport in Dair al Zor – the last places that are left in the hands of the Syrian regime. If ISIS becomes successful, it will obviously seize a quite secure a region in the east of Syria in particular. ISIS fights with the Syrian opposition forces in Aleppo and with the YPG in northern Syria. In the city of Kobani (Ayn al Arab), which is surrounded by Tal Abyad, Jarablus and Manbic regions under ISIS control, heavy clashes continue as ISIS forces try to seize the city and the rural areas in the region. ISIS and the YPG may be engaged in intensified exchange of fire at the frontline of Jazeera, Afrin and Kobani cantons, none of which has any geographical connections with each other. Overall military statement by ISIS already holds this sense of aspect and acts like state authorities in the regions it has captured so far. ISIS gaining strength in the regions heavily populated by Sunni Arabs at the Iraq-Syria front diversifies financial sources and increases the number of new members owing to the latest victories and the declaration of Chaliphate.^{34 35}

CONCLUSION

The U.S. and its western allies plan to form a coalition consisting of the leading regional countries in addi-

tion to the Central Government in Iraq, the Kurdish Administration in Northern Iraq (KRG), Sunni Arab tribes (Sahwas) and the Syrian opposition groups; thus, stop ISIS first, then besiege the group, force it to withdraw and eradicate it eventually. However, the past experiences during the formation of Sahwas, as Arab tribes thought they were betrayed in the fight against al Qaeda in 2007, indicate that the formation of such a coalition would not be easy. Again, the Sahwa strategy³⁶ that had been put into practice under the U.S. CENTCOM Commander General David Petraeus against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AI) was backed by over 130,000 combat troops of the U.S. Land Forces. However, it should be kept in mind that in the fight of the coalition against ISIS, formation of land forces will not be possible.³⁷ Besides, ISIS takes advantage of its domination in Syria when it comes to having military and logistic support, and the number one condition to give a decent, strong response to ISIS is to dysfunctionalize the group in Syria. However, the Bashar al Asad regime, Iran and Russia, appear to raise objections to unilateral interventions in Syria. On the other hand, considering the members of the international coalition against ISIS, an option to unite forces with Syria against ISIS is out of question for the coalition. In this context, the coalition wishes to see the Syrian opposition and the PYD elements among themselves. Yet, it is another critical question whether or not the Syrian opposition and the PYD elements can work in coordination with the US or for how long they can make a descent contribution to the coalition. Besides, relations between the PYD and the Asad regime and their past encounters with the Syrian opposition set a serious obstacle before the formation of a coalition. In particular, the Islamic Front and al Nusra, both are effective on the ground, do not seem to be part of such a coalition in ideological aspects.

33. ISIS Just Looted Advanced Weaponry from A Crucial Assad Regime Air Base In Syria, Business Insider, August 25, 2014.

34. According to a research conducted by the Institute of the Near East and Gulf Military Analyses (INEGMA), ISIS earns three million dollars per day from selling grains and smuggled oil to regional countries. The International Energy Agency (IEA) Oil Market Report reads that ISIS holds seven oil fields with a production potential of 80,000 barrels/day in Iraq. The market value of 80,000 barrels of oil today amounts to 8.24 million dollars, 103 dollars per barrel price. In the report, it is noted that ISIS claims Ayn Zalah, Batma, Najma, Kayara, Hamrin, Ajeel and Balad oil fields in Iraq, and uses this oil to meet its fuel needs and to earn income from oil smuggling. ISIS' daily oil income stands at three million dollars as it earns more from ransom, abduction, taxation and war booties. AA, August 26, 2014.

