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Unconventional Warfare as a Strategic Force Multiplier:

Task Force Viking in Northern Iraq, 2003

by Timothy D. Brown

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On the cover: Iraqi Kurd peshmerga fighters celebrate as they head to the frontline after a defensive restreat by Iraqi government forces on a road leading to the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, 3 April 2003. SOURCE: CAREN FIROUZ/REUTERS/NEWSCOM.

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About the Author

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Colonel Brown holds a bachelor of science degree in civil engineering from the United States Air Force Academy, a master of aviation science degree from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, a master of military art and science degree from Air University, and a master of strategic studies degree from the United States Army War College.

A veteran of multiple combat and combat support operations throughout the world, he served as the director of operations and plans (J-3/5) of Joint Special Operations Air Detachment-North, in direct support of Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-North in the opening days of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. In this role, he planned and conducted operations in northern Iraq from February 2002 to May 2003. Prior to deploying to Irbil, Colonel Brown led the team that opened the air base at Constanta, Romania, thus providing a key logistical node in the air bridge that helped coalition forces move into the Kurdish Autonomous Zone. Much of this paper reflects his personal experiences and observations while supporting Task Force Viking.

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In today's dangerous, rapidly changing security environment, United States political and military leaders continue to wrestle with a supremely important, vexing question: For what type of warfare should America's military be prepared? Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has maintained an unparalleled capability to wage traditional warfare.[1] This approach has been appropriate, as America's military might has dissuaded, deterred, and, when needed, defeated adversaries. However, the world is not static, and neither are the country's adversaries, who Americans sometimes fall into the trap of believing are unimaginative people awed by the 'might and right' of the U.S. and who should dogmatically bend to its will. Such a situation would certainly make military planning and preparation relatively simple, especially as the country's preference has long been to fight conventionally against traditional foes and avoid 'messy' wars whenever possible. Even a casual look at the emerging global security environment reveals such thinking is unrealistic, dangerous, and potentially catastrophic. Sometimes, and increasingly more often, adversaries do not play by the rules we observe, or they simply ignore rules altogether.

A fierce debate emerged following the Cold War regarding whether the U.S. military should prepare for irregular warfare (IW) over traditional warfare, or vice versa. One side of the debate says the U.S. should prepare for IW, loosely known over the years as small wars or as part of military operations other than war, among other monikers. According to this view, IW will be more prevalent, and there will be sufficient indicators and warning for traditional warfare to make adequate preparations. On the other side is the belief that the U.S. should prepare for traditional warfare, since it is more dangerous, and flex to IW if needed. Both arguments are based on a fundamentally flawed notion that the U.S. can maintain competence in either type of warfare while organizing, training, and equipping for only one.

To declare one type of warfare as more important than the other is precarious at best, and the arguments are unconvincing. Traditional warfare against the U.S. will not be common, as adversaries will be hesitant to challenge the might of its military prowess, but if it happens, the level of destruction could be ruinous. On the other hand, IW will be more likely, although the aftermath may be less consequential. According to the 2015 National Military Strategy (NMS):

> In this complex strategic security environment, the U.S. military does not have the luxury of focusing on one challenge to the exclusion of others. It must provide a full range of military options for addressing threats including both revisionist states and VEOs [violent

1. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, 25 March 2013, x. Traditional warfare is characterized as a violent struggle for domination between nation-states or coalitions and alliances of nation-states.

extremist organizations]. Failure to do so will result in great risk to our country and the international order.[2]

Thus, both types of warfare will continue to exist and are unavoidable, just as they have been since the advent of warfare. Preparing for both is essential, and competence in both can be complementary and symbiotic. Proficiency in one, backed by proper theory, doctrine, training, planning, and preparedness, can bolster proficiency in the other. This paper intends to show how unconventional warfare (UW),[3] an activity of IW, is valuable to the nation and can, when properly applied in conjunction with a thoughtful plan, be a significant force multiplier. The example used is the UW campaign in northern Iraq in 2003, which, despite considerable and nearly crippling geographic and political obstacles, successfully aided the coalition advance to Baghdad. First, however, it is important to understand what an IW capability brings to the nation.

The Future Security Environment

The U.S.' potential adversaries are changing at a rate that outpaces traditional warfare's ability to keep up. The challenges will be diverse, requiring a multidimensional, multi-domain approach across the spectrum of conflict, with a variety of partners. IW will be a vital aspect of this approach. Nevertheless, state challenges will remain. In the event of state-on-state conflict, traditional warfare preparedness will be vital to national security. Increasingly, though, states employ tactics that fall outside the norms of traditional warfare, or perhaps they meld their capabilities with non-state actors, such as VEOs. Such scenarios are what the 2015 NMS refers to as 'hybrid conflicts':

> Overlapping state and non-state violence, there exists an area of conflict where actors blend techniques, capabilities, and resources to achieve their objectives. Such "hybrid" conflicts may consist of military forces assuming a non-state identity, as Russia did in the Crimea, or involve a VEO fielding rudimentary combined arms capabilities, as ISIL[4] has demonstrated in Iraq and Syria. Hybrid conflicts also may be comprised of state and non-state actors working together toward shared objectives, employing a wide range of weapons such as we have witnessed in eastern Ukraine. Hybrid conflicts serve to increase ambiguity, complicate decision-making, and slow the coordination of effective responses.

2. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015: The United States Military's Contribution to National Security* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, June 2015), 3.

3. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-05, Special Operations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 16 July 2014), xi. UW includes "operations and activities that are conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area." The doctrine for UW can be found in U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-05.1, Unconventional Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 15 September 2015). This document is For Official Use Only (FOUO) and not publicly released.

4. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, now officially referred to by the U.S. Government as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Naming Convention for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," memorandum, 13 February 2017.

> Due to these advantages to the aggressor, it is likely that this form of conflict will persist well into the future.[5]

While this same description does not appear in the 2016 NMS, the concept of hybrid warfare, alternatively referred to as gray zone activity, remains valid and poses a significant challenge. The area of overlap between state and non-state conflict depicted in figure 1 is where this type of conflict is prominent and where adaptive adversaries can thrive.

