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The Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga: military reform and nation-building in a divided polity

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ABSTRACT

During the war against Islamic State from 2014 to 2017 the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga became important local allies of the United States and its international partners, playing a significant role in the eventual defeat of Islamic State. In 2017, backed by the US and its Western allies, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) agreed plans to reform and modernize the Peshmerga. This article provides an analysis of this reform process. Reform is severely constrained by two problems. First, the continuing soft civil war between Iraqi Kurdistan's two main political parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), within which both parties view their maintenance of independent Peshmerga forces as central to their power and political survival. Second, the heroic-mythic status of the Peshmerga within Iraqi Kurdish society, which makes it difficult to convert the Peshmerga into a "normal" military force. Reform efforts to date have not addressed these issues. Until such time as the deep political divide between the KDP and the PUK is addressed, Peshmerga reform is unlikely to make significant progress – the military cart cannot be put before the political horse.

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During the war against Islamic State in northern Syria and northern Iraq from 2014 to 2017 the Peshmerga – the armed forces of the Iraqi Kurds – became important local allies of the United States and its European partners (Atran and Stone 2015; Hannah 2016). Against this background, in 2017 the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), supported by the US and its European partners (in particular the United Kingdom, which has been a lead player on the issue), put in place a plan to reform and modernize the Peshmerga (Abdullah 2017; Davies 2019). This plan, known as "Peshmerga of the Future", is theoretically comprehensive, encompassing 35 detailed points relating to the organization, structure and operational capabilities of the Peshmerga. This article provides an analysis of this reform process, assessing progress to date and its future prospects. We situate our analysis in recent literature on external efforts to support the reform of countries' armed forces or what in official US terminology is referred to as security assistance. This literature argues that external efforts to support military reform have tended to be technical in nature (focusing on training, the provision of equipment and combat effectiveness) and have ignored or downplayed the larger political challenges

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involved in military reform, in particular the problems of nation-building (Karlin 2017, 2018; Shurkin et al. 2018). As a consequence, externally backed military reform efforts often fail because they do not address underlying political questions about the control and function of armed forces. In particular, in deeply divided societies, military reform cannot be addressed without addressing large questions of nation- and state-building. As Karlin (2017, 119) puts it, "like all state-building endeavours, these are political, not technical exercises."

We argue that the current efforts to reform the Peshmerga face two obstacles, both of which are deeply embedded in Iraqi Kurdish society: first, the long-standing conflict between the region's two main political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which lies at the heart of Iraqi Kurdish politics, and, second, what we describe as the heroic-mythic status of the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdish society. Although open violence between the KDP and the PUK has only occurred at certain points, the civil war between the two parties has been a defining part of the political and social fabric of Iraqi Kurdistan for more than half a century. The two parties fought a brief civil war in 1996–97, but the relationship between them has been one of permanent mistrust and competition.

In its current stage, which we describe as a soft civil war, the KDP-PUK conflict is conducted through political discourse, the media, disputes over control of resources and governing institutions and sporadic high tensions. This soft civil war maintains polarization in Iraqi Kurdish politics and society, provides a key source of legitimacy for old guard political leaders in the KDP and the PUK and results in a self-reinforcing status quo. The Peshmerga, further, are intimately linked to this civil war: each party controls its own Peshmerga forces and these forces are a source of political and economic power and, ultimately, a guarantee against being subject to the use of force by the other party. Iraqi Kurdistan is thus a deeply divided polity (Guelke 2012; Horowitz 1993) and Peshmerga reform goes to the heart of this divide. In these circumstances, despite public statements of support for the establishment of a single united Peshmerga force, in practice both KDP and PUK leaders remain deeply reluctant to surrender control of their Peshmerga forces or take the steps that would result in a truly unitary force.

Second, because of their decades long role in defending the region against the Iraqi state and pursuing the goal of independence, the Peshmerga have a special and very distinctive status in Iraqi Kurdish society: Peshmerga are not simply ordinary citizens but heroic defenders of the nation, as such they are viewed as above criticism and not subject to the types of normal rules, laws and institutional arrangements that govern militaries in most societies. Demands for Peshmerga reform, in particular reforms that would subject Peshmerga to legal and institutional constraints or limit their social and economic privileges, thus challenge the status of the Peshmerga. Attempting to turn the Peshmerga into a modern military under the control of centralised institutions and subject to larger democratic norms runs against the grain of what the Peshmerga is and how it operates.