35. According to the Human Rights Watch for Syria headquartered in London ISIS has over 50,000 members in Syria, 20,000 of whom are citizens of other countries. There are the citizens of Chechnya, China; European and Arab countries among ISIS members. More than 6,000 people joined ISIS last month. According to the same HRW for Syria, this is the highest participation, but the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Spokesperson Ryan Trapani says the latest intelligence information reveals that ISIS has 20,000-31,500 active members in Iraq and Syria. Previously, this figure was standing at 10,000. (AA)

36. Can Acun, "Irak'ta İsyanın Haritası: Silahlı Gruplar", SETA Perspektif, June 2014.

37. Obama appointed General John Allen to coordinate operations against ISIS. Allen played a critical role in the formation of Sahwas, consisting of Arab tribes in Iraq in the past, and in the success of Sahwas against al Qaeda.

After all, the latest military developments in Iraq and Syria indicate that after the declaration of Caliphate, ISIS has gained strength in the regions located on the Iraq-Syria frontline. However, the same developments also show that ISIS has failed to take over Baghdad and other Shiite regions by putting the “Baghdad belt” plan into play, therefore changed direction to the north, easily pushed the Iraqi Kurdish forces aside, invaded places controversial according to the Iraqi Constitution, and threatened Arbil. Beside Baghdad and Shiite groups, ISIS opened another front in the north this time against Kurds, therefore pushing its luck and causing the Kurdish Administration to join forces with the Baghdad administration and Shiite groups against itself. By posing a threat to Arbil, ISIS has also cleared the way for international forces to take military action against itself and has begun to lose armored vehicles and cannon ball batteries, which had helped ISIS against the air strikes so far. The group has no choice but to reduce mobilization in the field. ISIS has shown that threatening Arbil is a redline for the U.S. and western countries and that western states will be involved in the situation to stop ISIS from advancing to the north.

Nonetheless, U.S. airstrikes against ISIS and western efforts for the formation of an anti-ISIS coalition have helped ISIS in ideological terms, increased support of the Iraqi Sunnis and positively affected its spurts to take over the leadership of the “Global Jihad” from al Qaeda. The only feature to dysfunctionalize ISIS and force it to withdraw is by eliminating local dynamics and reasons behind the existence of the group rather than to form an international coalition against it. Although asking al Maliki’s resignation was a step taken in this direction, the Ibadi government has not shown any sign of capacity to take steps in a way to keep Sunnis away from ISIS so far. As for the Kurdish Administration, failing to take advantage of the Sunni revolt under the ISIS leadership in Iraq with its victories against the

Central Iraqi Government, taking over of the controversial regions and the desire to transform into a State subsequently have been much dampened. The division of the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces as the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the lack of military equipment and training have surfaced in the face of a heavy defeat against ISIS. This has been a serious blow to the Kurdish desire to become a state in the middle run.

Demographic interferences in recent years have created economically and socially unbearable costs due to Kurdish and Shiite refugees fleeing from ISIS and seeking shelter in the Kurdish Administration – a region that has already been crowded by hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria as a consequence of the civil war.³⁸ The ISIS threat has forced Kurds to approach the Central Government in Bagdad and act together though unwillingly. The ISIS threat has also made clear that somewhat moderate policy should be adopted towards Iran although the KDP views Iran as a threat and remains distant.

As the Kurdish regions are located in the Iraq-Syria frontline, which is the scene of heavy military encounters; the PKK, the PYD military forces as well as the HPG and YPG in addition to the KDP and PUK have become critical actors. Although the PKK-YPG leadership leans on an anti-imperialist rhetoric in terms of organizational philosophy, their statements asking to be armed like any other forces against ISIS by the U.S. and western countries indicate how opportunistic they are and have the flexibility to exploit the developments for their own benefits. Competition for territorial dominance and being effective in the Kurdish regions signals that skirmishes are likely among these forces depending on diminishing of the ISIS threat against Kurds in the upcoming period.

38. The Organization of Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) announced 850,000 refugees are sheltered in three Kurdish provinces previously, but this figure jumps up to a total of 1.4 million with the addition of 216,000 more Syrians who migrated to the region recently and 335,000 refugees were placed in the same region before 2014. Majority of them (500,000) live in the Dohuk region.