

III. Arms transfers and the use of force against the Islamic State

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As discussed in section I, the rise of Islamic State (IS) in the interlinked conflicts in Iraq and Syria resulted in several strategies by external actors specifically aimed at dealing with IS. This section draws on SIPRI's long-standing research on international arms transfers and explores the ways in which such transfers were used as an emergency measure to try to contain and roll back the advance of IS in Iraq.

In 2014 a large number of states became involved in military action aimed at halting and pushing back IS. Two main approaches were taken by these states: airstrikes on IS, and sending weapons and other military aid to strengthen local forces fighting IS. To support forces of the Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) fighting IS on the ground, the United States took the lead in forming a coalition of 60 states to attack IS from the air. This US-led 'Operation Inherent Resolve' targeted IS in both Iraq and Syria, although not all coalition states were involved in attacking targets in both countries.¹ However, all the countries in the coalition, including the USA, were reluctant to involve themselves in direct combat with IS on the ground. Instead, a number of countries in the coalition provided support by supplying arms to Iraqi forces in the form of emergency aid and by allowing the completion of planned transfers.

Pre-2014 arms transfers

Since the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 Iraq has been rebuilding its armed forces to combat several armed groups in the country. By the end of 2011, by which point most US forces had withdrawn and the country was largely dependent on its own armed forces, Iraq had acquired large numbers of weapons. These had come mainly from the USA, but also from other countries such as Russia, Ukraine and several other European states. Such supplies primarily included large quantities of lighter types of arms and support equipment, for example, hundreds of thousands of small arms, over 10 000 light armoured vehicles and over 100 transport helicopters.² These supplies occurred at a particularly chaotic time, and the whereabouts of many of the small arms and light weapons are unknown.

¹ Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL Coalition Ministerial Meeting, US Department of State, 3 Dec. 2014, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/234627.htm>>; and Katzman, K., et al., *The 'Islamic State' Crisis and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress R43612 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 11 Feb. 2015), p. 7.

² Holtom, P. et al., 'International arms transfers', *SIPRI Yearbook 2010*, p. 302.

Several armed groups active in Iraq during that period most likely obtained a large proportion of their weapons from government stockpiles.³ From 2011, while the US armed forces were withdrawing their heavy arms, Iraq was acquiring increasing numbers of heavier and more advanced equipment, for example, 140 modern M-1A1 tanks from the USA and 24 EC-635 armed helicopters from Germany. In 2012–13 Iraq took the next step in rebuilding its armed forces by ordering 36 F-16 combat aircraft from the USA, and 15 Mi-28 and 28 Mi-35 combat helicopters from Russia, all for delivery from around mid-2014.

The Syrian Government started a process of military modernization in the years immediately before the outbreak of the war in 2011, which added new weapons to its existing arsenals. During the war it continued to receive arms from Iran and Russia, although it remains unclear in what volumes. At the same time, groups involved in the fighting against the Syrian Government received military aid from several countries in the Middle East and from the USA.⁴

Whereas the Iraqi and Syrian governments, to a greater or lesser extent, have access to arms from abroad, IS does not. Instead, IS seems to have acquired most of its weapons by capturing them from government forces and stockpiles in Iraq and Syria. While IS is reportedly able to generate an income of \$1 million a day, this does not seem to have been used for the import of notable volumes of arms; nor does it appear as if states have supported IS with military aid.⁵ The chaotic situation in Syria since the beginning of 2011 has provided armed groups with the opportunity to capture significant amounts of weapons from the Syrian Government's arsenals.⁶ In addition, IS has captured arms from other armed groups in Syria, including some that had been supplied by several countries directly to those rebel groups.⁷ These weapons seem to have provided IS with the technical means—its progress has been the result of several factors, weapons being one of them—to sustain its military campaign and its surprisingly rapid advances in Iraq in 2014.

IS's arsenal was further enhanced when in the first half of 2014 its forces managed to defeat Iraqi units on a number of occasions. IS overran several Iraqi military bases and captured significant stocks of arms in addition to

³ Holtom et al. (note 2).

⁴ Wezeman, P. D., 'Arms transfers to Syria', *SIPRI Yearbook 2013*, pp. 269–73; and Wezeman, P. D., 'Restricting arms supplies to Syria', *SIPRI Yearbook 2014*, pp. 23–30.

⁵ Lister, C., 'Cutting off ISIS' cash flow', Brookings Doha Center, 24 Oct. 2014, <<http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/10/24-lister-cutting-off-isis-jabhat-al-nusra-cash-flow>>.

⁶ Blanford, N., 'Qalamoun offensive', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Jan. 2014.

