

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Exeter		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 25 Area Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> The Wake of Islamic State: Shaping UK Foreign and Military Policy in Iraq		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> August 2014-2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Professor Gareth Stansfield	Professor of Middle East Politics	2002-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-present		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N</b>		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Islamic State (IS) in Iraq emerged in 2014 with shocking violence and speed. The consequences for the Iraqi people were devastating; with tens of thousands fleeing their home, thousands enslaved and many more killed. Prof Gareth Stansfield's research on Iraq's 'Disputed Territories' shaped Her Majesty's Government (HMG)'s approach to containing the IS threat, and dealing with its legacy. Firstly, by building military and civil service understanding of IS's foundations and how it proved to be resilient, in order to prevent re-emergence. Secondly, by supporting the resolution of internal tensions between political groups in Iraq and Kurdistan. Thirdly, by influencing HMG policies aimed at preventing security gaps in post-IS Iraq especially with regard to the reform of the critical Peshmerga (the military forces of the autonomous region of Kurdistan Region of Iraq).</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>Professor Gareth Stansfield (University of Exeter, 2004) is a leading figure on Iraq, with his input sought by UK and international governments. His 2003 book on Iraqi Kurdistan explored the development of the Kurdish political system since 1991. He examined the difficult and often violent relations between the two dominant powers, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and their relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government in order to understand contemporaneous state of Iraqi Kurdish politics and the operation of the state [3.5, 3.6]. With funding from the Leverhulme, ESRC and UK Government, Stansfield built on this foundation and developed a ten-year research programme into the politics and political economy of Iraq, focusing in particular on the Kurdish regions of the Middle East and questions of post conflict stabilization and nation/state building.</p> <p>In 2015, Stansfield was awarded ESRC funding to the project 'Disputed Territories'[3.1], which delivered fresh insights into the contestation of a large swathe of land known as the 'disputed territories' that lie to the south of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR). The territories are administered by the Government of Iraq (GoI), with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) demanding their incorporation into the KR.</p> <p>The project focused upon the origins of IS from a sociological and political economy perspective. Stansfield's research introduced the idea that IS was/is a distinctly Iraqi organization with its roots in the province of Nineveh and the city of Mosul, and with a strong link to the former Ba'th regime. Working with a PhD student, Stansfield delivered [3.2, 3.3] timely assessments of the implications of post-IS Mosul, conducting original interviews with the Maslawi populations revealing their attitudes towards IS, the Iraqi government (especially the PMF) and the international community. It also offered an assessment of the viewpoint of Kurdistan more broadly.</p> <p>Stansfield's research highlighted the deep roots of Sunni discontent in Iraq, which provided an environment for IS to grow. The relevance of this is straightforward – to prevent IS from re-emerging, circumstances in Nineveh and Mosul need to be understood and addressed.</p>		

Both lines of argument were original and based upon fieldwork undertaken in Iraq (in the Kurdish region) during 2014, and in subsequent research undertaken with researchers from Iraq. Stansfield's research explained how the various incarnations of ISIS survived the US military, the Iraqi government, and Sunni tribal fighters before its re-emergence in 2014.

Stansfield's Disputed Territories project engaged with the rapidly changing policy, humanitarian and military contexts of IS's emergence. He made specific recommendations to UK policy actors in 2014 [3.4] proposing 1) consideration of a Sunni Arab force countering Islamic state; 2) strategies that could break Sunni Arab support for Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; 3) support for a Non-Islamic State Sunni Arab Haven; 4) focus on liberation of Mosul; and finally 5) training of friendly forces in Mosul.

Stansfield's research [3.6] highlighted the critical role of *peshmerga* forces in countering IS and tackles the inadequacies of peshmerga structure, doctrine, and performance in the light of the advances made by IS. Two articles were published: one addressing the political problems of the KRI, and the other the problem of engaging with non-state security forces, from a UK perspective.

