# Why Iraq Should Get Apache Gunships

by Michael Knights **(/experts/michael-knights)**

Jan 13, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

## Sending a small number of U.S. Apache helicopters to Iraq would demonstrate increasing U.S. support, and any local or regional drawbacks could be addressed by offsetting measures.

The recent seizure of Fallujah by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), al-Qaeda's main affiliate in Iraq, is a shocking development. Liberated from al-Qaeda in 2004 at a cost of 122 U.S. deaths, the city sits just twenty-five miles from Baghdad International Airport. Against the backdrop of this crisis, Iraq has once again sought to purchase an unspecified number of Boeing AH-64 Apache attack helicopters from the United States or, at minimum, to lease six of the aircraft while Congress decides the fate of a major, still-delayed arms sale. The potential benefits of sending Apaches sooner rather than later are clear, and although many have argued against such a move, their concerns are either unwarranted or readily addressable.

## U.S. CONCERNS

The remaining hurdle before a sale or lease arrangement is authorization from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ), the committee's chairman, has argued that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki could use the helicopters against his political opponents in addition to bona fide security threats such as ISIS. The senator has also objected to Baghdad's apparent collusion with attacks against the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an Iranian opposition group that found refuge in Iraq.

Others have rightfully pointed out that Apaches cannot help Iraq fight today's battles against al-Qaeda -- it would take years to absorb and field these aircraft even if they arrived soon. But sending them now would be a potent symbol of increasing U.S. support and influence. The gunship's return is a fear-inducing prospect to Iraqi insurgents who spent a decade nervously scanning the skies for U.S. and British Apaches. At a critical juncture in the fight against al-Qaeda, a U.S. promise to deliver them would send a message that help is slowly coming, and that bilateral

security cooperation is picking up again.

## IRAQI CONCERNS

Maliki's political rivals may worry that an Apache sale would signal strengthened U.S. support for the prime minister, which might make him even more intransigent about sharing power. As he considers campaigning for a third term in the national elections scheduled for April, he already appears to be falling back into his usual pre-election tactic of emphasizing sectarian politics. The Shiite premier's approach has long contributed to Sunni discontent in Iraq and, by some accounts, has been a major factor in al-Qaeda's resurgence. To the extent that a U.S. Apache sale reinforces Maliki's sectarian tendencies, the Sunni community may become less willing to help with the fight against al-Qaeda.

That said, Apaches would not give Baghdad a new means of cracking down on popular dissent. Maliki's government removes its rivals using the tried and tested means of arrest, exile, violent warnings (e.g., near-miss shootings and bombings), and, *in extremis*, assassination. If crowds of protestors threatened the government, Maliki would no doubt find plenty of less flashy ways to deal with them than attack helicopters. Other U.S. weapons such as the M1A1 Abrams tank pose an equal or greater threat to his adversaries, yet Washington sees no problem with providing them.

Iraqi Kurds arguably have a stronger rationale for opposing Apache sales. Many have painful memories of being hunted by Saddam Hussein's helicopters, some of which were used in genocidal chemical weapons attacks. Today, a handful of heavily-armored AH-64s could devastate any *peshmerga* defensive position if Baghdad sought to push back Kurdish control in areas disputed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Yet the reality is that Baghdad already has many other means to accomplish the same ends if it chose to attack the Kurds. The AGM-114 Hellfire precision munitions that Washington is rushing to Iraq are exactly the kinds of missiles one might use on a point target such as a Kurdish artillery position. And the Iraqi government will soon have in service the first of an expedited delivery of forty well-armored Russian Mi-35 attack helicopters that began arriving in November. Iraqi forces have some experience using earlier versions of the Mi-35, and it is a much simpler platform to integrate than the Apache, particularly if Russian instructors assist with operations like they have in past conflicts such as the 1998-2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian war. To the extent that a largely amoral actor like Moscow is providing critical military systems to Baghdad, Maliki will have fewer constraints on harassing his opponents. By contrast, when helicopters and other key systems come from the United States, he has be concerned about Washington pulling the plug on the extensive support required to operate such systems if he goes too far against the Kurds or Sunnis.

Indeed, concerns about Maliki's sectarian approach are a good reason to make Baghdad sweat for every major weapons system it receives from the United States. Intentionally or not, a useful "good cop, bad cop" dynamic now exists between the White House and Congress on Iraq, and it may help drag the Maliki government into prosecuting a more enlightened and proven model of population-focused counterinsurgency. Yet leaning too heavily on the "bad cop" side by delaying Apache sales indefinitely would be counterproductive.

## REGIONAL CONCERNS

Additional advanced arms sales to Maliki's Iraq could also have regional consequences that are rarely acknowledged in U.S. government circles. For example, Iran and Sunni-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia could perceive such sales as an indication that Washington is favoring Shiites. Many in the Middle East already believe that the region is increasingly caught up in a sectarian struggle between Shiites and Sunnis. To the extent that Tehran misreads Apache sales as a sign of U.S. strategic realignment toward the Shiite axis, it could lead to serious misperceptions by Iranian leaders regarding Washington's policy on the nuclear impasse or Syria.

Furthermore, to the extent that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies perceive that the United States is arming Shiites who are killing Sunnis, they may feel less constrained in pursuing policies of which Washington disapproves (e.g., arming and funding radical groups such as the Syrian Islamic Front). They might also see less reason to assist U.S. policy initiatives such as Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Moreover, the stability of Jordan and other U.S. allies could be compromised if Sunni-majority populations believe that America is becoming their enemy.

Accordingly, Washington should demonstrate to Sunni allies that the United States is being evenhanded in its regional security assistance efforts. For example, it could offset Apache sales to Iraq with the resumption of nonlethal assistance to the opposition Supreme Military Council in Syria.

# CONCLUSION

Reservations about selling Apaches to Baghdad are serious and deserve close scrutiny. But some of these arguments are conceptually weak, and many of the downsides of such a sale could be offset by other U.S. initiatives. Sending a small initial order of Apaches would be exactly the kind of drip-fed concessionary tactic that Maliki uses to bring his rivals to heel -- which may account for why it is a good tactic to use on Maliki.

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