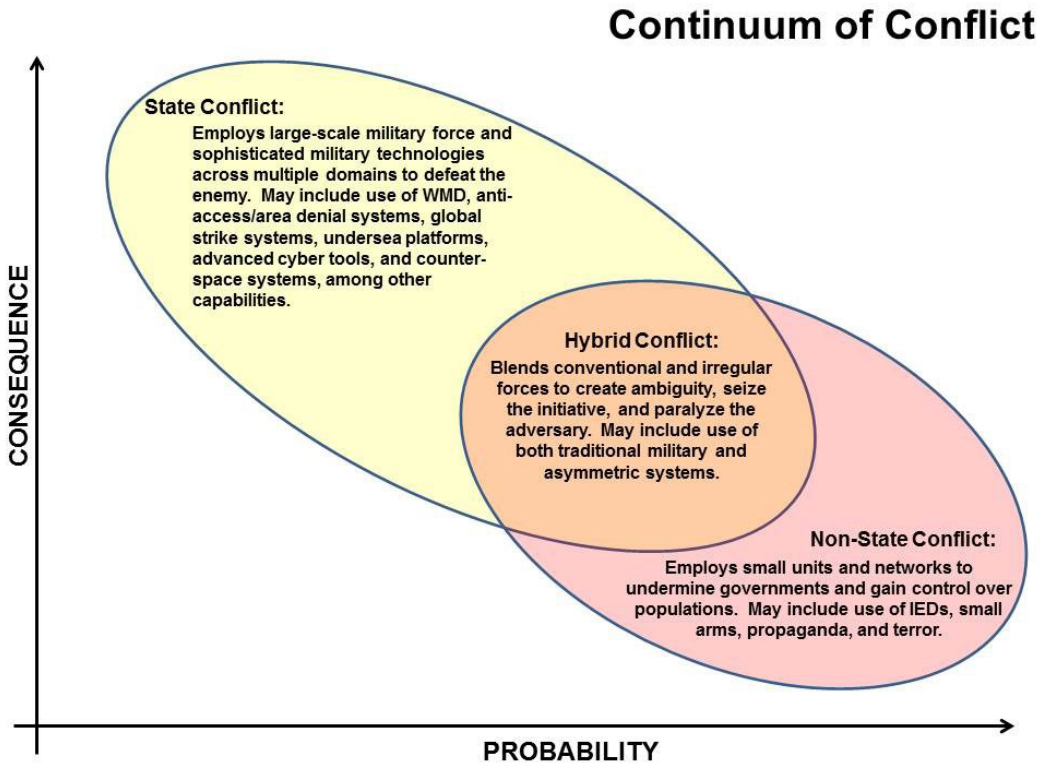

Figure 1: The continuum of conflict. SOURCE: U.S. JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF.[6]

An unclassified planning assumption from the Guidance for Employment of the Force (GEF) warns, "Adversaries will attempt to employ non-traditional or asymmetric means and more ambiguous forms of coercion against the United States, its allies, and partners."[7] Such adversaries are increasingly lethal, unconstrained by the bounds of internationally accepted norms, imaginative in their methods, and capable of wreaking havoc to further their political aims. "This 'gray zone' activity has integrated cyber espionage, covert operations, psychological operations, promotion of insurgency elements, subtle military maneuvers, and political and economic subversion into a seamless whole," suggests

5. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy*, 4.
6. Ibid.
7. Chuck Hagel, *Guidance for Employment of the Force, 2015–2017* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, February 2015), 7.

former U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense John J. Hamre.[8] However, activities of IW, when properly planned, resourced, and executed, may prove quite useful in exactly these types of situations and across the continuum, including in both 'pure' state and non-state conflict. As the GEF also notes, "Large-scale conventional combat operations against other nation-states are less likely in the near term than irregular warfare operations," especially in conflicts involving insurgencies, instability, and terrorism.[9] When employing IW activities and acting within the bounds of international laws and conventions, the U.S. and its allies and partners can also thrive in conflicts that defy traditional definitions and descriptions.

Irregular Warfare: What Is It?

Joint doctrine describes IW as "a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s)."[10] When describing IW, there are several salient points to be aware of: (1) the goal of IW is to gain legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s); (2) it is waged by both state and non-state actors, often at the same time; (3) IW favors, and likely requires, the use of indirect and asymmetric approaches; and (4) IW is, by its nature, a violent struggle, wherein all elements of military (and national) power may come to bear on the conflict.

In addition to UW, IW activities collectively consist of counterterrorism (CT),[11] stability activities,[12] foreign internal defense (FID),[13] and counterinsurgency (COIN).[14] An important note is while the 'five pillars' of IW are five separate activities, as specified by objectives, authorities, funding, target audiences, etc., they may appear very similar in practice. They may overlap to the point where any or all of them are occurring at the same time in a given operation. Regardless, all share the common traits listed above, and all will require a concerted, synchronized effort among military forces, interagency partners, other governmental agencies, multinational and/or regional partners, private organizations, non-governmental organizations, or any combination thereof. The desired end state is "a self-sufficient partner with a supportive population able to sustain its self-defense capabilities and who is

8. John J. Hamre, "What Are the Main National Security Challenges Facing the Trump Administration?" in Craig Cohen and Josiane Gabel, eds., *2017 Global Forecast* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), 7.
9. Hagel, *Guidance for Employment of the Force*, 7.
10. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 1*, x.
11. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-26, Counterterrorism*, 24 October 2014, vi. Counterterrorism: Actions taken directly against terrorist networks and indirectly to influence and render global and regional environments inhospitable to terrorist networks.
12. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-0, Joint Operations*, 17 January 2017, GL-14. Stability activities: Various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.
13. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-22, Foreign Internal Defense*, 12 July 2010, ix. Foreign internal defense: Participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization, to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security.
14. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-24, Counterinsurgency*, 22 November 2013, ix. Counterinsurgency: Comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances.

a trusted partner in regional security structures that support both HN [host nation] and U.S. national interests."[15] The intent is to enable the HN to address its problems, thereby furthering our security interests without major U.S. involvement.

Despite many similarities among the five IW activities, there is a significant difference setting UW apart from the other four. While FID, COIN, CT, and stability activities support a nation-state, typically against a resistance movement or insurgency, UW supports an insurgency or resistance movement against a nation-state, as depicted in figure 2. Usually, the insurgency or movement seeks to resist, overthrow, or gain political autonomy from a government, but it may also be designed to resist or expel a foreign occupying power. While UW incurs political and military risk, as do virtually all military operations, one of its major advantages is the ability to use fewer resources while supporting the insurgency or resistance movement in accomplishing the operation's objectives. To conduct UW, unique forces with unique education, training, and employment techniques are required.