The first part of this article provides a primer on the Peshmerga, summarising its evolution and key features. The second section examines the KDP-PUK civil war, showing how the Peshmerga are deeply intertwined with this conflict and why this explains the continuing deep reluctance of KDP and PUK leaders to unify their respective Peshmerga forces into a single united force. The third section examines the heroic-

mythic status of the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdish society, showing how this constitutes a further obstacle to reform of the force. The fourth section of the article analyses the Peshmerga reform process which was agreed in 2017, showing that progress to date has been limited and that the process has so far focussed on technical issues rather than the larger political questions. We conclude that, despite rhetorical commitments from KDP and PUK leaders to Peshmerga reform, the political support necessary for Peshmerga reform to proceed does not really exist and that the external supporters of reform – the US and its European allies – lack the leverage to force the hands of Iraqi Kurdish leaders. Until such time as the deep political divide between the KDP and the PUK is addressed Peshmerga reform is unlikely to make significant progress. The military cart cannot be put before the political horse.

The Peshmerga: a primer

The Peshmerga are the armed forces of the Iraqi Kurds. Peshmerga may refer to the collection of militias and units that make up the Iraqi Kurdistan forces either as a singular noun (the Peshmerga) or an adjective (Peshmerga forces). The term can also refer to individual fighters (a Peshmerga or the Peshmergas). The Peshmerga can be dated back the Mahabad Republic of 1945–46, a short-lived attempt by Iranian and Iraqi Kurds to establish an independent state centred on the northern Iranian town of Mahabad, which saw the establishment of its own military force called Peshmerga. The Peshmerga emerged in a more substantive way in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1960s and fought an on-off guerilla war for autonomy within or independence from the Iraqi state over the next few decades. Following the US-led military intervention in 1991 to protect the Iraqi Kurds from attacks by the Saddam Hussein regime, Iraqi Kurdistan gained de facto independence, with the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), albeit within the formal context of the Iraqi state. Central Iraqi military and police forces were withdrawn from the region and the Peshmerga became the region's military and security forces.

The Peshmerga are a phenomenon distinctive to Iraqi Kurdistan, with particular socio-political roots in the region. The Peshmerga are thus different from and have few substantive linkages with Turkey's more well-known Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, from Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) and its armed wing, the People's Defence Forces (HPG, from Hêzên Parastina Gel), or with the more recently established Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG, from Yekîneyên Parastina Gel), which is widely viewed as an offshoot of the PKK/HPG. The Iranian Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK, from Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê) has fought a low-level war against the Iranian government since the early 2000s and its fighters are also known as Peshmerga, but PJAK is much smaller and less significant than the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga. In the context of the Syrian civil war and the war against Islamic State, Kurds (along with a number of other ethnic groups) have also established their own semi-autonomous Rojava region, with its own Rojava Peshmerga (with links to KDP) (Federici 2015; Lowe 2016). This article focuses on the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, which are much larger than the Rojava and PJAK Peshmerga.

In conceptual terms, the Peshmerga exist in a grey area between being a regular state-controlled military (under the control, hypothetically, of the KRG), a guerilla force

fighting a war for independence and militia forces under the control of particular political parties and/or local commanders. Fliervoet (2018, 7) describes the Peshmerga "soldiers, rebels and militiamen". The Peshmerga fit with the concept of "hybrid actors" which are becoming increasingly common in the Middle East in the context of state fragmentation. "Hybrid actors" are "a type of armed group that sometimes operates in concert with the state and sometimes competes with it" and "depend on state sponsorship and benefit from the tools and prerogatives of state power but at the same time enjoy the flexibility that comes with not being the state". Hybrid actors engage in 'war, diplomacy, politics, and propaganda. They build and maintain constituencies, providing not just security but also services and ideological guidance (Cambanis et al. 2019, ix–x).

Estimates of the number of Peshmerga range from 190,000 to 250,000 personnel, although some sources suggest both higher and lower numbers (Derzsi-Horváth et al. 2017; Rudaw 2017). This issue is complicated by the fact that retired fighters are often also referred to as Peshmerga, as well as by the phenomenon of "ghost" Peshmerga who are payed a salary but do not actually work (with those involved splitting the salaries of such Peshmerga). Whatever the exact numbers of Peshmerga, for a region with a population of five million or so people the Peshmerga are a quite large armed force and their numerical strength indicates their importance within Iraqi Kurdish society.

