

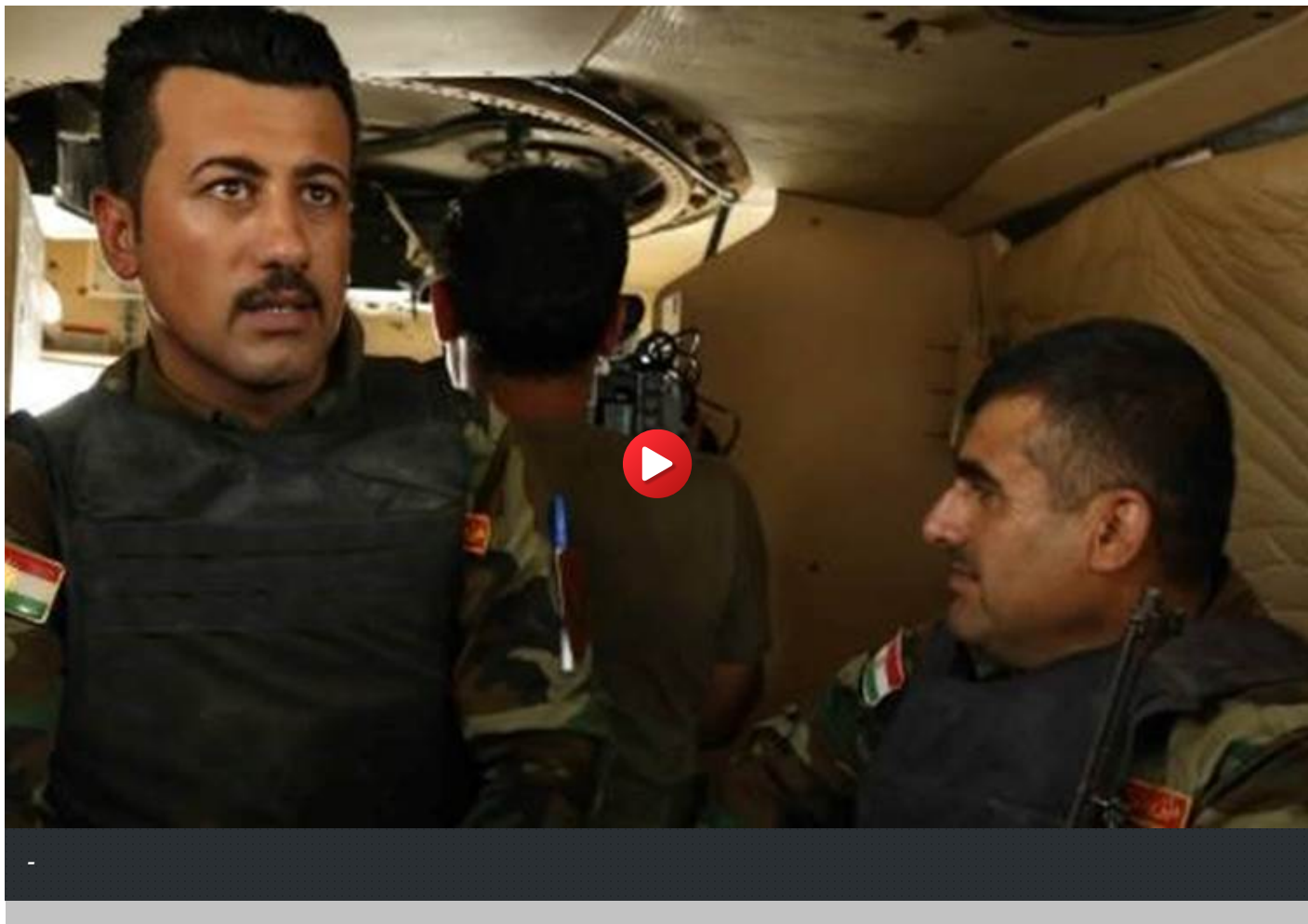
Kurdistan's unseen heroes: Ready to clear the way

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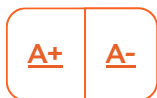
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by Zhelwan Z. Wali and Chris Johannes

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region — The Kurdistan Region's Peshmerga have never stopped in their fight against extremism. Despite the events of October 16, the Peshmerga have remained vigilant, fighting and training in for war their leaders say is as much about defeating the ideology ISIS embraced, as reclaiming lands overrun by the extremists in 2014.

When Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared ISIS defeated in December 2017, officials in the Kurdistan Region made it clear they were not taking a national holiday like in Baghdad. The Iraq Security Forces, including the Peshmerga, have continued to fight ISIS remnants in the meantime from Shingal to Khanaqin.

The Peshmerga's explosive ordinance detonation (EOD) team remains active — night and day — ready to respond when other units come across unexploded ordinance, mines, or ISIS's favorite technique improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

"Planted bombs caused us large damages because they were strange for us. Our Peshmerga did not have much information on landmines," said Peshmerga Maj. Gen. Mahmoud Hussein Kakai.

He estimates around 80 percent of Peshmerga-controlled areas have been cleared of explosives, so his Supporting Forces Command 1 units will continue to work to enable displaced people to safely return.

The Peshmerga say they lacked specialized tools to detect IEDs, so they painstakingly have used basic detectors and hard lessons learned to clear Kurdistan meter by meter.

"During the three years of ISIS war, we did receive some sophisticated tools. They supplied to us with Badger anti-mine vehicles, hand-held bomb detectors, and other things," said Kakai.

Having gained much knowledge of ISIS's techniques, Kakai provided the coalition with a book detailing more than 80 types of IEDs used by ISIS.

"Still now we cannot say, with the skills we possess now, that we are capable of removing the remaining explosives. We are in need of much more advanced methods," said Kakai.

With the focus of the ISIS conflict in Iraq shifting to stabilization, the specialized units under Kakai's command appreciate the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS's contributions, but don't understand why more cannot be given.

What allowed this force to arrive at the frontlines safely to dismantle or detonate IEDs, was primarily the Badger personnel vehicle that carries four crew and seven soldiers.

"We call it the protector of the lives of the Peshmerga because we took great advantage from it. Had not it been for it, we would have higher number of casualties. We are thanking them," said Lt. Walid Kakil, who commands one of many teams under Kakai.

During the ISIS conflict, Kurdistan's forces lost more than 1,846 fighters, 10,000 more were wounded — most in the first six months when the Peshmerga, more accustomed to fighting in the mountains, fought on open terrain against an enemy with superior fire power.

"If it was not an armored vehicle, we would possibly all die. The windows are smashed a little bit by bullets... Eleven people were in it. We were all safe when the bomb hit," added Kakil.

The United States has funded and trained two brigades of Peshmerga who are expected to receive funding for Fiscal Year 2019. With NATO taking on a greater training role in Baghdad, Peshmerga hope equipment and training continues as they look to professionalize their forces.

ISIS has between 15,500 and 17,100 fighters in Iraq and 14,000 fighters in Syria under the coalition's responsibility, according to an inspector general's report released in mid-August based on Pentagon data. This is roughly equal to the group at its peak four years ago.

US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford and Secretary of Defense James Mattis downplayed an ISIS resurgence or a reestablishment of their so-called "caliphate."

"I don't have high confidence in those particular numbers. I mean, we're focused on dealing with what remains a threat in the Euphrates River Valley," said Dunford on Wednesday.

"We know there are remaining residual pockets of ISIS inside of Iraq, which is why we're working with Iraqi security forces. We've acknowledged that remaining work has to be done, but I certainly would not say that ISIS has the same strength that it had at its peak back in 2015," he added.

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