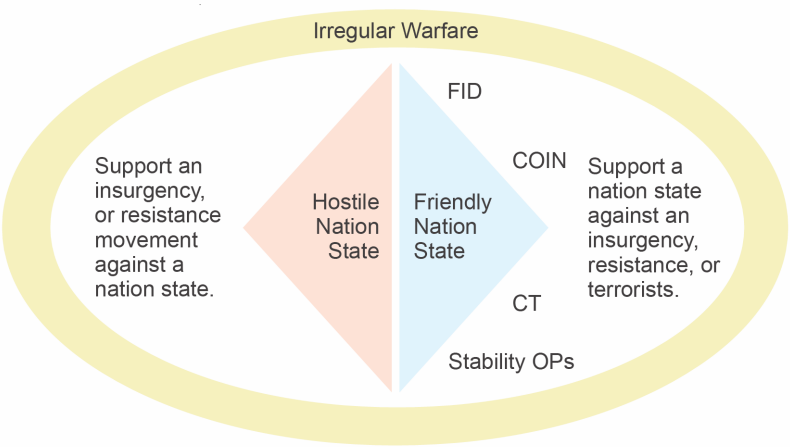

Figure 2. Relationships of the IW activities. SOURCE: U.S. JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF.[16]

Policy objectives, sensitivities, key actors, methods used, and risk involved in UW will dictate who leads the effort. A typical UW operation led by the Department of Defense (DOD) may be secret but not necessarily covert. It supports a resistance movement or insurgency/opposition group during a major theater war or regional contingency and usually (but not always) facilitates the eventual introduction of conventional forces and/or diverts enemy resources away from other areas of the battlefield. U.S. Army special forces (SF) primarily conduct this type of UW, likely in conjunction with other agencies. The supported movement will have its own political objectives, which, although they may vary and diverge over time, will coincide to some extent with those of the U.S.[17] This was the case in northern Iraq in 2003, a classic operation that yielded results far surpassing its level of

15. U.S. Air Force, *Air Force Doctrine Document 3-2, Irregular Warfare*, 15 March 2013, 12.
16. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-05*, II-2.
17. Ibid., II-8–II-10.

investment. It is an example of a U.S.-led coalition successfully conducting operations in the hybrid conflict area of figure 1. While the story of Task Force Viking has been told from a tactical standpoint elsewhere, it is important to recount the campaign from a strategic perspective to demonstrate its disproportionate political and military effect in aiding the coalition in its quest to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government.

Task Force Viking

As the U.S. and its coalition partners prepared for Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) in 2003, they faced a significant planning dilemma. Unlike Operation DESERT STORM 12 years before, in which the primary military objective was to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait, this time it almost certainly would be necessary to capture and occupy Iraq's capital city of Baghdad in order to topple Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's regime. As a result, a mere DESERT STORM reprise would not be sufficient. Planners envisioned a two-pronged approach to the capital city. Ground forces on the southern front supported by air forces would advance from Kuwait along established highways paralleling the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, likely facing significant resistance. To divert the attention of at least some of Iraq's mechanized forces, and thereby lessen resistance, an advance from the southwest from Jordan and from the north through Turkey and northern Iraq's Kurdish Autonomous Zone (KAZ), then southward toward Baghdad, would be necessary.[18]

Task Force Viking logo. SOURCE: USASOC HISTORY OFFICE, HISTORY SUPPORT CENTER, FORT BRAGG, NC/RELEASED.

After Saddam tried (and failed) many times to eradicate a longtime nemesis—the Kurdish people of northern Iraq—he eventually established the KAZ, demarcated from the rest of Iraq by what became known as the Green Line.[19] To protect the nearby oil fields from Kurdish occupation and exploitation, Saddam emplaced 3 army corps, comprised of 13 divisions, including 2 Republican Guard divisions, south of the Green Line. North of the line, the Kurds established governance and conducted their affairs with a fair degree of autonomy, although they were still technically part of Iraq. Saddam saw this arrangement as a means of placating the Kurds without empowering them. When establishing the Green Line, he was careful to ensure the major cities of Mosul and Kirkuk, Iraq's

18. Gregory Fontenot, E.J. Degen, and David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 46-47, 55.
19. Charles H. Briscoe et al., *All Roads Lead to Baghdad: Army Special Operations Forces in Iraq* (Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Operations Command History Office, 2006), 117.

third- and fourth-largest cities, respectively, and their nearby oil fields remained south of the line and firmly in the regime's control. To bolster the regime's claim to these areas, Saddam embarked on an Arabification campaign in the cities, which drove out many Kurdish residents and replaced them with Iraqi Arabs. This action, along with atrocities Saddam committed against the Kurds, such as gassing them in the latter stages of the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war, furthered Kurdish animosity toward the regime.

As well as occupying the northern part of Iraq, the mainly Muslim, historically nomadic Kurdish people are also indigenous to eastern Turkey, eastern and northern Syria, western Iran, and parts of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Kurds have long sought their own free Kurdistan. However, to create such an entity, one or more of these countries would be forced to make concessions to the Kurds—a repugnant idea to the ruling regimes. In addition to ceding land and associated resources, making concessions would also mean ceding authority, which would be perceived as a sign of weakness in a region of the world where prestige can underpin a ruling regime's power. Additionally, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran in particular feared one or more of the other countries would grant independence or otherwise greater Kurdish autonomy that could lead to the creation of a Kurdistan, which could then embolden their own Kurdish populations, thus potentially destabilizing the political balance in their countries. As a result, despite occupying large swaths of land in many countries in their ancestral homelands, the Kurds were viewed as a troubling presence who were, and continue to be, largely unwelcome.