The majority of Peshmerga are under the direct control of Iraqi Kurdistan's two main political parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), who have fought a cold, and sometimes hot, war since the 1970s. The KDP's Peshmerga are known as 80s units and the PUK's Peshmerga as 70s units. The KDP and the PUK also have other specialised Peshmerga units/forces responsible for specific tasks, in particular Asayish (security) forces which are responsible for major crimes, particularly those that are security-related or politically sensitive, and intelligence forces, the Parastin ("Protection") of the KDP and the Dazgay Zanyari ("Information Apparatus") of the PUK (Chapman 2009, 3). Since the 2000s there have been efforts to unify the Peshmerga into a single force. A Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs was established in 2007 (Kurdistan Parliament 2007). In 2009–10 a new Peshmerga force, the Regional Guards Brigades (RGB), was created, composed of 14 brigades merged from KDP and PUK Peshmerga and theoretically under the control of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. The KDP have approximately 50,000 Peshmerga, the PUK 48,000 and the RGB 42,000, (Derzsi-Horváth et al. 2017; Fliervoet 2018, 16; Rudaw 2017). The RGB are theoretically politically neutral, but commanders and units often retain their core loyalties to the KDP or the PUK. Command structures for the Peshmerga run through the KDP and the PUK and the top political leaders of the two parties are the senior Peshmerga commanders. In daily life and the media, Peshmerga are referred to as Peshmerga i parti (KDP) or Peshmerga i yaketi (PUK) – i.e., KDP peshmerga or PUK Peshmerga. The Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs exists on top of these long-standing informal but powerful institutional arrangements and is relatively weak compared to them. By way of comparison, it is as if in the United States the armed forces were composed of units loyal to and with command structures running through the Republican and Democratic parties respectively and the Department of Defense and the centralized military command structure were only weak institutions on top of these. Fumerton and Van Wilgenburg (2015, 1) argue that "(T)he Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs was reconstituted as a joint body in 2010, but although it presents a veneer of unity, the KDP and the PUK still maintain their

separate Peshmerga forces." The same pattern exists with the intelligence elements of the Peshmerga. Officially, the KDP's Parastin and the PUK's Zanyari were combined under the umbrella of the Kurdistan Security Council in 2011. According to the head of PUK's intelligence, Lahur Talabani, however, "we as a Zanyari agency, have a good relation with more than 30 countries, exchanging information with their intelligence services, but we do not cooperate and share information with the KDP's Parastin agency. . . . at times, we have had a better working relationship with Baghdad than we have with our [KDP] counterparts in Erbil" (Hama 2017).

A divided polity: the KDP-PUK civil war

The KDP and the PUK fought a short civil war in 1996–97, but that conflict had much deeper origins and, although open war ended in 1997, the civil war between the two parties continues to be fought by other means. Writing in 1996, Gunter argued that "when discussing how the Kurds can build their democracy, we must come to grips with three basic problems: primordial loyalties, proliferation of guns and armed militias, and the disastrous economic situation" (Gunter 1996, 241). Twenty-five years later, despite some important changes, these problems remain defining features of Iraqi Kurdish politics and society.

The roots of the KDP-PUK civil war go back to the establishment of contemporary Iraqi Kurdish politics after the Second World War. The KDP has been the dominant Iraqi Kurdish political party. The party has a strong clan or tribal basis, being led by the Barzani family (whose family name arises from their home town of Barzan in northern Iraqi Kurdistan). Mustafa Barzani, who emerged as the central Iraqi Kurdish leader in the inter-war years, led the KDP from its formation in 1946 until his death in 1979; his son Masoud Barzani has led the party since then; the party's vice-president since 2010 is Nechirvan Barzani, grandson of Mustafa and nephew of Masoud. The origins of the PUK lie in divisions within the KDP from its foundation in 1946, in particular between the Barzanis and more leftist nationalists led by Ibrahim Ahmad and Jalal Talabani. In 1964 these disputes escalated, with the Barzanis using their Peshmerga to force Ahmad, Talabani and their supporters to flee to Iran (McDowall 2007, 317; Waisy 2015, 220). In 1975 Talabani formed the PUK, formalizing the split from the KDP.

The differences between the KDP and the PUK are diverse and deeply embedded. The two parties are strongly territorially based, with each having their own stronghold regions, the KDP in the north centred on Dohuk and part of Erbil and the PUK in the south centered on Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk. The differences include language, with people in KDP regions generally speaking the Badini dialect of Kurdish and people in PUK regions generally speaking the Sorani dialect, and religion, with the KDP and the PUK associated with the Qadri and Naqshbandi orders respectively within Sufi Islamic mysticism. Ideologically, "the KDP is supposedly more conservative, traditional, nationalistic, tribally-based" (Gunter 2007), whereas the PUK is a more leftist socialist or social democratic party. The KDP is also viewed as a more rurally-based party and the PUK as a more urban educated elite party. Additionally, Iraqi Kurdish politics is highly personalized, with the conflicts between the individual leaders of the KDP and the PUK (and sometimes within the two parties) a central element of the region's politics.