In the wake of the IS insurgency, it became critical to understand the reality of the Kurdistan Region in the 'post-Mosul' world, specifically in relation to renewed calls for an independence referendum (2017). Building on his foundation of early research on the development of the Kurdish political system [3.6], Stansfield's research has shown that the events of 2014, and those that followed, are not only placed within the context of post-2003 Iraq, but within the context of a century of statelessness, with regular episodes of marginalization, oppression, and genocidal actions committed by successive Iraqi governments. Stansfield's research highlighted the urgent need for western governments to understand the complexities of these political and social contexts [3.6].

### 3. References to the research

#### Research Grants, Research Publications and Briefings

**3.1** Understanding and Managing Intra-State Territorial Contestation: Iraq's Disputed Territories in Comparative Perspective. ESRC, funded value £746,596. PI, Stansfield (Exeter); CI, Wolff (Birmingham). June 2015-February 2019.

**3.2** 'The Day After: What to Expect in a Post-Islamic State Mosul.' Co-authored with Tallha Abdulrazaq. RUSI Journal, Vol. 161, No. 3, June/July 2016, pp. 14-20. DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2016.1184013

**3.3** 'The Enemy Within: ISIS and the Conquest of Mosul.' Co-authored with Tallha Abdulrazaq. Middle East Journal, Vol. 70, No. 4, Autumn 2016, pp. 525-542. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26427457>

**3.4** 'The Islamic State, the Kurdistan Region, and the Future of Iraq: An Assessment of UK Policy Options,' International Affairs, Vol. 90, No. 6, 2014, pp. 1329-1 DOI: [10.1111/1468-2346.12167](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12167)

**3.5** Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. Submitted to RAE2008.

**3.6** 'Kurdistan Rising: To Acknowledge or Ignore the Unravelling of Iraq', Middle East Memo, No.33, July 2014 <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Kurdistan-Iraq-ISIS-Stansfield-0731.pdf>

### 4. Details of the impact

The 'Disputed Territories' project led to Stansfield's appointment to several HMG roles including: Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) (Honorary Fellow), Anti-IS Task Force (Member), British Embassy Baghdad, the Ministry of Defence (Defence Intelligence) and the Stabilisation Unit (SU) (all Advisor). Stansfield directly informed HMG foreign and military policy responses to the IS occupation (2014), the Kurdish Referendum (2017), peshmerga reform (2018) and tensions in Zini Warte, KRI (2020).

**Contributing to Post 2014 UK Foreign Policy and Diplomacy**

The Disputed Territories research project findings [3.1] have filled a ‘knowledge and analysis gap’ [5.1] on key policy issues relating to post-IS Iraq. The FCO MENA Research team benefited from insights in the period both before and after the recent Iraqi Kurdistan referendum (2017) for which Stansfield drew upon his research on the KR, including assessments of the advantages and disadvantages of independence for western powers [3.6]. Stansfield provided the team with:

*‘analysis on the Kurdish referendum, the fall-out from protests in the KR, the dynamics between and within key political parties in the KR, and the implications of national elections [...] often at crucial policy junctures’.* [5.1]

Stansfield’s research insights regarding post-2014 Iraq [3.1-3.4] informed Ministerial understanding, actions and political outcomes. The Minister for the Middle East between 2017-2019 ‘had been aware of Professor Stansfield’s work for some time and had read his 2016 book on Iraq which highlights the context of ISIS’ [5.6]. As a result, the Minister twice sought meetings with Stansfield in 2017. The meetings ‘enabled better understanding of the ramifications of the ISIL occupation of Mosul [...] and the 2017 referendum’. Specifically, they contributed to the HMG’s efforts in supporting the resolution of internal tensions between political groups in Iraq and Kurdistan:

*‘[P]ost the referendum, there were concerns that conflict might have arisen over oil between Baghdad and Erbil. [...] Stansfield’s insights helped me to understand how the UK could find common ground between the KRG and Iraq’* [5.6]

The meetings with Stansfield contributed to the Minister’s understanding of internal tensions and as a result positively benefited diplomatic visits to Erbil and Mosul in 2018, and subsequent outcomes. The former Minister reported that ‘Stansfield’s insights [...] informed the conversations I had during that trip. Our diplomacy positively contributed to local level elite politics. It is accepted that the conflict that we had feared would arise between Erbil and Baghdad was avoided’. [5.6]