Perhaps no one outside Iraq feared the Kurds more than Turkey. Kurds occupy a large portion of eastern Turkey and are the majority ethnic group in Turkish territories bordering Iran and Iraq. An emboldened Kurdish population has long been an unacceptable proposition for Turkey, not just within its borders, but within its neighbors' borders as well. Turkey, at the time the only primarily Muslim member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), was usually a stalwart and reliable ally of the U.S. and had supported Operations PROVIDE COMFORT and NORTHERN WATCH in the post–DESERT STORM years by allowing coalition air forces to base from its airfields to enforce the no-fly zone over northern Iraq. While the U.S. primarily intended those operations as a means to protect the Kurdish population of northern Iraq from the same type of massacres Iraq's Shiite population suffered after Saddam's humiliating defeat in 1991, Turkey perhaps viewed them differently. Throughout their lifespan, Operations PROVIDE COMFORT and NORTHERN WATCH were domestic political hot potatoes for the Turkish government. Rather than casting the operations as a means to protect the Kurds, and the separatist groups Turkey claimed they harbored, the Turks portrayed them as a means to subdue Saddam and prevent his re-emergence as a strong and destabilizing presence in the region. They also provided an avenue for Turkey to keep an eye on developments in Kurdish-inhabited lands.[20]

The U.S., on the other hand, has maintained a long, friendly relationship with the Kurds, which was bolstered even more during the PROVIDE COMFORT and NORTHERN WATCH years. The Kurds, suffering some degree of persecution everywhere they lived and lacking a unifying political

20. Ibid., 11.

leadership to overcome their plight, were proud of and valued their relationship with the U.S. When approached with the proposition of participating in operations leading to the overthrow of Saddam's regime, the Kurds eagerly accepted and readily prepared. Outwardly, they proclaimed ridding Iraq of Saddam would be good for Kurds and Iraq as a whole. Inwardly, they may have viewed the operation as an opportunity to settle old scores with Arabs who displaced them from what they claimed as ancestral lands, primarily Mosul and Kirkuk, and subsequently attempt to resettle those lands. This action, though, might also bring the oil fields under Kurdish control, which would bring them great riches, but which could severely undermine the fragile economic stability of post-Saddam Iraq. Kurdish occupation of the oil fields also posed an unacceptable outcome for Turkey.[21]

Kurdish governance fell to two main parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The KDP, the larger of the two, mostly considered the northwestern part of the KAZ its power base. The PUK, a leftist-leaning splinter party of the KDP, regarded the southeastern portion of the KAZ as its territory. The two organizations were rivals and viewed each other with suspicion. Each had its own indigenous militia, known collectively as peshmerga, who were competent, battle-hardened veterans on whom the Kurds relied for protection from outside threats, and from each other. However, the rival Kurdish organizations represented an existing, in-place resistance movement the coalition could leverage to achieve its objectives while reducing its footprint in the north, thus allowing it to concentrate more forces on the southern approach to Baghdad. For purposes of OIF, the two rival organizations agreed to set aside their differences and cooperate with the U.S. It was a shaky alliance—one that required nurturing and quick thinking to preserve.[22]

Kurdish peshmerga in Iraq. SOURCE: USASOC HISTORY OFFICE, HISTORY SUPPORT CENTER, FORT BRAGG, NC/RELEASED.

21. Isaac J. Peltier, U.S. Army, *Surrogate Warfare: The Role of U.S. Army Special Forces* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2005), 25.
22. "Kurdish Peshmerga," *The Kurdish Project*, accessed 13 March 2017, http://thekurdishproject.org/history-and-culture/kurdish-nationalism/kurdish-peshmerga/.

In 2003, when the U.S.-led coalition proposed an approach to Baghdad from the north through Turkey for OIF, Turkey was presented with a major political quandary. Internationally, Turkey wanted to continue to be perceived as a reliable ally and help rid the region of the destabilizing presence of Saddam Hussein. However, Turkey suspiciously eyed the coalition's claim of Saddam's purported weapons of mass destruction program, and fretted over the possibility that Kurdish participation in the coalition operation would embolden, empower, and potentially enrich the Kurdish population and perhaps reinvigorate their desire for an independent Kurdistan. Additionally, Turkey felt the need to protect its ethnic cousins, the minority Turkmen of northern Iraq, from the Kurds. The question became: Could Turkey join the coalition and sell its participation domestically without causing a major political upheaval by being perceived as aiding and assisting the Kurds?

The coalition attack from the north was to be led by the U.S. 4th Infantry Division, which would disembark in Turkey's seaports and infiltrate the KAZ overland through Turkey. U.S. SF and their Kurdish peshmerga partners would support the 4th Infantry Division's advance by gathering intelligence, fixing Iraqi forces (pinning them down in one location), and participating in their defeat or capitulation. At a minimum, this action would prevent Iraqi forces from turning to oppose the coalition's southern invasion route. Otherwise, after defeating Iraqi forces in the north, the 4th Infantry Division would continue its attack southward toward the capital, further placing the regime in peril.[23]

At a minimum, this action would prevent the Iraqi forces from turning to oppose the coalition's southern invasion route.

The U.S. Army's 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) (SFG [A]) received the task to plan and conduct operations in northern Iraq in support of United States Central Command's (USCENTCOM's) plan to remove Saddam Hussein from power. Based at Ft. Carson, Colorado, 10th SFG (A) was apportioned to United States European Command (USEUCOM) and maintained a permanently based battalion in Germany to support USEUCOM. Although USCENTCOM has responsibility for Iraq, its dedicated and apportioned 5th SFG (A) was heavily involved in Afghanistan and was otherwise planned for operations in western Iraq during OIF. Since the northern Iraq operation would require close planning and cooperation with Turkey, in USEUCOM's area of responsibility, 10th SFG (A) was a logical choice. Additionally, the group had participated in operations PROVIDE COMFORT and NORTHERN WATCH for a number of years, as had its air partner, the U.S. Air Force's 352nd Special Operations Group (SOG). Those operations had not only afforded 10th SFG (A) and 352nd SOG an opportunity to develop a lasting working relationship with each other, but also provided an avenue for each to develop and maintain relationships with Kurdish leadership, which would pay great dividends in planning and conducting OIF.[24]

The plan called for 10th SFG (A), with a small contingent of coalition Special Operations Forces (SOF), to form Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-North (CJSOTF-N), which nicknamed itself Task Force Viking, paying homage to the Group's European roots. CJSOTF-N would base in

23. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, 78.
24. Author's personal experience; Briscoe et al., *All Roads Lead to Baghdad*, 33–35.