Armed force – and the Peshmerga as the instrument of force – has been central to the relationship between the KDP and the PUK. As with the initial split in 1964, armed force was the means of pursuing politics and resolving disputes even before the PUK was established. From the 1960s to the 1990s, the two parties had a long history of deep differences, conflict, on-off war and periodic truces (Gunter 1996; Nawshirwan 1998; Razoux 2015, 329). The only time they were able to unite was when the Kurds lost all their bases after the Iraq-Iran war in 1988 and Saddam Hussein's government launched the Anfal genocide campaign to annihilate the Kurds, leading to a united Kurdistan front (Baray Kurdistani) (Human Rights Watch 1993; Mustafa 1988).

The first elections for the Kurdish regional parliament in May 1992 resulted in the KDP and the PUK each gaining half the seats and the formation of a national unity government – but tensions were never far below the surface. Armed clashes between KDP and PUK Peshmerga broke out in 1994 and a full-scale civil war occurred in 1996–97. The civil war of the 1990s was known in Kurdish as "brakuji", or the killing of brothers, reflecting the bitterness of the internecine conflict (Alaaldin 2014). A US-brokered peace agreement was accepted in 1998, leaving the KDP controlling the northern half of Iraqi Kurdistan, the PUK the south and central governing institutions divided on a fifty-fifty basis. The northern KDP-governed area is known as the "yellow" zone and the southern PUK-governed area as the "green" zone (Ala'Aldeen 2016). While the 1998 agreement brought peace – in the sense of an end to direct fighting – it reinforced and embedded the sharp division of politics and society between the KDP and the PUK.

A further government unification agreement was concluded between the KDP and the PUK in 2006, but a close examination of the document shows that there was little appetite for real unification. The government unification agreement stated that for reasons of the "supreme interest of the people of the Kurdistan Region", implementing the new Iraqi constitution, "establishing a genuine federal and democratic Iraq; restoring Kirkuk, Khanaqin, Sinjar, Makhmour, and other Arabized areas" the two parties agreed upon "partnership, consensus and equity". The first point of the document established "a new post of Vice President of the Region", who "will be from the PUK and will also serve as the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan Region", to work alongside the President of the Region and the Commander-in-Chief of the Peshmerga, who is the KDP leader. The document also specified that the Prime Minister would be from the KDP and the Speaker of the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) would be from the PUK. The agreement thus formalised a fifty/fifty division of power and created a form of bi-governance system, with two competing governing powers within the one government. The agreement also included commitments in relation to elections, that sought to preclude any significant change arising from elections: "(F)or the next election, the KDP and PUK will participate in a joint slate as equals, and at that time the post of the Speaker of the KNA will go to the KDP and the Prime Minister will be from the PUK". The document also illustrated the continuing lack of trust between the two parties: "If either of the ministerial blocs withdraws from the joint cabinet, the entire cabinet will be considered as resigned" (Kurdistan Regional Government 2006). Implicitly, neither party was willing to tolerate the other governing without it: either govern together or no government.

The KDP-PUK civil war is also underpinned and reinforced by economic dynamics similar to those in other civil war situations (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Keen 2012). The

KDP and the PUK act as rentier systems, extracting resources from the regions they control and allocating resources to their members and supporters. At the same time, the two parties compete to control resources, primarily natural resources and border tariffs. According to Ali Saleem and Skelton (2020, 6): "(R)ather than reinforcing loyalty to the regional government, networks of patronage in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) are tightly organised around the two main parties and their respective subregions. The potential for conflict arises when one party impedes on the capacity of the other to maintain its patronage networks." In a situation with weak central institutions, armed forces – Peshmerga – are the ultimate determinant of control of resources.

An additional factor complicating and helping to perpetuate the KDP-PUK civil war is the involvement of external actors, specifically the central Iraqi government, Turkey and Iran. Since the 1990s all three of these external actors have intervened in Iraqi Kurdistan, politically, economically and militarily to advance their perceived interests, including access to economic resources, control of transport routes and their relative power vis-à-vis one another (Knights 2005, 154). Turkey has backed the KDP and Iran the PUK. The central Iraqi government has had a shifting policy of divide-and-rule towards the KDP and the PUK. None of these external actors has an interest in a stronger, more united Iraqi Kurdistan and their interventions have only served to reinforce the divisions within the region.