These insights also contributed to the Minister’s preparations for the Kuwait Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq in February 2018: The three-day event mobilized nearly USD 30 billion of additional international support to the country following IS’s territorial defeat in 2017. The Minister reported:

*It was critical that I had a good understanding of the sensitivities of the relationships between the various protagonists in Erbil and Baghdad, as well as the recent background in order to make a positive contribution to the exchange rather than negative. It was essential that I was well informed of potential tensions and I sought Professor Stansfield’s advice in guiding me through this difficult period.* [5.6]

Stansfield has continued to contribute to the management of internal tensions within the disputed territories. In April 2020, a potentially explosive three-way standoff developed in Zini Warte (in the KRI), between two Peshmerga brigades – one led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), another belonging to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) (a proscribed armed group fighting for greater cultural and political rights of Kurds in neighbouring Turkey). Colonel Roy Natarajan (UK Special Adviser to the Kurdistan Regional Government on Peshmerga Reform) spoke with Prime Minister Barzani, to encourage a way to de-escalate the tension and mediate between the KDP and PUK. Before they did this, Stansfield briefed Colonel Natarajan on why a confrontation had started in Zini Warte, the historical precedent from 1994, the Kurdish political system, potential fracture points and how best to handle the discussion with PM Barzani and his counterpart in the PUK, Lahur Talabani. Stansfield’s briefings drew on his 2003 book, which offered insights on the origins of the 1994 civil war [3.5]. This meeting preceded a gathering of the Iraqi Kurdistan leaders at the start of May

2020 to seek to assuage hostilities. Following this meeting, the immediate tensions were reported to have de-escalated.

### **Informing Post-2014 Military Policy, Understanding and Decision making**

In the wake of IS's rapid insurgency it was vital to re-build British military understanding of Iraq. Appointed as Senior Adviser to PJHQ, Stansfield brought British Military knowledge up to date [5.7] drawing on contemporaneous and historic research on the critical Disputed Territories [3.1-3.6]. Stansfield attended three biannual Component Commanders Conferences (CCC) (Bahrain, London and Cyprus). At these Conferences, he contributed to detailed discussions that informed military leaders' understanding of Iraq at this critical moment. Stansfield was the only academic to participate in these meetings, with all other personnel being British military or members of the Civil Service. The former Chief of Joint Operations (CJO) attested that Stansfield '*enabled the British military to be better informed and therefore to make better decisions*' [5.7]

Stansfield has drawn on his research to regularly prepare senior military officers for deployment during the post 2014 period including: the Deputy Commander of the Combined Joint Task Force in Iraq, the Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence at PJHQ, multiple Defence Senior Advisers Middle East and North Africa [5.7].

Working with the SU, Stansfield shared original research on the roots of IS and the possible implications of UK intervention in the fight against them [3.2]. The recommendations set out in this 2014 article [3.4], are visible in contemporaneous HMG policy in relation to 1) addressing Sunni disengagement, and 2) the provision of training to the peshmerga to fight IS [5.4, 5.10]. During a visit to Iraq in November 2014 the then Secretary of State for Defence announced that he would offer 'additional training to Peshmerga fighters' [5.10]. The training of *peshmerga* forces contributed to regains in territory from IS and, in a letter to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, the then Foreign Secretary noted that HMG had encouraged '*the Iraqi Government to establish the political reconciliation and reform needed to rebuild public trust in the Iraqi state and unite communities against extremism*' [5.5].

### **Tackling IS through Peshmerga Reform**

Peshmerga forces are critical to the security of the KRI due to its borders with Syria, Turkey, and Iran and the continuing threat of Sunni Arab / jihadist insurgency and terrorism (including IS). The territorial area of IS was primarily focused on areas lying south of the KRI in the North of Iraq. Before 2017, these areas had been liberated by the combined Iraqi and Peshmerga forces. In order to ensure IS was not reconstituted in these territories, it was essential to have a capable and effective Peshmerga force - thus necessitating reform. The Peshmerga reform plan of the KRG aims to create a more affordable, accountable, and capable Peshmerga force that would be removed from the structures of the two dominant political parties – the KDP and the PUK – and would be placed under the command and control of an apolitical military structure that would report to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA) of the KRG [5.2].