Turkey, from which it would infiltrate the KAZ overland and by air, with the assistance of the co-located 352nd SOG. The 352nd SOG would form Joint Special Operations Air Detachment-North (JSOAD-N) and be in a direct support relationship to CJSOTF-N. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions of 10th SFG (A) would be the nucleus of the SF presence in the KAZ and would stand up Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) 102 and 103, respectively. FOB 102 would team with the KDP, and FOB 103 would do likewise with the PUK. This proved to be a shrewd move, as it placed the rival Kurdish organizations on equal footing and avoided showing favoritism to either, which would be vital to gaining trust and maintaining the fragile alliance. Since USEUCOM chose to retain 1st Battalion, 10th SFG (A), for its theater missions, FOBs 102 and 103 would be supported by 3rd Battalion, 3rd SFG (A).[25]

Well before the commencement of hostilities against Iraq, SF would infiltrate the KAZ to begin planning, organizing, and training to operate with their peshmerga partners in classic UW fashion. Simultaneously, SF would conduct operational and intelligence preparation of the environment, building on what began with engagement in Operations PROVIDE COMFORT and NORTHERN WATCH. Meanwhile, 4th Infantry Division would accomplish reception, staging, onward movement, and integration in Turkey in preparation for movement into the KAZ and employment against Iraqi forces.

How the Plan Unfolded

The plan stumbled almost at the gate. Feeling domestic political pressure, the Turkish government began to indicate it would not support coalition operations from its soil. Nearly as bad, Turkey hinted that if it granted permission, it likely would be at such a late stage as to hinder CJSOTF-N's timely infiltration into the KAZ to begin its mission. Yet the timeline for OIF to commence marched onward. Despite multiple high-level delegation visits and military-to-military engagements to arrange Turkish permission and potential coalition participation, the delay dangerously paralyzed the plan for northern Iraq.

Realizing the chances of basing in Turkey were eroding, CJSOTF-N and JSOAD-N leadership began looking for alternatives. Ultimately, with the help of USEUCOM, Romania agreed to the use of Mihail Kogalniceanu (MK) Air Base near the Black Sea city of Constanta. Hoping Turkey might eventually relent and allow the use of its bases and airfields, JSOAD-N sent a small contingent to Romania to open the air base in February 2003. This proved to be a fortuitous decision, as Turkey continued to balk. Feeling the need to get its forces staged closer to the KAZ, CJSOTF-N later that month moved from Germany, where it had stood up in January, to MK Air Base. JSOAD-N followed suit, relocating from England. Constanta was not an ideal location, but the infrastructure was adequate. Romania, aspiring to join NATO, was eager to cooperate and demonstrate its value as a potential NATO member. Thus, the decision to base at MK Air Base was both military and political in nature. Besides, it increased the distance to infiltrate forces into the KAZ by only a couple of hours, assuming Turkish overflight permission was granted.[26]

25. United States Special Operations Command History and Research Office, *United States Special Operations Command History*, 6th ed. (Tampa, FL: U.S. Special Operations Command, March 2008), 121.
26. Author's personal experience in leading the team who opened and operated Mihail Kogalniceanu (MK) Air Base, February–March 2003.

Permission was not forthcoming. Eventually, the Turkish Parliament voted against basing coalition forces on its soil, and effectively prohibited transit of its territory and the use of its airspace for coalition operations. The effects of this vote were enormous and manifold. The 4th Infantry Division, awaiting disembarkation in Turkey, would not be available in northern Iraq and had to be rerouted to Kuwait to be of use at all in OIF.[27] Thus, the task of fixing and/or defeating Iraqi forces in the north fell entirely to CJSOTF-N and its peshmerga partners. But CJSOTF-N forces were stuck in Romania, and the potential for getting to the KAZ in time, if at all, was slim at best and receding each day. If SF couldn't get to the KAZ, the peshmerga would be alone. Feeling slighted and abandoned by the promise of U.S. cooperation failing to materialize, the Kurds would be left by themselves and faced the prospect of having to suffer yet again as a result.

This scenario posed several problems, all with potentially devastating outcomes. First, perceiving the Kurds as weak and unprotected, Saddam could unleash his forces before the coalition could act and move north to crush them in an attempt to 'solve' his Kurdish problem forever. Such action would create a regional humanitarian problem on a massive scale. Not only would the Kurds suffer greatly, but the flow of refugees into surrounding countries could pose threats to their political stability. Or, believing he could keep the Kurds in check with minimal effort, Saddam could instead turn his northern-based mechanized forces to oppose the southern advance from Kuwait, thus greatly slowing the pace of operations and increasing the potential for coalition casualties tremendously, and perhaps even endangering the overall success of OIF.

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On the other hand, Turkey, perceiving the Kurds as unprotected, might make a military move to 'solve' its Kurdish problem and take control of the northern oil fields. This scenario, though unlikely, would put Turkey in a politically adversarial position to its NATO allies, namely the U.S., which would seriously jeopardize not only the OIF coalition but the future of the NATO alliance as well. An unraveling NATO could have geopolitical consequences far exceeding the regional scale where the coalition hoped to keep everything contained.[28]

Another potentially deadly situation could also materialize: the Kurds, feeling unrestrained by the U.S. absence and sensing the impending fall of Saddam's regime, could unleash their own offensive in the north to reclaim their ancestral lands and the oil fields.[29] In turn, such a Kurdish action could trigger any of the other unwelcome scenarios. The rival KDP and PUK, vying for pre-eminence in Kurdish politics, could even attempt to eliminate each other through military means.

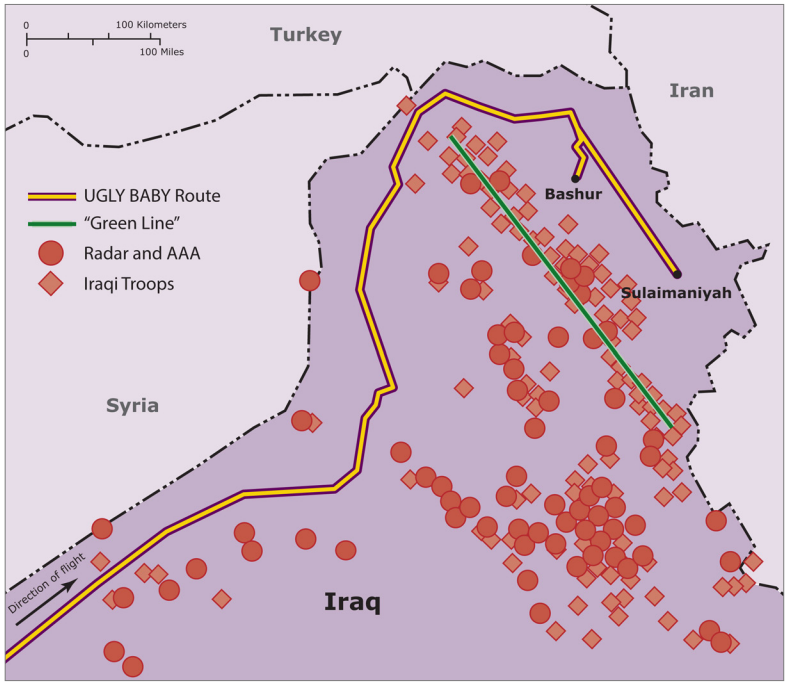
In yet another scenario, Saddam, sensing his defeat and removal from power to be imminent, could order his forces to sabotage oil fields, including the northern ones, to prevent their falling into

27. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, 78.
28. Ibid., 90–91; Briscoe et al., *All Roads Lead to Baghdad*, 368; author's personal experience while planning with the Turkish General Staff. While not overtly stated, and unlikely in the context of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, a possible Turkish move into northern Iraq was strongly implied, assuming the absence of American forces.
29. Briscoe et al., *All Roads Lead to Baghdad*, 81.

the hands of his rivals such as the Kurds or the Iraqi Shiite majority. As troubling as an empowered Kurdish population was for Saddam, an empowered Shiite population would likely invite internal meddling from his eastern neighbor and greatest external enemy, Shiite-dominated Iran. Plus, a post-Saddam Iraq in which Iran or its operatives/clients wielded too much power was unacceptable to the coalition, particularly the U.S.

Essentially, the need and urgency for CJSOTF-N's mission was growing exponentially. A lack of U.S. or coalition presence in northern Iraq could have catastrophic consequences, which grew in likelihood each day. Perhaps, somehow, infiltrating SF, with their unique training and abilities and despite their small footprint, into the KAZ could prevent a calamity. Yet the ability of SF to influence events from their base in Romania was marginal. Leaders and staff brainstormed ideas to get forces into the KAZ. One such opportunity presented itself through a USCENTCOM tasking to CJSOTF-N for a personal security detail mission for a high-level U.S. dignitary to meet with Kurdish leaders in the KAZ in late February 2003. Through creative planning and execution, 37 CJSOTF-N SF members assigned to the personal security detail got 'lost' somewhere between entry to the KAZ from Turkey through the Habur Gate and the mission's return to Turkey. In reality, the 'Lost 37' had linked up with their Kurdish counterparts to begin planning and training.[30]

However, the coalition would have great difficulty achieving its objectives in the north with only 37 operators on the ground. Although it appeared having all of CJSOTF-N in place might not really help, it had to get its forces moving. At the time, CJSOTF-N numbered only a few hundred; it would eventually grow to more than 5,000 personnel, including JSOAD-N and all attached units. When OIF commenced on 19 March 2003, CJSOTF-N was still at Constanta. Ordinarily, and doctrinally, SF should have been in the KAZ weeks, if not months, before combat operations started.



The flight route into northern Iraq, dubbed 'Ugly Baby,' was used for infiltrating CJSOTF-N personnel in preparation for OIF in 2003. SOURCE: USASOC HISTORY OFFICE, HISTORY SUPPORT CENTER, FORT BRAGG, NC/RELEASED.

Looking for creative solutions, JSOAD-N air planners proposed a route from Constanta into the KAZ that, instead of overflying Turkey, would bypass it. Three MC-130H Combat Talon II airplanes would depart Constanta with SF and equipment aboard and move to a forward staging base to await

30. Ibid., 83.

diplomatic approval and coordination to enter Iraq from the southwest. Once in Iraq, the aircraft would fly a route that essentially paralleled the Syrian border while maintaining a safe distance from Syrian air defenses. But the Syrian air defenses were not their greatest worry: the aircraft would have to fly some 4.5 hours at a low level over Iraq and avoid its defenses until they could reach the more permissive airspace of the KAZ, where they would fly separately and offload SF at the airfields at Bashur and As Sulamaniyah to link up with KDP and PUK peshmerga, respectively. Then they would have to reverse their route upon departure.

It was a daring plan, fraught with risk. On top of that, it was a one-time operation. Assuming the aircraft could safely ingress and egress once, the element of surprise would then be lost, and no other flights could move along that route without being at even greater risk. Barring a diplomatic development regarding Turkish overflight, whatever personnel and equipment could infiltrate in three Combat Talon II aircraft is all CJSOTF-N would have in the KAZ for the foreseeable future. Admiring its audacity and knowing it might be the only way to get his forces into the fight, the CJSOTF-N commander approved the plan and dubbed it 'Ugly Baby,' because it was so ugly only its parents could love it. After more detailed planning and preparation, three heavily loaded aircraft departed Constanta on 22 March to a forward staging base.

The flight into Iraq on 23 March was even more eventful than expected. All aircraft came under heavy enemy fire. One was so badly damaged it had to divert to a Turkish airfield prior to infiltrating its forces. Now CJSOTF-N was down to two MC-130H loads of forces in the KAZ, and the third aircraft, with its crew and passengers, was in a diplomatic no-man's land. But, careful planning and cross-loading of the aircraft minimized the impact of losing a third of the force. Upon arrival at the designated airfields, the SF met their peshmerga counterparts, and the fight was on.[31]

An MC-130H pilot's windshield showing post-mission battle damage after flying the 'Ugly Baby' route to northern Iraq. SOURCE: USASOC HISTORY OFFICE, HISTORY SUPPORT CENTER, FORT BRAGG, NC/RELEASED

Not only did the Ugly Baby operation get desperately needed coalition forces into the fight in the

31. Based on author's personal experience. For a more in-depth study of 'Ugly Baby,' refer to: Robert W. Jones, Jr., "Getting There Is Half the Battle: Operation UGLY BABY," *Veritas: The Journal of ARSOF History*, PB 31-05-1 (Winter 2005): 10–14.

north, it had a significant side effect. The diverted MC-130H in Turkey essentially became the epicenter of a diplomatic brouhaha between the U.S., which needed its aircraft and personnel back, and Turkey, which wanted to continue to flex its muscle and appear strong for its domestic audience. Eventually, through much high-level negotiation, the U.S. got its aircraft back, and Turkey even relented on the use of its airspace, although it placed a restriction on the number of flights and added the stipulation that missions intended for combat in Iraq could not emanate from within its borders.[32] Thus, the much-needed air bridge from Europe to the KAZ was now open, and forces could begin flowing. The tide of the war in the north was turning.