In recent years there have been important shifts in Iraqi Kurdish politics. These developments have partly challenged the KDP-PUK duopoly, but have also reinforced the civil war between the two parties. In particular, a number of new political parties, groupings and leaders emerged, countering the KDP's and PUK's hitherto dominance of the region's politics. The growth of these groups reflected unhappiness, especially amongst younger people, with key features of Iraqi Kurdistan's status quo, such as patronage, corruption and a poor human rights record. Most prominent has been the new political party Gorran (or Movement for Change – the word Gorran means change in Kurdish). Gorran was established in 2009 and gained 24% of votes in both 2009 and 2013 Kurdish parliament elections, although falling to 12% in 2018 elections (- in the 2013 elections Gorran's share of the vote overtook that of the PUK which scored 18%, although the PUK overtook Gorran again in 2018 with 21% of the vote). These developments were a particular challenge for the PUK: Gorran itself was a splinter party from the PUK; the long-standing PUK leader Jalal Talabani had to withdraw from politics in 2012 after suffering a stroke (and died in 2017), resulting in factional in-fighting within the PUK (Hama 2019). According to Alaaldin (2014), "(F)ormed as a reaction to the KDP's nepotism and tribalism, the PUK itself fell victim to the same dynamics and suffered a decline, particularly over the past decade." In terms of the civil war dynamic between the two parties this had two impacts: the KDP was emboldened to attempt to assert a hegemonic position, as opposed to accepting the PUK as an equal (Hama 2019); the PUK, in contrast, has perceived itself as increasingly threatened and besieged. In such circumstances, maintaining a loyal party militia is seen as the only way for the PUK and its leaders to survive.

The continued depth of divisions between the KDP and the PUK was indicated by events surrounding the independence referendum organized by the Kurdish regional government in September 2017. The decision to call a referendum was driven by the KDP and its leader Masoud Barzani and arose from calculations about internal Kurdish

politics at least as much (if not more) than from a belief that the referendum was likely to advance the cause of Kurdish independence (Mustafa 2020). Against the background of divisions within the PUK between the Talabani family and opponents within the party, the referendum was "regarded by much of the Talabani wing as an attempt by Barzani to cement his power in Kurdistan at their expense" (Wörmer and Lamberty 2018, 78). The referendum provided the Iraqi government with the opportunity to re-take the contested city of Kirkuk in October 2017, which had been under Kurdish control since 2014 when Iraqi forces had fled in the face of Islamic State advances. Following an apparent PUK-KDP agreement to defend Kirkuk, the Talabani wing within the PUK reached an agreement with the Iraqi government to withdraw its Peshmerga forces from Kirkuk, resulting in the collapse of Kurdish defences, the withdrawal of all Kurdish forces and the loss of about one-fifth of the territory the Kurds had controlled only days earlier (Wörmer and Lamberty 2018, 81). On one day, 16 October, eight of the 14 RGBs split along KDP-PUK lines (Davies 2019, 1). The 2017 referendum, supposedly an important step on the road to Kurdish independence, was instead a new low point in KDP-PUK relations.

In summary, the civil war between the KDP and the PUK has been a defining feature of Iraqi Kurdish for nearly three quarters of a century since the 1960s and has become deeply institutionalised. Today, Kurdistan's society is deeply polarized and a soft civil war continues, fought through politics, governing institutions, elite struggles, social media and the economy. In these circumstances, control of Peshmerga forces remains central to the KDP and the PUK and both sides remain reluctant to surrender control of their forces to the KRG and the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.

Peshmerga: the name, history and image

This section explores what we describe as the heroic-mythic status of the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdish society, showing how this constitutes a further obstacle to reform. Peshmerga is a Kurdish word composed of the two words pesh ("before" or "in front of") and merga ("death"), which is roughly translated as "those who face death", with the heroic connotation of being unafraid of death or willing to die for one's cause (Chapman 2009, 37). The word Peshmerga, as a description of bravery, has longer roots in vernacular Kurdish. As noted earlier, the use of the term Peshmerga to describe Kurdish armed forces dates back to the Kurdish Mahabad Republic of 1945–46 in north-western Iran. The Mahabad Republic established its own armed forces, raising the issue of what they should be called. The President of the Republic, Qazi Mohammed, appointed two famous poets to address the issue. While they were considering the matter, so the story goes, the waiter serving them tea said he had heard that a man who dies very bravely in battle is called a "peshmerga" and the word was then proposed and adopted as the official name of the Republic's military (Nawshirwan 2006, 1993, 161; Nerwiy 2012, 146; Qazi 2008, 9). The Mahabad Republic was rapidly crushed by the Iranian government, but is viewed by Iraqi and Iranian Kurds as a historic standard-bearer for the cause of Kurdish independence. Peshmerga subsequently became one of the most widely used words in Iraqi Kurdish language and literature and the concept is now deeply embedded in Iraqi Kurdish society. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the Peshmerga led a series of wars for greater autonomy within or independence from Iraq. The embeddedness of the

Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdish society is such that almost every family in Iraqi Kurdistan has someone who is, has been or may claim to be a Peshmerga.