⁷ Higgins, E., 'ISIS deploys Croatian weapons against the Iraqi army', Brown Moses Blog, 8 Mar. 2014, <<http://brown-moses.blogspot.se/2014/03/isis-deploys-croatian-weapons-against.html>>; Malas, N., 'Rebel-on-rebel violence seizes Syria', *Wall Street Journal*, 18 Sep. 2013; and Roggio, B., 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant overruns air defense base in Hama', *The Long War Journal*, 14 Sep. 2013, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/islamic_state_of_ira_7.php>.

those seized in Syria.⁸ The amount of weapons captured has not been established, but weapons seen in the hands of IS in 2014 included weapons recently supplied by the USA to Iraq, such as M-16 rifles, light armoured vehicles and 155-mm howitzers.⁹

Arms transfers in reaction to the advances of IS

In response to the advances of IS, a coalition of countries led by (and in terms of the number of sorties, dominated by) the USA used combat aircraft to attack IS targets from the air. Iranian combat aircraft also attacked IS targets. However, as noted above, states were generally not prepared to send troops to combat IS on the ground. Instead, some of those states provided emergency military aid to Iraq, including to the regular armed forces of, and militias related to, the Iraqi Government and the KRG.

However, states supplying arms to Iraq were faced with the potential risks associated with arms transfers to fragile states.¹⁰ The poor performance of the Iraqi armed forces at the beginning of 2014 and the resulting capture of arms by IS, raised the question as to whether the Iraqi army would be able to control the new weapons it received or if these would also fall into the hands of IS. Large-scale corruption in the Iraqi armed forces was considered a related risk, especially as there were reports that recently delivered arms had already found their way on to the black market and into the hands of IS.¹¹ Another important question concerned the potential targets of the weapons: would they be used against IS or would they in the short or long term contribute to an intensification of tensions and lead to further violent conflict between Shia, Sunni and Kurdish populations within Iraq, the PKK and Turkey or intra-Kurdish groups?

In early 2014 the USA reportedly withheld approval for the supply of heavy armoured vehicles to Iraq due to concerns that the government of then Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, might use the weapons against his political opponents, mainly from the Sunni and Kurdish communities.¹² The USA linked the increase of military aid to Iraq to the establishment of a new government that would include the Sunni and Kurdish minorities (see section I). The USA increased military aid to Iraq in late 2014 after Haider al-Abadi replaced Maliki as prime minister in August, although concerns

⁸ Katzman et al. (note 1).

⁹ Conflict Armament Research, 'Islamic State weapons in Iraq and Syria', Sep. 2014; Katzman et al. (note 1), p. 6; and Prothero, M., 'Iraqi army remains on defensive as extent of June debacle becomes clearer', McClatchy, 14 July 2014.

¹⁰ For a discussion of such risks see Bromley, M., et al. 'Transfers of small arms and light weapons to fragile states: strengthening oversight and control', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, no. 2013/1, Jan. 2013, <http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=453>.

¹¹ Kirkpatrick, D. D., 'Graft hobbles Iraq's military in fighting ISIS', *New York Times*, 23 Nov. 2014.

¹² Ratnam, G., 'U.S. ramps military aid for Islamic state fight', *Foreign Policy*, 21 Nov. 2014.

remained about Abadi's commitment towards reconciliation with the Sunni minority.¹³ Another problem for the USA emerged at the end of 2014 when US-supplied weapons were reportedly transferred from the Iraqi Government to Shiite militias in Iraq with close ties to Iran.¹⁴

US officials considered the supply of heavier weapons to the KRG necessary as part of a more long-term strategy to drive back IS.¹⁵ However, they expected some opposition to such transfers from the Iraqi Government, because the weapons could be used by the KRG to expand control over more territory in Iraq.¹⁶ The Turkish Government initially opposed arms supplies to Kurdish groups in Syria because of the links between those groups and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, which has been in conflict with the Turkish Government for decades.¹⁷ Notwithstanding these concerns, the USA and a number of other states concluded that the dire situation in Iraq warranted the supply of arms despite the risks.

By 2014 the USA had already started the process of delivering advanced weapons to Iraq. However, it suspended the planned delivery of the first batch of F-16 combat aircraft in November because the base where these were to be stationed was considered a potential target for IS.¹⁸

During 2014, and particularly after the departure of Maliki as Iraqi prime minister, the USA stepped up its emergency 'train and equip' assistance of less complex weapons. At the end of the year the USA decided to deploy to Iraq approximately 2000 military trainers and advisers to the Iraqi Government and KRG armed forces, as well as Iraqi tribesmen.¹⁹ Weapons supplied included ammunition, armoured vehicles and other equipment that could be delivered quickly and deployed immediately by the Iraqi forces against IS without much training and preparation. Specific transfers included 250 second-hand wheeled armoured vehicles, thousands of Hellfire air-to-surface missiles and small arms for the Iraqi armed forces.²⁰

In an attempt to improve the integration of Sunnis in the Iraqi power structure the USA backed a plan to create an Iraqi National Guard in which

¹³ Gearan, A. and Morris, L., 'U.S. plan to fight Islamic State depends on new Iraq leadership, Kerry says during visit', *Washington Post*, 10 Sep. 2014; and Ratnam, G., 'U.S. fears new Iraqi prime minister isn't serious about Sunni outreach', *Foreign Policy*, 15 Dec. 2014.

