Natalia Bosch

Dr. Bessetti-Reyes

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Arm the Kurds: A Response to the Threat of ISIS

Growing up in northern Iraq, most of my childhood friends were Kurdish. Returning to visit them this Christmas, I became aware of one of the greatest differences between them and me. Each morning, my dad teaches college business classes, grades papers, attends meetings, and returns home every evening in time for dinner. My friends’ fathers pack up a few belongings, sling AK-47s over their shoulders, and set off for the battle fields for weeks at a time. Since the autumn of 2014, the Kurdish militia, called the peshmerga, has been on the front lines fighting Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). While the caliphate of ISIS endangers the lives of millions of Kurds and Arabs in Iraq, it also poses a threat to any free country. America, therefore, longs for the demise of the Islamic terrorist group but is hesitant to put U.S. boots on the ground. In order to accomplish this objective of defeating terrorism in the Middle East, America should directly arm the Kurds because the Iraqi army fled when ISIS first invaded while the Kurds fought, the Kurds are in the front lines fighting ISIS, and when the U.S. sends weapons through Baghdad, the Kurds do not always receive them.

Over the past two years, the Iraqi army has shown a few instances of major irresponsibility that have allowed ISIS a foothold in Iraq. In the summer of 2014, ISIS marched from Syria, through western Iraq, to the city of Mosul. As Michael Knights comments in his article “Iraq War III Has Now Begun,” ISIS, with less than 1,000 fighters, gained control of Mosul in three days. The Iraqi army gave up and abandoned their posts. Many soldiers and police deserted, and ISIS quickly gained entrance and complete control of Iraq’s third largest city. Weapons, vehicles, and other military equipment were left for ISIS to either destroy or use for their own military campaigns (1). Many of the supplies were weapons that America had given to the Iraqi Central Government, reporter Nabih Bulos informs the readers of *The Los Angeles Times*. Secretary-general of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, Jabbar Yawar, said, "We're talking about armaments for 200,000 soldiers, all from the Americans”(Bulos 3). Another setback in the fight against ISIS occurred in May 2015, when ISIS took the city of Ramadi. As Ali Adeeb Alnaemi states, the Iraqi army fought but ultimately fled (1). In addition, the army left behind much equipment, says journalist Yaroslav Trofimov (1-2). At first glance, these shortcomings on the part of the Iraqis may seem irrelevant to the Kurdish fighters. However, Kurds on the front lines have reported that “ISIS has very advanced weapons that it received from Iraqi army stores” and that “they target us with weapons that were abandoned in Ramadi” (Trofimov 2). As the Iraqi army deserts its stations, ISIS captures their weapons to use against militants in other parts of the country, particularly the Kurds. Thus, the irresponsibility of the Iraqi army should not be overlooked, but the United States should arm the Kurds directly instead of sending all resources to the Iraqi army.

The United States should arm the Kurds because the Kurds are on the front lines fighting ISIS. An old neighbor of ours told us that ISIS began to advance toward Dohuk, the city in which we used to live. The peshmerga did not have the right equipment and weapons to stop ISIS. Eventually, America stepped in with airstrikes, which hurt ISIS enough to stop their advancements. Journalist for *The Wall Street Journal*, Sohrab Ahmari, writes that Kurdish fighters on the front lines will need more weapons. In his article “On the Front Line Against Islamic State,” Ahmari describes an interview with Kurdish intelligence chief Masrour Barzani, who admitted the peshmerga’s need for weapons and supplies. As Ahmari writes, “Ammunition shortages are sometimes acute, and many of the Iraqi Kurds’ heavier weapons are antiques wrested years ago from Saddam Hussein’s regime.” Moreover, in the interview, Mr. Barzani says, “To help us win the war, you- the world, the West, the United States- must provide us with better weapons” (qtd. in Ahmari 1-2). Coming from the chief of intelligence, this statement is particularly powerful. The Kurds do not have the resources to purchase their own supplies, yet they are adamant about defeating ISIS. While America continues to share this fervency, it must not be reluctant to supply weapons to those on the front lines who have shown a consistent record in defeating ISIS.

The U.S. should send weapons and supplies directly to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) instead of sending them through the Iraqi government in Baghdad. Currently, any specific weapons that the U.S. supplies to those fighting ISIS are sent to Baghdad to be distributed by the Iraqi government. However, though the peshmerga is fighting ISIS, Iraq rarely sends them a share of the arms. Trofimov suspects the Iraqi government fears a Kurdish insurrection and thus will not supply them with the tools they need (2). Foreign policy experts suggest that sending supplies to the KRG would be a wise and beneficial move for the U.S. For example, Michael Knights wrote two articles explaining what America’s policy should be in regard to the Kurds’ situation. In each, he described a plan to send weapons to the Kurds, circumventing Baghdad. This plan would also set up training for the peshmerga led by the U.S. This would help them better use the technology and weapons they would be receiving, while also aiding them with developing strategy (“Last Man Standing” 2) (“Resetting the U.S.-Kurdish-Baghdad Relationship” 2). These proposals would be effective, as the U.S. could avoid sending supplies through Baghdad while also being able to oversee the peshmerga’s training. If implemented, these changes would greatly help the fight against ISIS because those on the front lines would be armed with modern war equipment.

Many people are opposed to the idea that the Kurds should be armed directly, because they believe the Kurds will use the weapons to rebel against Iraq and create their own nation. Akbar Shahid Ahmed and Christine Conetta say that some believe an independent Kurdistan to be detrimental as it will dissolve Iraq’s sovereignty as a state (2). As a result, the disunity will give ISIS an advantage as they fight to gain territory in what is now Iraq. Ahmed and Conetta write, “If Iraq were to split into three segments [. . .] the Islamic State could further consolidate its power and its hold on Iraqi Sunni Arabs by stoking tensions between the bitter neighbors” (3). When these journalists comment on “three segments” in Iraq, they are referring to the the dissension that already exists between the Sunni Arabs and the Shi’ite Arabs as well as the separation of the Kurds from Iraq. However compelling these arguments may appear, the threat of Kurdish independence is secondary. The sovereignty of Iraq is already at risk because ISIS controls much of western Iraq and desires even more land. To say America must not arm the Kurds in order to save the state of Iraq is naïve, for the Kurds cannot simply hold ISIS at bay by sheer willpower. Sooner or later, if the Kurds do not possess the right equipment, ISIS will break through front lines and there will be no sovereign state of Iraq left to save. While some say the Kurds must remain part of Iraq so that ISIS does not use the disunity to their advantage, they need to remember that ISIS will be an imposing threat whether the Kurds are independent or not. As long as the Kurds are part of Iraq, they are the ones on the front lines fighting and dying for the freedom of Iraq. Thus, if the American government, which has strived to produce a free and democratic state of Iraq, does not wish Iraq to be defeated and overtaken by ISIS, it must arm the Kurds for battle.

As modern technology brings the Near East nearer than ever before, Americans feel the effects of terrorism as never before. The desire for the defeat of ISIS is strong, and Americans hope it comes soon. The U.S. government shares these sentiments and must look for a way to end the struggle against the Islamic State. America should arm the Kurds because of their courage and consistent winning record against ISIS. It is necessary for preserving peace not only in the Middle East but also around the globe.

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