Peshmerga is also a call. It calls young Kurds to overcome the fear of death. As a word uttered repeatedly throughout daily life, describing the act of being a soldier, it has had a powerful impact on Iraqi Kurdish society. As Reinhart Koselleck (1985, 75) put it, "it is not deeds that shock humanity, but the words describing them." Accordingly, the word Peshmerga to describe a soldier is as powerful as, if not more powerful than, actually being a soldier. In this way, the name Peshmerga has an impact on how others experience the Peshmerga and how it is made intelligible to them. Peshmerga is thus a concept, with a history, a trajectory, a particular meaning and an aura.

The idea of Peshmerga also has strong heroic, even mythic, connotations. The Peshmerga has been a literary hero and protagonist since the late 1950s. The first novelette published under the title Peshmerga was in 1959 in Iranian Kurdistan by an author close to the political elites of the Mahabad republic called Rahimi Qazi, a work re-published in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2008 (Qazi 2008). In a pre-modern or not yet fully modern society, such as a Kurdistan, with relatively low levels of literacy, the image is more powerful than any other tool of thinking: this is apparent in the very limited number of readers of books and newspapers in the region and the prevalence of television and other medium of communications. The image of the Peshmerga is a part of the process of resistance. Resistance is resisting the reality, i.e. being able to imagine another reality. This process requires a hero, a superman, and the Peshmerga fulfils this role. Because freedom is the ability to escape the boundaries of current reality, then imagination is the tool for achieving freedom. This necessity has become part of Kurdish social reality. Therefore, it is not surprising to see a link between Peshmerga and freedom. Freedom requires courage, sacrifice and heroics – the Peshmerga are the ones who deliver these things. This is how the myth of the Peshmerga blossoms.

The concept of the Peshmerga thus requires demystification. A Peshmerga is neither a person nor simply a soldier. Sherko Bekas, a well-known Kurdish poet was known as poet Peshmerga; Massoud Barzani, Iraqi Kurdish President from 2005 to 2017, described himself as a president Peshmerga. Peshmerga is a status, a hero, a herculean figure. Peshmerga defies nature, is stronger than any other forces and arrives before anything else. As Bekas wrote, in one his many poems for the Peshmerga, "It was night/only Peshmerga and snow were in the foot of the mountain/the snow slept/Peshmerga came down slowly" (Bekas 2006 – authors' translation). Here, the Peshmerga defeats nature: snow sleeps, but the Peshmerga doesn't; when the snow sleeps, the Peshmerga commences his activity. The Peshmerga has a particular language, unlike ordinary language. A language with "special conditions" qualifies it to become "myth" in the Barthesian sense (Barthes 2012). There is a plethora of popular songs and hymns praising the Peshmerga, describing him as a tiger, a lion and the like. As a result, there is a narrative of a hero who sacrifices himself altruistically for the people. The people have to adore this figure and express all due respect to him.

The linkage between the people and the Peshmerga results in specific relationships and a form of power. This power manifests itself through a web, which includes not only the Peshmerga, but also the political parties, the government, intellectuals and society. Through this web, images are produced, others are deconstructed, taboos are created and silences are imposed. This mythmaking of the Peshmerga is problematic in many

ways: mythical figures are beyond rationalisation and organization; more dangerously, they are also beyond criticism. For a figure with such a mythical status it is difficult to become an ordinary soldier. The mythical status of the Peshmerga within Iraqi Kurdish society is thus an important obstacle to the reform and modernization of the Peshmerga as a military force.

In the context of current discussions on reform there is debate over whether the name Peshmerga should be retained or abandoned. Based on our informal discussions, there are two schools of thought on this issue. One school argues that the name is an obstacle to reform and should be removed, the other suggests the opposite. The removal school argues that the era of the Peshmerga is over. Today, the Kurdistan regional government has a responsibility to provide security and protect urban areas. This requires a modern, centralized, disciplined army. The other side argues that the Peshmerga is symbolic capital in a Bourdieuan sense: "resources based on cultural categorizations and societal perceptions that bestow meanings such as prestige or recognition" (quoted from Watts 2012, 72) and renowned globally, profiled in major global news outlets such as the BBC, CNN and the like. Moreover, the Peshmerga is a concept that differentiates the (Iraqi) Kurds from others.

The Peshmerga reform process

After beginning to work more closely with the Peshmerga during the war against Islamic State, the US and its international coalition partners concluded that the Peshmerga needed to be reformed in order to enhance its military effectiveness and make it a more durable partner. Setbacks which the Peshmerga had suffered against Islamic State in 2014 and the prospect of material military assistance from Western partners persuaded Iraqi Kurdish leaders to support a new reform effort. In 2015 then President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Masoud Barzani invited the UK to assist the KRI with Peshmerga reform. In 2016 the UK completed a scoping study on Peshmerga reform and appointed a Special Defence Adviser to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs to support reform efforts. In 2017 the KRG formally endorsed a reform policy entitled "Peshmerga of the Future" (Baghdadpost 2017). In 2017–18 a Reform Directorate was created within the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs to support the implementation of the reform process. The US, the UK and Germany have together been the main external partners supporting the reform process (Davies 2019).

