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## Iraq's Kurds reach a fork in the road

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<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2014/Sep-05/269575-iraqs-kurds-re...> [1]

## Iraq's Kurds reach a fork in the road

The French arming of the American revolutionaries in 1778 is beginning to resemble today's American support for the Iraqi Kurds. France provided weapons, munitions, money and even soldiers that proved crucial to American independence from Britain.

The Americans are now arming and fighting (from the air) on the side of the Iraqi Kurds against ISIS. The French did it to weaken Britain. The Americans are doing it to prevent the spread of a group that wants to deny the Kurds, and many others, an independent future. As French military assistance helped win the war for independence, American military aid to the Kurds could be just as crucial.

So far the weapons, coupled with U.S. airstrikes, have yielded hard-won victories against ISIS in the Mosul Dam area, in Amirli and elsewhere. However, two potential problems present themselves. The weapons may bolster the Kurds' secessionist tendencies and Western action may look as if it were being directed against Sunnis. Over-arming the Kurds could backfire and destabilize Iraq and the region. Likewise singling out the Kurds for material assistance could further alienate Iraqi Sunnis.

"You calibrate what you are providing and you ensure that you communicate conditionality," Derek Harvey, a former lieutenant colonel and senior analytical specialist for Iraq who had served with General David Petraeus, said in an interview. Harvey says arming the Kurds is about limiting the quantity and the quality of the weapons. The U.S. must limit the types and quantities of weapons provided to the Kurds so that it is sufficient for them to defeat ISIS. Small arms, mortars and munitions do not by themselves provide a capability to change the political dynamics allowing Iraqi Kurds to break away from Iraq.

The political dispute between Baghdad and Irbil is genuine. In 2012 a peshmerga official was quoted as saying his troops could attack Iraqi government soldiers "at any minute." In

November 2012 clashes erupted in Tuz Khormata, one of the disputed areas claimed by Iraqi Arabs, Turkmens and Kurds. The clashes resulted in the killing of one civilian and 12 Iraqi soldiers.

Still it might seem ironic that analysts are looking at the consequences of arming the Kurds in light of the latest United Nations report on the crimes committed by ISIS. More than 1 million people have been forced to flee since June 10; 1,500 Iraqi conscripts were shot in Tikrit on July 12; 1,000 Yazidis have been killed and 2,750 have been kidnapped or enslaved. Iraq has become a “blood soaked killing field,” says Amnesty International. Defending his government’s almost unprecedented decision to arm 4,000 Kurdish fighters, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that “ISIS is a threat to the survival of Iraq’s Kurdistan region and to Iraqi statehood itself – and even to the already fragile regional order in the Middle East.” Germany will also be supplying the Kurds with anti-tank rockets, assault rifles, hand grenades, mine-clearing equipment, night-vision goggles, field kitchens and tents.

The fact that Apache helicopters and F-16s are not included in the package mean the Iraqi military will maintain superiority over the peshmerga. Two additional states will certainly prove an obstacle to Kurdish independence aspirations. “Turkey and Iran are much more powerful than the Iraqi Kurds will ever be even if the Iraqi government were somehow to lose some of its advantage in pure military [terms] to the Kurds,” observed David Pollock, a senior foreign policy expert at the Washington Institute.

Nor is there unanimous consensus among Iraqi Kurds about advancing on the independence track. Not wanting to be seen as exploiting the current chaos in Iraq, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, led by former President Jalal Talabani, is not in full support of secession from Iraq.

Furthermore, the president of the Kurdish Regional Government, Massoud Barzani, stressed on Aug. 9 that “Iraq cannot withstand these conflicts anymore ... things in Iraq are heading toward a confederation.” His mention of “confederation” instead of “independence” suggested that even Barzani himself was perhaps taking a step back from the independence project.

By singling out Kurds in supplying weapons, the U.S. risks provoking a feeling of disenfranchisement among Sunnis in Iraq. ISIS can depict this move, plus the recent U.S. backing of Iraqi government forces and Shiite militias, as well as Kurds, in Amirli as a sectarian affront to all Sunnis. However, there are also moderate Sunnis in Iraq desperate to receive military aid and join the global coalition against ISIS. Already two anti- ISIS brigades have been formed in Mosul to join the Sunni tribes in Anbar and Salaheddine provinces in combating this “death cult.”

For Harvey, to further alleviate those concerns, the U.S. should continue supporting a unified and sovereign Iraq, as did the latest United Nations and European Union resolutions on the crisis in the country. It should also focus on finding a political solution to the internal disagreements between Kurds and Arabs.

As the Obama administration is contemplating a comprehensive regional strategy to fight ISIS, and the American public is weary of another foreign war, there are local partners on the ground who can be strengthened. Arming the Iraqi Kurds, the Iraqi army and Sunni moderates will be in the United States’ interest.

By arming the peshmerga the U.S. will enhance its leverage with the Kurds, allowing them to

advise against an independent Kurdistan. Pollack explains that “by supporting the Kurds in Iraq we’ve become a partner that can influence their decision to try and work things out with the Iraqi government and not on their own.” This leverage could triple if more U.S. military personnel are deployed on the ground.

However, as the complications arising from Kurdish statehood become more obvious every day, the Iraqi Kurds have come to realize that they will need more than weapons to protect their relative prosperity and an independent future.

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