

# Last Man Standing: U.S. Security Cooperation and Kurdistan's Peshmerga

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga forces need Washington's military cooperation if the United States expects Kurdish troops to help stabilize Iraq.

**O**n July 22, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) attacked Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) positions in Kurdish-populated areas of Tel Kaif, between Erbil and Mosul. The assault saw ISIS fighters advance in tracked and wheeled armored vehicles captured from the Iraqi army and Federal Police. The attack is the latest sign that the fragile truce between the two sides is rapidly breaking down, with dozens of Kurds killed in clashes along the entire frontier since June. Maintaining more than four hundred miles of frontline positions facing areas held by forces loyal to ISIS, the Kurds are in need of U.S. military support.

## HOLDING THE LINE

**F**or weeks the peshmerga militia forces of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of three main political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, have clashed with ISIS around Hamrin Lake, Tuz Khormatu, and Kirkuk. PUK continues to allow the federal Iraqi air force to use the Kirkuk air base it now holds to bomb ISIS forces along this front, and PUK recently, and unprecedentedly, began allowing Shiite militias to reinforce Shiite enclaves near Kirkuk and Tuz Khormatu using Sulaymaniyah airport and land routes within the KRG. The largest Iraqi Kurdish party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), is likewise getting drawn into anti-ISIS fighting. ISIS is launching heavy attacks on Syrian Kurds adjacent to KDP-held zones and has begun to purge Kurds from Mosul, just forty miles west of the KRG's capital, Erbil. The attack at Tel Kaef fell upon KDP forces.

Mindful of these developments, Kurdish politicians of all parties have increasingly come to realize that a nonaggression stance toward ISIS -- which recently shortened its name to the Islamic State (IS) when it declared a caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq -- is unsustainable. On July 2, KRG president Masoud Barzani's chief of staff, Fuad

Hussein, told a Washington Institute Policy Forum that "today [ISIS] is not attacking the Kurds but tomorrow they will." The Kurds are also beginning to shape their demands should they collaborate in an anti-ISIS campaign, for which Iraqi Kurdistan would be the ideal launchpad. On July 20, Masrur Barzani, head of the KRG National Security Council, added, "ISIS now has a lot of modern military equipment in their possession, and to fight against them I think the peshmerga have to be much better equipped than they are." A ramp-up of U.S. security assistance to the Kurds is merited, particularly as a hedge against the difficulties of U.S. security cooperation with the shattered and Iran-influenced federal Iraqi security forces.

## THE PESHMERGA

**T**he peshmerga (meaning "those who do not fear death") is the Kurds' traditional fighting cadre. After the KRG was formed in 1992, the peshmerga began its slow evolution into the Kurdish region's unified armed force. This evolution remains only partially complete: 33,000 peshmerga are now formed into ten Regional Guard Brigades (RGBs) under the KRG Ministry of Peshmerga, with plans to eventually field 70,000 peshmerga in twenty-one RGBs. Another 30,000 peshmerga now serve in the KRG Ministry of Interior's Zerevani, a gendarmerie-type paramilitary police force. And at least another 70,000 peshmerga are still gathered in traditional smaller units controlled directly by the KDP and PUK party politburos.

Espirit de corps and rapid mobilization are the peshmerga's key strengths. Today's Peshmerga in the RGB units are equipped with high-standard body armor and can draw on heavy weapons support from captured Saddam Hussein-era artillery, tanks, personnel carriers, and antitank weapons. Following the recent disintegration of federal Iraqi military units in areas subsequently taken over by the peshmerga, Kurdistan also took possession of large numbers of U.S.-provided armored trucks, support vehicles, and artillery pieces.

Despite these advances, the peshmerga is still significantly underdeveloped. Outside the RGBs, peshmerga units' equipment remains rudimentary and heavy weapons are largely absent. During periods of crisis, the peshmerga relies on improvised logistical, engineering, communications, and medical capabilities, mainly drawing support from KRG civilian agencies and the public. Aside from some small, unarmored helicopters, the peshmerga currently has no air support.