The "Peshmerga of the Future" plan incorporates 35 detailed proposals. These include: the development of an official security strategy for the KRG, including a military strategy which would set out the basis for the number and structure of the Peshmerga needed; the establishment of a new General Command for the KRI's armed forces; the incorporation of the KDP's and PUK's currently separate Peshmerga with those controlled by the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs; and the development of a military doctrine. The plan calls for a new approach to recruitment based on competence, for all members of the armed forces to hold only one post (which would reverse the current common practice of Peshmerga holding other positions/jobs outside their military roles), an overhaul of the salary system and a more "systematic and effective" approach to training. The plan also proposes a unified approach to weapons system across the Peshmerga and, in a what would be a new move for a hitherto purely ground force, the establishment of an "auxiliary aerial wing" (Ministry of Peshmerga 2018).

Coming only a few months after the "Peshmerga of the Future" reform plan had been adopted in May 2017, however, the events surrounding the fall of Kirkuk in October 2017 highlighted the severe difficulty of reform. The war against ISIS from 2014 to 2017 resulted in what Hawramy (2018) describes as "unprecedented cooperation" and a new "level of trust" between the KDP and the PUK and their respective Peshmerga forces. The underlying tensions between the KDP and the PUK, however, remained and were brought to the fore by the independence referendum. As noted above, PUK forces withdrew from Kirkuk and the supposedly unified RGBs split along KDP-PUK lines. According to Hawramy (2018), "[T]he confrontation has split the Peshmerga forces once again along party lines and threatened to undo years of hard work in trying to unify the forces of the two main ruling parties … [T]he checkpoints between the PUK and the KDP territories have been reinforced since the October confrontation. There have even been calls for the official division of the Kurdistan region into PUK and KDP territories. Party officials have accused each other on their TV channels of betrayal and being on the payroll of the enemies of the Kurds. The impact has been severe on the Peshmerga forces." The RGB forces which disintegrated at Kirkuk were theoretically re-united in 2018 (Ali 2018), but the events of 2017 suggest that these forces would likely split again in the event of a crisis. The 2017 battle at Kirkuk also suggests that KDP and the PUK remain highly unlikely to allow their Peshmerga to be integrated into a single force controlled by the Ministry of Peshmerga. In addition to the KDP's and PUK's fear of one another, given wider disillusionment with the established political order in Iraqi Kurdistan, the two parties are also wary that a united independent Peshmerga might side with wider society against both parties. Separately, over many decades the Peshmerga have developed a particular esprit de corps which has helped to make them a relatively effective military force and, here also, Kurdish political leaders and Peshmerga commanders fear that a one size fits all Western approach to military reform could undermine this esprit de corps and thereby weaken the Peshmerga as a military force.

An examination of other areas also illustrates slow progress with reform. There has been no progress on the development of a security strategy and a military strategy, supposedly the first item on the 35 point reform plan, in significant part because the KDP and the PUK differ on such basic questions as who are the Kurds enemies and allies within the region. The Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs lists five projects where progress has been made: a strategic military defence project within the Ministry, an Operating Concept for the Peshmerga, electronic payments of salaries of Peshmerga, a cooperation project between Peshmerga forces and Iraqi security forces, and laws and regulations of the Ministry. Even on these projects, however, it is unclear what they involve and whether real progress has been made in implementing them. As of late 2020, further, the section of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs website detailing reforms had not been updated since 2018 (Ministry of Peshmerga 2018).

A number of other problems may be identified with the reform process and external support for it. First the reform process and external support for the process have engaged only with the Peshmerga, the Ministry of Peshmerga and senior KDP and PUK leaders/commanders. This may seem logical and is pragmatic: if the challenge is to reform the Peshmerga, then focus on the Peshmerga and those who control them. This approach, however, excludes other important institutional actors, in particular the Kurdish regional parliament, other political parties and wider civil society. By default, the reform process

reinforces the KDP-PUK duopoly over the Peshmerga: those who control Peshmerga matter and shape the reform process, those who do not control Peshmerga do not matter and are excluded from the reform process. There is a strong case that the reform process should be widened to include other political parties, the Kurdish regional parliament and the initiation of a wider civil society debate on the Peshmerga and that external actors need to engage with this wider set of actors.

