

In northern Iraq, casualties as Kurds push back Islamic State

by [Scott Peterson](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Bulldozers equipped with steel plates welded over their cockpits to thwart snipers are digging earth berms and trenches here, creating the new front lines of northern Iraq.

Kurdish peshmerga units began a week ago pushing beyond a line 20 miles southwest of the oil city of Kirkuk, which Kurds have held since last summer when Sunni militants swept into Iraq from Syria. The Kurdish fighters' aim is to squeeze the self-described Islamic State between them and a parallel offensive by the Iraqi Army and allied Shiite militia to the south that has encircled Tikrit.

The multi-pronged fight is a major test for reconstituted Iraqi forces. When IS jihadists seized the northern city of Mosul last year, entire Iraqi Army divisions disintegrated. Today, the momentum appears to have shifted: U.S. officials estimate that IS today has lost 25 percent of the territory—nearly 5,000 square miles—it held at its peak last August, when it declared an Islamic caliphate.

Kurdish forces, aided by U.S.-led airstrikes, say they are making far faster progress than they expected—up to 15 miles in some places—across the flat ground carpeted with spring green. They've been capturing villages laced with booby-traps and car bombs.

“They are fighting hard and have readiness; we have martyrs and wounded, and this is a real sign,” said Wasta Rasul, the Kurdish commander of southern operations. IS forces “are retreating and they are not the same IS they used to be. I think in the next few days IS will not exist in the Kirkuk area.”

The Kurds want to push IS out of artillery range of oil and gas installations here, and squeeze them between Tikrit and Kirkuk. Using binoculars and targeting scopes from the top of the freshly dug earth berms, Kurdish fighters watch the nearby village of Tal al-Ward. Wounded peshmerga from the fight—some of them screaming—are

driven quickly by in the back of trucks.

About 50 wounded are brought to Kirkuk hospital by dusk on this day alone, and an unspecified number of dead. One Humvee limps by, bulletproof windows impacted by rifle shots, tires shredded by a roadside bomb. Another Humvee is towed, its tire rubber flapping uselessly in the dirt. The sound of U.S. warplanes circling high above lasts for hours.

“If the airplanes don’t support us, we can’t advance,” said one Kurdish fighter, sharing a common refrain.

Lt. Col. Bakr Ahmad, who is tasked with calling in coalition airstrikes, juggles a radio and mobile phone.

“They are retreating . . . we are weakening them,” Ahmad said. “We don’t forget the role of the alliance—those planes make a big difference. . . . When I need them I ask and they do it.”

From a state to a terror group

Last summer Kurdish fighters set up defensive lines southwest of the strategic oil town of Kirkuk, near the Lower Zab canal. Eight months ago “[IS] were attacking us, now we are attacking them,” Fuad Hussein, chief of staff to the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, told a forum held last week in northern city of Sulaymaniyah. “If the strategy is to weaken them, they are weaker. If the strategy is to turn them from a state to [only] a terrorist organization, we are on the path.”

Yet without defeating IS in Syria, Hussein said, the jihadis will keep coming back to Iraq. Already some 20,000 foreign fighters from 90 different countries have joined IS in Syria and Iraq, “many of them” seeking suicide operations, said Brett McGurk, the U.S. deputy assistant secretary for Iran and Iraq, speaking at the same forum. The map of anti-IS forces advances show “how the tide is slowly starting to turn.”

Kurdish forces have a “very solid defense line” and U.S.-led airstrikes give “great confidence” to the peshmerga as they advance, said Michael Knights of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Yet IS remains potent, despite an estimated death toll from U.S.-led airstrikes of 6,000, as of a few months ago. Within a week recently the group launched 10 major

attacks with 100 to 200 fighters each. Each attack formation was decimated by airstrikes and ground forces.

"The refreshment of this movement is higher than anyone thinks, and as a result there is no military solution," Knights said.

Secret tunnels and suicide attacks

IS has a few tricks up its military sleeve. Several bodies still rot amid the rubble of Dur al-Kahraba village, which Kurds took control of last week. Three houses down from a small mosque the Kurds found a surprise: an 8-by-8-foot hole dug in the living room of a house that leads into a 150-yard-tunnel that nearly reaches Kurdish trenches. All other rooms were full of dirt, in a bid to hide the excavation from view.

"This is IS, this is how they were thinking," said Shukur Abbas, who is in charge of the bulldozers building trenches and flattening recaptured villages.

At night in Kirkuk at the hospital, the emergency entrance is a constant hive of activity, as casualties are driven in and relatives arrive, often in tears.

Fadhil "Hama Jaff" was wounded in the blast of a suicide car bomb, as his Kurdish unit—buoyed by days of swift progress—attacked an IS-controlled village that morning.

"They were fighting hard," Fadhil said from his hospital bed. "All at once they stopped shooting at us, we thought they were retreating. We advanced and they sent an SUV—we were surprised."

Another Kurdish fighter, Bakhtiar Jabar, jumped out of the Humvee and fired his heavy machine gun at the oncoming vehicle, but it was armored and the bullets had no effect.

Jabar was struck with shrapnel in his side, and that night in the intensive care ward said repeatedly, "I am in pain. I am in pain."

Such events are no surprise to commander Rasul.

"Scientifically, I haven't seen anything special about their [IS] fighting ability," he said. "They are here only for suicide."