Forces moving into the KAZ faced numerous problems, not the least of which was their severely late arrival. They were also grossly outnumbered and outgunned. Although the peshmerga, by some counts, numbered as many as 50,000 fighters, they were only lightly armed. The three battalions of SF who eventually infiltrated via the new air bridge over Turkey were not much more heavily armed, counting only Javelin anti-tank missiles and 81mm mortars among their heaviest weapons. On paper at least, the SF and peshmerga were no match for Iraqi mechanized units south of the Green Line. But they were ready to fight. Both partners were enthusiastic and relied on creativity to overcome odds. And, SF could bring to bear an asset that the Kurds greatly admired and the Iraqis could not counter: airpower. Although the southern advance to Baghdad received the bulk of the air support, planning allowed the SF to capitalize on airpower effects in the north, as would become evident in follow-on operations.[33]

Before beginning operations along the Green Line, the partners needed to neutralize Ansar al-Islam (AI), a U.S.-declared terrorist group. Approximately 700 AI fighters posed a direct threat to the Kurdish rear from their entrenched positions in the mountains on the Iranian border in the vicinity of Halabja in the southeastern KAZ. Additionally, a suspected chemical weapons facility near the village of Sargat needed to be captured, investigated, and exploited, and was key to coalition OIF objectives. Less than a week after infiltration via Ugly Baby, FOB 103 and PUK peshmerga engaged in Operation VIKING HAMMER, designed to eradicate AI and capture the facility at Sargat.

Airpower began softening up the entrenchments on 21 March when 64 Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAMs) were launched. Unfortunately, the TLAM attack occurred before the arrival of the main SF body into the KAZ, owing to the Turkish delay, and allowed some AI fighters to escape into Iran. However, when FOB 103 and approximately 6,500 peshmerga, supported by AC-130 gunships and other air platforms, began a six-pronged attack on 28 March, plenty of resistance remained. Over the next two days, the partners engaged in intense ground combat, often having to clear caves. It was difficult fighting, but resulted in a resounding defeat of AI. Noting the tenacity of the attack, those AI members who escaped chose to sit out the rest of the war. VIKING HAMMER became the first major success of the U.S.-Kurdish OIF partnership. It secured the Kurdish rear from threats that might hinder operations along the Green Line, eliminated the Sargat facility, cemented the trust between the

32. United States Special Operations Command History and Research Office, *United States Special Operations Command History*, 123.
33. Briscoe et al., *All Roads Lead to Baghdad*, 196.

SF and peshmerga, and demonstrated U.S. resolve to engage in the fight.[34] These developments would be important in later operations.[35]

Retaking Mosul and Kirkuk

As important as VIKING HAMMER was in preparing the environment for Green Line operations, it paled in comparison to what remained in fixing and/or defeating the Iraqi forces, protecting the infrastructure, discouraging adverse Turkish action, keeping the Kurds under control, and holding together the KDP-PUK alliance. Perceiving that Saddam had not necessarily placed his best forces in the north, except possibly the two Republican Guard divisions, the battle-tested partners believed a demonstration of determination and firepower would weaken Iraqi resolve and lead to their defeat or capitulation. Thus, FOB 102 and the KDP began operations to retake Mosul, while FOB 103 and the PUK would capture Kirkuk.

Neither would be an easy fight. The best available way to take the cities seemed to be an encircling method, whereby friendly forces would capture key lines of communication (LOCs) while simultaneously pounding the Iraqis with airpower, thereby cutting them off and impressing upon them the hopelessness of their plight. However, other fights would be necessary to open avenues of approach to the cities and protect friendly LOCs. In the ensuing days, FOB 102 fought a significant engagement at Ayn Sifni, located on a major road north of Mosul. Its capture by determined SF and peshmerga, again supported by airpower, opened the road to Mosul and aided in its eventual capture. Likewise, the battle of Debecka Pass was designed to secure the LOC linking Kirkuk and Mosul and to protect Irbil, the Kurdish capital city and new home to the CJSOTF-N and JSOAD-N headquarters, which had relocated from Constanta.[36] Both fights demonstrated the steely

Members of FOB 103 attack northwest to Kirkuk. SOURCE: USASOC HISTORY OFFICE, HISTORY SUPPORT CENTER, FORT BRAGG, NC/RELEASED.

34. Ibid., 194–198.
35. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, 250; Kenn Finlayson, "Operation VIKING HAMMER: 3/10 SFG against the Ansar Al-Islam," *Veritas: The Journal of ARSOF History,* PB 31-05-1 (Winter 2005): 15–19.
36. Briscoe et al., *All Roads Lead to Baghdad*, 252, 261.

resolve of the SF-peshmerga partnership. Their success was a direct result of trust born in combat. But this trust would be tested in the eventual capture of Mosul and Kirkuk.

Capturing the cities was essentially a multi-sided operation to drive the demoralized Iraqi forces from the cities while causing as little infrastructure damage as possible. If defeating the forces was not practical, it was important to encourage the units to capitulate, thereby allowing coalition forces to dictate the terms and identify and account for the Iraqi soldiers involved. Otherwise, units could simply disintegrate as soldiers deserted and attempted to blend back in with the population. Unfortunately, as the coalition later discovered throughout Iraq, many of these former soldiers felt disenfranchised when the Iraqi army crumbled and was subsequently disbanded. The lack of former soldier accountability and proper reintegration with the population then provided fertile ground from which an ensuing insurgency against the new Iraqi government recruited fighters. In the north, while some units surrendered, an unknown number of Iraqi soldiers simply 'evaporated,' in many cases because there were just not enough coalition forces to control the situation.

It was important for U.S. forces to reach Mosul and Kirkuk first, before Kurds could rush back to the cities, attempt to resettle their long-abandoned lands, and cause a potentially violent, destabilizing situation. This was especially problematic in Mosul, in which a small SF contingent had to race ahead of the Kurdish 'Million Man March' to enter the city first. Additionally, SF had to balance the desires and interests of the KDP and PUK. Suspicion between the groups heightened as each eyed the prizes of Mosul and Kirkuk.[37] If either group laid claim to one or both of the cities, the fragile alliance could shatter, and post-war stability in Kurdish territory would be in danger.