Second, external assistance has had a strongly technical character, focusing on the provision of equipment to and training of the Peshmerga and changes at the level of the Ministry of Peshmerga. This logic partly emerged during the war against Islamic State from 2014 to 2017, when the immediate challenge for both the Kurds and the US and its coalition partners was how to strengthen the combat effectiveness of the Peshmerga. This approach, however, has continued since 2017, with further provision of equipment and on-going operations against Islamic State forces (Shilani 2020a; van Wilgenburg 2020). Provision of equipment, training and organisational reforms may be necessary to enhance the military effectiveness of the Peshmerga, but they do not address the larger political question of who controls the Peshmerga.

Third, the "Peshmerga of the Future" reform plan does not really address the existing praxis and culture of the Peshmerga. This relates to both of the core issues discussed above. First, most Peshmerga are members of either the KDP or the PUK and their ultimate loyalty is to their political party, not to the putative state that is the KRG. Second, the heroic-mythic status of the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdish society means that they are viewed as outside or above the kinds of rules and constraints which govern militaries in most modern states. Addressing these issues requires deep changes at individual, organizational and cultural levels. As Foucault put it, establishing a modern military requires creating a "subject whose conduct is highly regulated and whose body is at the service of government"; one must "get rid of the peasant and given him the air of a soldier" (Foucault 1991, 135).

Fourth, other regional actors – the central Iraqi government, Turkey and Iran – have no real interest in a more united and integrated Peshmerga force. From the Iraqi government perspective, a more united and integrated Peshmerga force would potentially bring the Kurds closer to full independence and, probably more substantively, give the Kurds a stronger hand in struggles over so-called "disputed territories" and oil resources. From the Turkish perspective, given Turkey's long-standing struggle with the PKK, anything that unifies even parts of the Kurdish population is a negative (not withstanding that the KDP are sometime allies with Turkey against the PKK). For Iran, a united Peshmerga under Western, especially American tutelage, would be a setback in terms of the regional balance of power. The Iraqi government, Turkey and Iran are thus happy to quietly practice divide-and-rule towards the KDP and PUK and have no real interest in backing the reform process. Although the Western powers have encouraged cooperation between the Iraqi security forces and the Peshmerga, and there has been some progress on this front in the war against Islamic State, there are clear limits to such cooperation.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the Peshmerga reform process initiated in 2017. We have argued that the reform process is fundamentally constrained by the deep division in

Iraqi Kurdish politics between the KDP and the PUK and the continued soft civil war between the two parties. In these circumstances, both parties remain deeply reluctant to surrender control of their Peshmerga forces. While some more technical elements of Peshmerga reform may proceed, the Peshmerga are likely to remain instruments of the KDP and the PUK rather than a truly national force of the KRG. The heroic mythic status of the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdish society constitutes a further obstacle to their reform.

The Peshmerga reform process has, to a significant extent, been driven by the US and its Western allies. Both Kurdish political leaders and Western governments, however, are playing a political game, where there is an unstated gap between their rhetoric and what can likely be achieved in terms of Peshmerga reform. After working closely with the Peshmerga during the war against Islamic State from 2014 to 2017, the US and its Western allies took the view that a reformed and united Peshmerga would be more effective in helping to counter Islamic State. Having established a newly close relationship with the US and its allies, Kurdish leaders were hardly likely to openly oppose Western calls for Peshmerga reform, especially if the reform process included training and equipment from the West. Rhetorically, Iraqi Kurdish leaders remain committed to the Peshmerga reform process (Kurdistan24 2019; Shilani 2020b). As we have argued, however, there is good reason to be sceptical that KDP and PUK leaders really support the type of reform that would lead to a unified Peshmerga. Likewise, Western governments remain publicly committed to the Peshmerga reform process (Shilani 2019; van Wilgenburg 2020a). Experience of engagement with Iraqi Kurdish political leaders and the Peshmerga over recent years, however, must surely have made Western officials well aware of the obstacles to reform. The highest priority for the US and its Western allies regarding the Peshmerga is its effectiveness as an ally against Islamic State. In these circumstances, Western governments are in practice likely to support limited Peshmerga reform so long as it enhances the Peshmerga's military effectiveness against Islamic State, even if it fails to address the larger problems of the Peshmerga's place in Iraqi Kurdish politics and society. Deeper reform, in particular unification of the KDP's and PUK's Peshmerga forces, is unlikely to progress unless and until the larger political divide between the two parties is addressed. The experience of nearly three quarters of a century of Iraqi Kurdish politics since the 1960s, as well of other cases of deeply divided societies (Guelke 2012; Horowitz 1993), shows how difficult it is to overcome or bridge such divides.

Disclosure statement

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