In 2018, there was recognition that '*the UK ran the risk of thinking it understood the situation [the peshmerga] when it only understood a superficial layer of detail, making its decisions flawed or ineffective*' [5.8]. To address this '*knowledge blindness*' [5.8], Stansfield was appointed Senior Adviser to HMG on the Peshmerga Reform Programme. As a Deployable Civilian Expert (DCE) he worked in Iraq with the British Embassy Baghdad, the UK Consulate General Erbil, UK military advisers, and *peshmerga* leadership.

Stansfield was commissioned to write substantial political economic analyses (PEAs) (2018, 2020). The first report provided extensive background information on the political system of the KRI (3.5), the nature of the two leading parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) - and the history and development of the Peshmerga forces. The 2020 PEA covered the period since the Kurdistan Region elections of 30 September 2018 to March 2020. As such, it presented an update to the first Political

Economy of Peshmerga Reform, completed in August 2018. The PEAs analysed the conditions impacting Peshmerga Reform, drew on Stansfield's research on *peshmerga* reform, as well as on the consequences of Western intervention [3.6] and were the 'critical factor in shaping the UK's policy on the reform programme' [5.8].

Stansfield's recommendations led HMG to support the process, and agreements were reached between Secretary of State for Defence Michael Fallon and Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani in 2017 [5.2, 5.7, 5.8]. The former CJO attests:

*'Stansfield's research [...] enabled better appreciation of the political drivers, which contributed towards building an effective policy delivery plan. Without [...] Stansfield's contributions, we would not have got to where we are now [...]. His inputs emphasised the need [...] to draw on all political actors in order to aid political (as well as military) reform' [5.7].*

Stansfield's PEA not only fundamentally reshaped UK policy, but 'also [...] the policies of seven other nations' [5.9]. According to the Consul General Erbil the focus given through Stansfield's contributions has led 'to the most significant progress in developing a more affordable, capable and accountable Peshmerga, in the past fifteen years' [5.9].

Interviews with prominent leadership KRI political and military leaders demonstrate [5.2] that a key recommendation from Stansfield's 2018 PEA has been adopted, namely that British Embassy Baghdad and Consul General Erbil extensively engage with senior political and governmental figures in Erbil, Suleimani, and Baghdad, to maintain and deepen the view among political elites that military reform combined with political normalization (i.e. de-militarisation) is a positive development. This engagement strategy has been progressing at pace, and at considerable depth. It is, for example, apparent that visiting MoD staff have been engaging political stakeholders at the highest level on a regular basis. [5.2, 5.7].

The importance of peshmerga reform has endured. As the DSAME attests, for 'President Barzani, the importance of Peshmerga reform is absolutely clear' and it 'is one of the key strands to [British military] engagement strategy with Iraq' [5.7].

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Letter from MENA Research Analysts, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

5.2 [TEXT REMOVED FOR PUBLICATION]

5.3 [TEXT REMOVED FOR PUBLICATION]

5.4 UK Government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq inquiry, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee <https://bit.ly/3deingn> Stansfield is cited 39 times.

5.5 The UK's role in the war against ISIL following the Cessation of Hostilities in Syria in February 2016: Government response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2015-16 (Appendix: Letter from the Foreign Secretary and Government Response) <https://bit.ly/3sEuZE9>

5.6 Letter from the former Minister of State for the Middle East at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2017-19)

5.7 Letter from the former Chief of Joint Operations, Permanent Joint Headquarters/ Current Senior Advisor Middle East (October 2020) (DSAME)

5.8 Letter from the former UK Special Adviser to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (2018-19)

5.9 Letter from the Consul General, British Consulate—General Erbil

5.10 'UK Forces to Provide Further Support to Forces Fighting ISIL', Ministry of Defence, Published 5 November 2014 <https://bit.ly/3tYS44o>