With Baghdad refusing since 2003 to fund any KRG military forces except the Zerevani (which is nominally funded through the federal Ministry of Interior), operating the peshmerga has been a huge drain on the KRG budget. Indeed, Baghdad is still withholding all the KRG's monthly salary payments due to disputes over oil contracts and revenue-sharing arrangements. Under such circumstances, maintenance of the current mobilization and procurement of new equipment and training are particularly difficult for Kurdistan to finance.

## U.S.-KURDISTAN SECURITY COOPERATION

**C**ooperation between the U.S. military and peshmerga should be excellent considering the very pro-U.S. position adopted by the Kurds for decades, the pivotal U.S. role in protecting the fledgling KRG and overthrowing Saddam, and the basic affinity felt by American and Kurdish soldiers battling the same insurgents for more than a decade. In practice, however, the United States has struggled to work closely with Iraqi Kurdistan's military. Tensions between Baghdad and the KRG have been one obstacle, with the federal government claiming that Kurdistan should only be allowed to build and operate small and lightly armed paramilitary police forces, while blocking Kurdish access to end-user certificates for heavier equipment. Clashes and tension between Kurdish and federal forces have been a further complicating factor. The United States demanded a range of military reforms in Iraqi Kurdistan before it would commit to full development of the peshmerga and Zerevani, including the full integration of such forces under KRG ministries with budgetary and parliamentary oversight as opposed to political party control. The net effect of U.S. hesitation has been that only eight KRG brigades were built with \$92 million of U.S. support (as

compared with 109 U.S.-supported brigades in federal Iraq at a cost of more than \$25 billion). Today the eight Kurdish units are intact, whereas almost a quarter of the federal forces have disintegrated.

The closest U.S.-Kurdish cooperation has been achieved between counterterrorism units, and in light of the ISIS threat, a new Joint Operations Center has been established to expand this cooperation. Until 2011, the United States ran the Combined Security Mechanisms, a series of trilateral U.S.-Iraq-KRG command centers and checkpoints intended to prevent clashes between federal and Kurdish forces. The Kurds have been very open about their willingness to host a long-term U.S. military presence in Kurdistan, and at various points, the U.S. military deployed prepositioned equipment sets (tanks and armored vehicles) in the KRG to reassure the Kurds that Washington would not let Baghdad militarily pressure Iraqi Kurdistan in the future.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

**W**ith significant shared experience and mutual sacrifice fighting Iraq's insurgents, the U.S. and Kurdish militaries remain natural security partners. Iraqi Kurdistan's long frontier with ISIS and the safe domestic security environment make it an optimal air base location for U.S. drone and Special Forces operations against ISIS, whether covert or overt. The Kurdish forces are now the custodians of significant swaths of new territory and the guardians of persecuted non-Kurdish minorities who are being attacked daily by ISIS. Long-term accommodation between Kurds and neighboring ethnicities is vital for the stabilization of northern Iraq. As PUK's recent actions illustrate, the Kurds could facilitate the reinforcement of holdout pockets of federal security forces through Iraqi Kurdistan's airports. The Kurds control an important portion of Iraq's border with Syria, providing useful access to opposition-held areas.

These factors necessitate an upgrade in the U.S. military alliance with the Kurds. Such a development would improve U.S.-KRG relations after a bruising few years of differences on a raft of issues. A major new security cooperation program could tap into the \$5 billion Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund. Due to its good security and excellent airports, Iraqi Kurdistan would be an ideal venue to safely undertake a major U.S.-delivered military train-and-equip program for both Kurdish and federal Iraqi security forces. The planned reorganization of Iraq's armed forces into national army and national guard components could open the door to Kurdish RGBs receiving greater U.S. security cooperation.

The United States could also help negotiate the eventual use of substantial numbers of vehicles and weapons abandoned by the federal military and currently held by the Kurds. This equipment, overwhelmingly U.S. taxpayer funded, will need significant U.S. support services to keep in operation. Transfer of some of the material to a U.S.-supported re-equipment of the peshmerga and some back to federal Iraq would seem a fair bargain. Increased federal funding for the peshmerga and Zerevani might grease the wheels of such an agreement and could kick-start both U.S.-KRG security cooperation and maybe even federal-KRG cooperation as well.

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