



# Adding fuel to the fire? Arming the Kurds

by Jan Joel Andersson and Florence Gaub

This summer marks the first morbid anniversary of the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as a proto-state entity. Following the group's proclamation that it had re-established the Muslim caliphate, a US-led alliance was formed to combat the terrorist outfit. Iraq has subsequently seen air strikes, a change of government, and deliveries of weapons to the country's Kurds. Although ISIL has not been defeated, it has lost 25% of its territory and 20% of its troop strength. Moreover, its advances into Iraqi Kurdistan in particular seem to have been halted – but for how long?

## In the line of fire

The Kurdish-inhabited parts of both Iraq and Syria came into ISIL's crosshairs in the summer of 2014. After the fall of Mosul, the jihadists began to encroach on the Iraqi Kurdish region's – disputed – borders, only to clash violently with the Peshmerga (Kurdish military forces which operate independently from the Iraqi army). Battles between the Peshmerga and ISIL in villages around Kirkuk and Mosul left at least 1,000 Kurdish fighters dead, while ISIL lost some 3,000 men, according to Massoud Barzani, the region's president. In Syria, the Kurdish town of Kobane was placed under a highly sensationalised siege by ISIL, prompting German defence minister Ursula von der Leyen to voice fears of an imminent genocide.

In the absence of an international willingness to put troops on the ground (arguably the only way

to fully defeat ISIL) and in light of the decent performance by the somewhat underequipped Peshmerga, the decision by European states to send weapons and ammunition to Iraqi Kurdistan was logical. It also had precedent: other countries in the region and the CIA had been delivering arms to the Kurds for some time. US support has, for example, contributed to the establishment of eight Kurdish brigades worth \$92 million. While military aid was also sent to the Iraqi army, the majority of European assistance went to the northern Kurdistan region.

## Lending a European hand

Whether or not to send arms to Kurdish forces fighting ISIL is strictly a national decision. Though the Council of the European Union welcomed that individual member states will provide military aid to the Kurdish regional authorities in its foreign affairs configuration on 15 August 2014, EU foreign ministers agreed that arms shipments 'will be done according to the capabilities and national laws of the member states and with the consent of the Iraqi national authorities.'

Estonia donated one million rounds of 7.62mm ammunition to the Kurds in late August, while Croatia, the Czech Republic and Hungary have all announced that will provide large quantities of machine guns, Kalashnikov assault rifles, recoilless rifles, millions of rounds of small arms ammunition and thousands of hand grenades.



Italy is providing 200 machine guns, 2,000 rocket propelled grenades and nearly one million rounds of Soviet-era ammunition. Most of this equipment was seized by Italy in 1994 from a vessel which tried to run the blockade to ship arms to Serbia during the wars in ex-Yugoslavia. The UK is reportedly offering 61 tons of weapons and ammunition, and a small team of British soldiers is already in northern Iraq training the Kurds how to operate the L1A 12.7mm heavy machine gun. France has promised weapons, too, although it is not clear exactly what kind. Outside of the Union, Albania has sent 22 million 7.62mm rounds, 15,000 hand grenades and thousands of artillery shells.

The largest European contribution to date has been made by Germany. In addition to its earlier humanitarian and medical aid, Berlin elected to supply large amounts of military equipment to Kurdish forces in northern Iraq last August. The first shipment then arrived in Erbil, the region's capital, within weeks of the decision. Divided in three tranches, the German military aid package includes 8 million rounds of small arms ammunition, 16,000 G3 and G36 assault rifles, 8,000 P1 pistols, 40 MG3 machine guns, 10,000 hand grenades, 30 MILAN anti-tank guided missile launchers with 500 missiles, 200 Panzerfaust 3 light anti-tank launchers with 2,500 rounds and 40 Carl-Gustaf 84mm recoilless rifles with 1,000 battlefield illumination shells.

In addition, Germany is supplying 4,000 helmets and sets of body armour and other equipment such as night vision devices, tents, radios, field kitchens and wheeled vehicles necessary to equip infantry brigades. A small team of German military advisers is also currently in northern Iraq to provide training on the more advanced anti-tank systems.

### One year later...

The Kurds have successfully prevented ISIL from advancing into their territory: however, the jihadists continue to collect heavy weaponry abandoned by the Iraqi army elsewhere, allowing them to outgun the Peshmerga. Moreover, the main threat now seems to be political rather than tactical. The organisation has not only managed to detonate several bombs in Kirkuk, it is also recruiting among Kurdish youth. At least 500 Kurds have joined the ranks of the jihadists so far, and a suicide bombing perpetrated in April by young Kurdish man in Erbil showcased that even the population of Iraqi Kurdistan is not immune to the appeal of ISIL.

This is unexpected for two reasons: although conservative and Sunni Muslim (and boasting the highest number of mosques per capita in the world), Kurdish society is religiously moderate and largely nationalistic in outlook. Second, mosques, the traditional point of recruitment for jihadists, are closely monitored by the Kurdish authorities.

ISIL evades traditional intelligence mechanisms by recruiting through personal contacts and the internet. This, along with the fact that many Iraqi Arabs have relocated to the Kurdish region after fleeing ISIL, makes the infiltration of jihadists more likely.

The tactical difficulties in tackling ISIL are exacerbated by a split in the Kurdish political leadership in Iraq: the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan maintain control over different parts of the region and over their respective Peshmerga forces. Although the division of these troops, and therefore the diluting of efforts to fight ISIL, has become a topic of intense debate in Erbil over the last year, no concrete steps have been taken to integrate the forces' two wings.

In addition, deliveries of arms to the Kurdish region raise some concerns over its relations with the central government. Erbil has been at odds with Baghdad over key concerns ranging from the status of Kirkuk, the region's oil fields, and, most importantly, the issue of potential Kurdish independence. Since the end of the First World War, Kurds have been scattered over several adjacent countries (with the majority found in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran), and many have aspired to statehood. In a perhaps prophetic move, several US congressmen suggested that the Kurdish region of Iraq be recognised as a separate country in April in order to not have to clear weapons shipments with Baghdad – a proposal which was rejected last month.

Three months ago, President Barzani reiterated that the fight against ISIL has only delayed the quest for Kurdish independence and not put an end to it. Although he vowed that the desired end state would not be achieved by force, there are fears that the weapons delivered today might one day be used to carve out the long-awaited state of Kurdistan.

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