The 'Million Man March' to Mosul. SOURCE: USASOC HISTORY OFFICE, HISTORY SUPPORT CENTER, FORT BRAGG, NC/RELEASED.

Occupying the cities would prove tricky, as well, testing the mettle and political acumen of the SF leaders. They had to find a way to control the situation without Kurds and Arabs taking out their animosities on each other or trying to seize power. In both cities, they cleverly established patrols and conducted information operations that made it appear there were more than a handful of U.S. forces in the city, thereby putting an American, rather than a Kurdish, face on the occupation. Astutely, SF

37. Ibid.

leaders encouraged the peshmerga to move back north of the Green Line and brokered an agreement between the KDP and PUK, lessening their rivalry while also easing Turkish anxiety. SF leaders quickly met with tribal and city leaders to establish governance and restore basic services. A robust information operations campaign, including televised messages by SF leaders, continued and helped reassure the population.[38] Within days, the SF were able to leave the cities, handing over responsibility to larger and better-equipped U.S. conventional units that eventually made their way into northern Iraq. The 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations-Capable), 173rd Airborne Brigade, and others, received tasking to support CJSOTF-N and were placed under its tactical control.[39] It was an unusual command structure at the time, but a harbinger of future command arrangements in subsequent operations.

The war in the north appeared to be winding down, but a major task remained. An Iranian dissident group and (at the time) U.S.-designated terrorist organization, the Mujahedin-e Khalk (MEK), operated north of Baghdad and was a possible threat to coalition units and operations in that area. MEK's origins date to 1979, when members fled Iran following the revolution. They not only oppose the Iranian regime, they hate it. But Saddam found a valuable use for the enemy of his enemy: providing internal security for his regime and keeping an eye on the Republican Guard, much in the same way the Republican Guard kept tabs on other military units. The MEK are generally very well-educated and reliable, so Saddam equipped and trained them well.[40] If hostile to coalition forces, they posed a formidable foe.

The coalition was unsure of the MEK's intentions, so to ensure the safety of coalition forces, the MEK had to be subdued in one way or another. Fortunately, on 13 April, MEK members contacted SF leaders and indicated they had no desire to fight the coalition. The FOB 103 commander began negotiations with the MEK. Eventually, they reached a ceasefire agreement, whereby the MEK fighters confined themselves to five camps northeast of Baghdad, under the watchful eye of SF. This development defused another possible threat to coalition forces. Interestingly, after SF began providing medical care to the MEK in their camps, the MEK reciprocated by providing valuable intelligence on the Iranian regime.[41] Because of the MEK's cooperation with the coalition, begun with the SF-brokered ceasefire, and its subsequent renouncement of violence, the U.S. several years later removed the MEK from its list of foreign terrorist organizations.[42]

Thus, one of the most successful UW operations in U.S. military history began to draw to a close. In barely two months, while overcoming what at times appeared to be insurmountable odds, three battalions of SF and their capable Kurdish peshmerga partners, supported by airpower and conventional units, defeated three Iraqi corps of 13 divisions, soundly defeated one known terrorist

38. Ibid., 343, 365–371, 380–381.
39. United States Special Operations Command History and Research Office, U*nited States Special Operations Command History*, 124; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, 224, 230.
40. "Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization," GlobalSecurity.org, accessed 13 March 2017, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/mek.htm.
41. Briscoe et al., *All Roads Lead to Baghdad*, 383–385.
42. "Mujahedin-e Khalq," GlobalSecurity.org.

group, and negotiated a ceasefire with another. In doing so, CJSOTF-N diverted Iraqi forces that could have otherwise opposed the main coalition advance from the south, while simultaneously preserving the infrastructure in the north, discouraging a Turkish military incursion in northern Iraq, preventing atrocities and a potentially massive humanitarian situation, and subduing, at least temporarily, the political ambitions of rival Kurdish factions. The relative peace that subsequently prevailed in northern Iraq, even in the darkest days of the violent unrest that later embroiled the rest of the country, is a direct testament to a successful UW operation prosecuted by a small group of highly trained, well-educated, and politically astute American warriors.

Conclusion

IW will continue to be an important military competency for the foreseeable future and must benefit from an appropriate level of investment. While IW and all its activities are aimed at gaining some form of control over affected, relevant populations, UW is perhaps the most unique IW activity in that instead of supporting an HN government, it works against a government or occupying power. The intent may be to overthrow that entity, coerce it into taking action(s) favorable to U.S. political or military objectives, or prevent it from taking adverse actions. Regardless, UW can prove to be a significant force multiplier, but it requires a dedicated force educated, trained, and prepared to conduct it.

Generally speaking, prevalent thought tends to indicate IW is a form of warfare the U.S. military will prosecute in response to how our adversaries fight. While that is often the case, it cedes the initiative to the adversary and puts the U.S. in reactionary mode. However, with the proper investment in forces to conduct IW, coupled with prudent planning, the U.S. can seize the initiative in IW and prosecute a successful campaign that is either the main effort or supports the main effort. Such was the case in Iraq, when SF teamed with an irregular force to defeat not only conventional forces, but also irregular forces of known terrorist organizations, with the goal of toppling the government of a nation-state.

Coalition planners did not foresee a small force of SOF shouldering the load for the entire Iraqi northern front in 2003. However, in conjunction with tenacious, battle-hardened Kurdish peshmerga, supported by special operations and conventional airpower, and complemented by various conventional units, a Group-equivalent of SF orchestrated a campaign that met or exceeded all its military objectives in a short period of time, despite several significant obstacles that delayed the beginning of the operation by weeks, if not months. In so doing, the campaign proved the value of UW as a force multiplier even if, as in this case, it was essentially an economy-of-force mission. It was made possible by capitalizing on years of trust and respect among leaders on all sides. Its enormous success had tremendous political consequences, as it aided the toppling of Saddam Hussein, potentially reduced friendly casualties by minimizing the physical footprint of forces, and simultaneously, through astute maneuvering, held the coalition together in the north. In short, Task Force Viking lived up to its motto: Concede nothing!

Coalition planners did not foresee a small force of SOF shouldering the load for the entire Iraqi northern front in 2003.

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