

# What Iraq's Kurdish Peshmerga Really Need

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Aug 7, 2014

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**While the Kurds could use more ammunition and weapons, they also need coordination, air support, and logistical help -- all of which the United States can provide on short notice.**

**P**rior to August 1, the Iraqi Kurds had not felt the full brunt of attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, which now styles itself "the Islamic State"). Yet after a string of powerful ISIS strikes on Kurdish peshmerga units between Mosul and the Syrian border, the Kurdistan Regional Government's forces are fully engaged. On August 5, KRG president Masoud Barzani stated, "We have decided to go on the offensive and fight the terrorists to the last breath."

The United States should certainly support its historic allies, the Iraqi Kurds, in this fight. However, amid a clamor of voices calling for Washington to arm the peshmerga, it is important to draw lessons from the recent fighting that highlight the Kurdish military's more pressing needs.

## KURDISH MILITARY PERFORMANCE

**O**n August 1-3, ISIS launched a phased offensive in western Ninawa province, in the triangle encompassing the Mosul Dam area, the Rabiya border crossing with Syria, and the Sinjar district, a Kurdish-controlled salient populated mainly by Iraq's Yazidi minority. The attacks caused a number of peshmerga units to fall back toward the KRG or even into Syrian Kurdistan to escape ISIS forces. Simultaneously, on the eastern side of the KRG in Diyala province, Kurdish forces are stuck in an attritional see-saw battle against ISIS in the twin towns of Jalula and Saadiya.

In a bid to explain the peshmerga setbacks in these battles, Kurdish media have focused on the need for more and newer weapons. Another key theme has been ammunition shortages -- a traditional face-saver for Middle Eastern armies, based on the premise that even the bravest troops have to give way temporarily if they lack the means to

fight.

While these explanations may be partially true, the battles in Ninawa and Diyala highlight a range of other weaknesses among the peshmerga that can and should be reduced through U.S. security cooperation. These weaknesses include:

- *Poor disposition of forces.* Perhaps the main reason why western Ninawa fell to ISIS is because the disposition of Kurdish forces made it very difficult to defend that territory. The Sinjar and Rabiya areas encompass a large strip of land along the Syrian border that extends deep into ISIS-held territory. Adequately garrisoning these areas requires significant forces, but only two small peshmerga brigades were stationed there on August 1. Likewise, ISIS was able to develop advanced outposts on either side of the Tigris River approaching Mosul Dam and in the Christian areas east of Mosul due to the paucity of peshmerga forces in those areas. This is not because the KRG has insufficient forces -- rather, peshmerga units are overconcentrated around Kirkuk, where the two main Kurdish factions, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), are competing for influence.
- *Intra-Kurdish rivalries.* The peshmerga's stumbles in Ninawa and Diyala have hurt Kurdish military pride, prompting recriminations between KDP and PUK supporters. Worse yet, the setbacks were apparently caused in part by poor coordination between some KDP and PUK units, even when those units were mixed together in purportedly unified Regional Guard Brigades. Where RGB units have failed, the solution has often been to call on less professional but more trusted peshmerga units that remain under party control.
- *Alienation from Sunni tribes.* Both western Ninawa and northern Diyala have strong Sunni Arab tribal networks. This is particularly true in Rabiya, where the Shammar tribal confederation is based. Unfortunately, the Kurdish military has a bad relationship with tribes in both areas, meaning that peshmerga units can expect little or no intelligence support or reinforcements from these Sunni Arab communities. Although forging a better relationship is a tall order due to the bitter history of competing Arab and Kurdish territorial claims, such efforts may become vital if the KRG intends to garrison these areas in the long term.
- *Tactical surprise.* Kurdish forces are no less vulnerable than the Iraqi army to the panic caused by surprise attacks, such as the June ISIS advance in Mosul and the more recent assault in Sinjar.
- *Inexperience.* Although the peshmerga have received thorough training, particularly those in RGBs, many Kurdish units are still inexperienced. Their older commanders fought Saddam's army in guerrilla warfare, but those experiences do not necessarily prepare them for vehicle-mounted militia warfare or counterinsurgency -- the poacher does not automatically know how to be a gamekeeper. No senior peshmerga officer or planner has experience with modern combined-arms offensive warfare, while the rank and file are typically much younger, lacking combat experience and, critically, the Arabic language skills needed to interact profitably with Sunni Arab communities.
- *Equipment and logistics.* The peshmerga have significant stocks of heavy weaponry, including tanks, rocket artillery, and howitzers, so any claim that ISIS can outgun them is simply untrue. But they may lack the ammunition required to sustain artillery barrages throughout the duration of offensive operations, as well as the spare parts and maintenance capabilities needed to keep armored vehicle fleets in service. In other words, the peshmerga face a logistics shortfall, not an equipment shortfall per se.

## **PRACTICAL U.S. ASSISTANCE**

**T**he United States has fought alongside the peshmerga in the past and can provide powerful assistance again.

Weapons deliveries could be part of this effort; indeed, the simplest way to guarantee U.S. logistical and sustainment support is for the peshmerga to receive and use U.S. weapons and vehicles. In particular, items such as light antitank rockets, radios, night-vision aids, and body armor are badly needed. Yet Washington can also be of use in other ways, in some cases immediately:

- *Operational and intelligence support.* Although ISIS practices good operational security, U.S. intelligence assets could undoubtedly help reduce the group's ability to achieve tactical surprise against the peshmerga. Washington could also provide impartial advice that might help overcome some intra-Kurdish tensions over deployments and unit integration.
- *Airpower.* The United States can help weave together peshmerga ground forces with federal Iraqi and U.S. airpower. During the 2003 U.S. invasion, the combination of peshmerga troops and American airstrikes was devastating. One key area of U.S. coordination might be the establishment and maintenance of a Fire Support Coordination Line (FSCL), which would designate map grids in which the Iraqi air force was free to conduct bombing runs at any given time. Only the U.S. military has the experience, the surveillance capabilities, and the links in Baghdad and Erbil to maintain a system capable of minimizing friendly fire incidents. If and when Iraqi F-16s and Apache helicopters become available, Baghdad could send a welcome signal to Erbil by having their first mission be supporting Kurdish forces -- not posing a threat to them.
- *Logistics.* The United States is well positioned to deliver stocks of Eastern Bloc ammunition and spare parts that the Kurds need to keep their Soviet-era heavy weapons in use. Sourcing these supplies through the United States rather than less scrupulous third parties might reassure Baghdad. This in turn could ease the difficulty of obtaining end-user certificates for arms delivered to the KRG.
- *Long-term integration of RGBs under a Ministry of Peshmerga.* The United States has long backed efforts to professionalize Kurdish forces within a unified KRG ministry setting. U.S. involvement and training can help reduce the risk of future peshmerga refragmentation along party lines -- an outcome that could be highly destabilizing for the KRG. The U.S. military should also provide combined arms training and advice to ensure effective employment of armor, infantry, artillery, and air assets.

Although the peshmerga suffered some hard knocks in the past couple weeks, they are already counterattacking -- and far faster than the U.S.-trained Iraqi army, it must be said. The Kurdish military remains the ideal ally against ISIS: it is highly motivated, quite well equipped, and perfectly positioned to assault ISIS along a broad front. Now is the time to commence U.S. airstrikes in support of the peshmerga, and to greatly intensify broad-based U.S. security cooperation. The latter effort should be structured to last well beyond the current fight against ISIS and involve more than the provision of U.S. weapons.

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