

Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict

Crisis Group

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Loosely organized in an ad hoc coalition, Western countries rushed military aid to Iraqi Kurds in the face of a lightning assault by the Islamic State (IS) in June 2014. They failed, however, to develop a strategy for dealing with the consequences of arming non-state actors in Iraq (...)

Rather than forging a strong, unified military response to the IS threat, building up Kurdish forces accelerated the Kurdish polity's fragmentation, increased tensions between these forces and non-Kurds in disputed areas and strengthened Iraq's centrifugal forces. Delivered this way, military assistance risks prolonging the conflict with IS, worsening other longstanding, unresolved conflicts and creating new ones (...)

Despite Western concerns, doing so is unlikely to enhance chances of Kurdish independence. Kurdish parties have become even more dependent, not less, on their alliances with Turkey and Iran since IS's arrival. Turkey, the country with the ability to give the Kurds the independent revenue stream from oil sales they would need to move effectively toward independence, has given no indication it is prepared to do so and every indication it wishes to preserve Iraq's unity. Western states' current practice of channeling weapons to the Kurds via Baghdad and encouraging the two sides to resolve their outstanding disputes over oil exports and revenues also will keep the Kurdish region inside Iraq. Indeed, the development of a professional Kurdish military force is a necessary condition for effective coordination with the Baghdad government in joint operations against IS and in preparing a post-IS political plan.

Coalition military aid is premised on a belief that giving weapons and training to Kurdish forces, known as peshmergas, will in itself improve their performance against IS, a notion Kurdish leaders were quick to propagate. But the evolving state of Iraqi Kurdish politics makes for a rather more ambiguous picture: the dominant, rival parties, the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), have been moving away from a strategic framework agreement that had stabilised their relationship after a period of conflict and allowed them to present a unified front to the central government as well as neighboring Iran and Turkey. Moreover, their historic leaders, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, are on the political wane, triggering an intra-elite power struggle. (...) While coalition members have tied military assistance to acceptance of the central government's sovereign role in its distribution, they are jeopardising their stated interest in preserving Iraq's unity. Indeed, by upsetting the fragile equilibrium among Kurds, between Kurds and Sunni Arabs and between the Kurds and the governments in Baghdad, Tehran and Ankara, they risk weakening it.

(...) Coalition members, working in coordination, need instead to persuade Kurdish parties to complete the reunification of their parallel military, security and intelligence agencies within a single, non-partisan structure by empowering the KDP-PUK joint brigades and the peshmergas' most professional elements; to cooperate with non-Kurdish actors in the disputed territories; and

to develop a post-IS plan with the central government that cements security cooperation in these territories and moves forward the process of resolving their status through negotiation.

(...)

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the governments of the U.S. and other coalition members:

Establish a coalition central command through which to channel military aid to Iraqi Kurds (...)

To the peshmerga affairs minister and the KDP and PUK leaderships:

Establish a joint operations room bringing together the minister, KDP-PUK joint-brigade commanders and relevant security agencies to draft a Kurdish national security strategy that would ease delivery of coalition military aid (...)

To the Kurdistan region presidency:

Encourage consolidation of KRG institutions in general and the peshmerga affairs ministry in particular and their emancipation from partisan control (...)

To the government of Iraq: Develop a joint security strategy with the KRG to counter IS, and work with the KRG to settle outstanding disputes over oil exports and budget allocations (...)

To the governments of Turkey and Iran: Support coalition efforts toward institutionalizing peshmerga forces and reinforcing their cooperation with the central government.

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