



ON THE BORDER OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

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Sitting in a plastic chair on Mohammed Mahmoud's porch we watch black puffs of smoke waft across the sky and listen to the machine guns go BAM BAM BAM up on the hill. Every now and then, the rustle of aluminum-canned soft drinks, buzzing cell-phones, rasping cigarette lighters, and lazy conversation is punctured by the deep thump of mortars fired by Kurdish forces over the ridge—that is, into the Islamic State.

Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, which has at this moment been under the control of an extremist organization known as the Islamic State (formerly ISIL or ISIS) for a month and a half, is just a ten-minute drive to the south. An inconspicuous line of low-slung brown ridges and little villages now forms the front line between Iraqi Kurdistan and the totalitarian theocracy to the south.

Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, just like the fighters of the Islamic State. But the decisive split in this corner of Iraq is less religious than it is ethnic – nuances and niceties aside, here it is a question of Kurds versus Arabs.

Mohammed Mahmoud's porch is a fine place to sit on a warm Iraqi evening and figure all this out, but the owner himself—once a big man in the Arab hamlets to the south and east—is nowhere to be found. The current occupants, a Kurdish militia squad, insist that the house was built on Kurdish land unjustly brought into Mohammed Mahmoud's possession by Saddam Hussein. Therefore, they say, it's only proper that it should serve as a Kurdish fortification against Arab intruders now. Faced with this argument Mohammed Mahmoud has, I believe wisely, decided to vacate the premises.

Ali, the militia leader

The Kurdish fighters are led by a politician from the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party, a friendly, executive-looking fellow by the name of Ali. When the Islamic State invaded Iraqi Kurdistan in early August, jihadis poured north toward Ali's town and its Yezidi inhabitants, a religious minority that the Islamic State has sworn to annihilate.

Stumbling out of bed after a panicked phone call from the collapsing front, Ali found himself the only leader left to organize a counter-offensive. In a few crucial hours, he helped rally party members, municipal workers, and policemen into an impromptu Peshmerga brigade, snatching a Kalashnikov for himself from one of the fleeing soldiers. After some back-and-forth, his men ended up lodged in this line of hills in the Arab-Kurdish borderlands, finally securing the high ground by fending off an equally confused offensive by the Islamic State.

"They came at us in a Hummer, a tank, and a pickup truck, plus four or five people in a BMW, so we shot at them and turned them back," Ali recalls. "We couldn't stop the tank, but it went away. Since then we haven't had to deal with a tank again, although we can see them move around far away in the distance, through binoculars."

The front has held ever since, with only a few probing attacks to test the tense stalemate. Ali and his Kurdish militiamen are tired and wary of their opponents, but they seem confident that the Islamic State's northern offensive has been stopped. Asked to name the turning point, most Kurds in Iraq will point to U.S. President Barack Obama's August 7 decision to launch airstrikes at the Islamic State—and Ali is no exception.

"We've had two or three airstrikes here," says Ali, waving toward the darkening skies. "We have a coordination room which includes both Iraqis and Americans. We'll sometimes call them and ask for help, but it rarely results in anything. We give them information, they make the decisions."

A local problem

But the strikes themselves didn't matter as much as having the world's only superpower on their side. According to Ali, not only did the U.S. intervention stiffen Kurdish morale—it has also made local Arab clans question the wisdom of allying with the Islamic State.

This, he thinks, is key. The Islamic State's fighters in this region are overwhelmingly Sunni Arab Iraqis from cities like Mosul or Tel Afar, or from the villages right across the ridge. In fact, Ali's men have not identified a single foreigner, although he agrees that foreign jihadis might be leading the offensives elsewhere.

"There is not a lot of *real* Islamic State fighters here", he says. "It's an exaggeration. All Sunnis are now called 'Islamic State' but they're not." Ali mentions a string of Sunni villages to the south from which he says that the jihadis are recruiting. Most of them are Arab-populated, but there's also a few Shabak and Turkoman communities. "You'll have two members of the Islamic State who go into an Arab village and then they suddenly get forty, fifty, or a hundred men to follow them."

While Ali isn't too eager to talk about it—he insists that as a politician, he always treated Kurds and Arabs equally—there is no shortage of grievances on either side. Iraq's Kurds lived through hell at the hands of Saddam Hussein, with the gruesome genocidal massacres of the eighties culminating in a ferocious final bout of ethnic cleansing in 1991, just before the

establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government and the no-fly zone that would protect it. But since then, the Kurds have been ascendant. The U.S. invasion in 2003 inaugurated a decade of unprecedented stability in the Kurdish region, even as the rest of Iraq collapsed.

On the other hand, the Sunni Arab populations just south of Kurdistan have experienced nothing but misery since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Jobs and incomes were lost through the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and the Baath Party. Power and patronage shifted to Kurdish militia leaders locally and pro-Iranian Shia figures nationally, completely overturning the old order. The Sunni areas around Mosul quickly turned into a hotbed of anti-US resistance, suffering copious counterinsurgency violence during the 2003-2011 war.

Even though he is himself a stalwart Kurdish nationalist, Ali understands the sources of Sunni Arab anger perfectly well. "Look", he says, "in the elections soldiers and prisoners vote separately. In all the prisons, the Sunni lists won. On all the army bases, the Shia lists won. Now, what does that mean? It means the Sunnis were in a bad position. That's why they greeted the Islamic State in Mosul when they first came. They had prayed for someone to save them—anyone."

Nation-building at a time of war

That's the secret of the Islamic State's successes. Riding on a wave of Sunni Arab frustration and revanchism, the jihadis broke through where resistance was at its weakest. And not until Iraqi forces are capable of seizing and holding the terrain thus lost to the Islamic State, without oppressing and alienating the local population, can a counter-offensive succeed.

President Obama pointed to exactly this problem in his speech on how to defeat the Islamic State on September 10. The U.S. could not and would not go it alone, he said, and any intervention had to depend on "a broad coalition" of both regional governments and local forces in Iraq and Syria. Coaxing the independence-minded Kurdistan Regional Government and the new Shia-led cabinet in Baghdad into a fruitful collaboration, while also appeasing and empowering rival Sunni Arab groups as an alternative to the Islamic State, will be exceedingly difficult. But for lack of other options, it is exactly what the U.S. has taken upon itself to do.

For now, the United States is still in emergency response mode, trying to put a stop to the Islamic State's expansion while laying the groundwork for this "coalition of the unwilling" inside Iraq.

As for Ali, he is stuck on the front with no end in sight, recalling with a bitter smile that he had predicted "this would go on for two weeks." With refugees filling the streets in Kurdish towns like Erbil, Zakho, and Dohuk, time is on no one's side. Children are missing school, hospitals are overburdened, and homeless families are only just beginning to feel the sting of Kurdistan's cold winter.

"These fighters are very tired," he says pointing to his men, "but we must maintain the frontline. When it is secure, we can go to war. We have no other choice. The Christians need to go back to their cities, and so do the Yezidis, the Shabak and the Kakhai. Many of the refugees now want to leave for Europe, but we can't let that happen—it wouldn't be good for them, for Europe, or for us Kurds."

And sitting with his rifle across his lap in the plastic chair on Mohammed Mahmoud's porch, he waits for war.