¹⁴ Rogin, J. and Lake, E., 'Iran-backed militias are getting U.S. weapons', Bloomberg, 8 Jan. 2015 <<http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-01-08/iranbacked-militias-are-getting-us-weapons-in-iraq>>.

¹⁵ US Department of Defense, Press briefing by the Director of Operations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lt. Gen. William Mayville, 11 Aug. 2014.

¹⁶ US Department of Defense (note 15).

¹⁷ Dombey, D., Solomon, E. and Daraghi, B., 'Turkey opens corridor for Kurdish fighters to relieve Kobani', *Financial Times*, 20 Oct. 2014.

¹⁸ Barnes, J. E., 'U.S. delays delivery of F-16 fighter planes to Iraq', *Wall Street Journal*, 11 Nov. 2014.

¹⁹ Katzman et al. (note 1), pp. 1315.

²⁰ SIPRI arms transfers database; and Office of the Secretary of Defense, Justification for FY 2015 overseas contingency operations Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF), Nov. 2014.

tribal Sunni forces would be integrated. In late 2014 the USA, through the Iraqi Government, started to supply small arms and light weapons to Sunni fighters in the Anbar province as part of a short-term bridging mechanism to resource Sunni fighters that were resisting IS and supporting the Iraqi armed forces, until such time as a National Guard structure could be created.²¹ Furthermore, in August 2014 the USA, with permission from the Iraqi Government, started to supply arms directly to the security forces (*Peshmerga*) of the KRG.²² It delivered mostly lighter weapons and ammunition, including 14 400 rifles and 36 120-mm mortars.²³ In November 2014 the USA air-dropped weapons in the Syrian city of Kobane to support the Popular Protection Units (YPG)—the Syrian affiliate of the PKK. In addition, the USA, together with Turkey, supported the despatch of a group of armed Kurds from Iraq through Turkey to Kobane.²⁴

Although the USA supplied Iraq with a significant amount of military aid, the Iraqi Government also acquired weapons from other sources. In 2014, deliveries of Russian equipment increased significantly and included advanced items such as a first batch of four Mi-28 combat helicopters, which had been ordered in 2012. Impatient with what the Iraqi Government considered to be slow progress on deliveries of weapons ordered from the USA, it turned in mid-2014 to Belarus and Russia for emergency supplies of weapons that could be deployed immediately.²⁵ These included five Su-25 combat aircraft and several TOS-1 rocket launchers from Russia.

Iran also considered the advance of IS a major threat and decided to send military aid to Iraq, even though United Nations sanctions on Iran (related to the country's nuclear programme) prohibit it from exporting arms.²⁶ The volume of these Iranian arms supplies is uncertain. However, the supplies are known to have included small arms and light weapons, rocket launchers, and seven second-hand Su-25 combat aircraft delivered in June 2014 and quickly deployed against IS.²⁷ Iran also supplied unidentified volumes of weapons to the KRG forces and sent military personnel to Iraq, reportedly mainly as advisers and trainers.²⁸

²¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense (note 20).

²² Agence France-Presse, 'Official: US shipping arms to Iraqi Kurds', *Defense News*, 11 Aug. 2014.

²³ Katzman et al. (note 1), pp. 15–16; and Office of the Secretary of Defense (note 20), p. 7.

²⁴ Letsch, C., 'Kurdish peshmerga forces arrive in Kobani to bolster fight against Isis', *The Guardian*, 1 Nov. 2014; and Solaker, G. and Perry, T., 'Turkey to let Iraqi Kurds reinforce Kobani as U.S. drops arms to defenders', Reuters, 20 Oct. 2014, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/20/us-mideast-crisis-usa-airdrops-idUSKCN0I904X20141020>>.

²⁵ 'Iraqi PM Nouri Maliki: Russian jets will turn tide', BBC News, 26 June 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28042302>>.

²⁶ See chapter 15, section II, in this volume.

²⁷ Jennings, G., 'Iranian Phantom jet strikes the Islamic State in Iraq', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 30 Nov. 2014; and Gordon, M. R. and Schmitt, E., 'Iran secretly sending drones and supplies into Iraq, U.S. officials say', *New York Times*, 25 June 2014.

²⁸ Coles, I., 'Iran provided weapons to Iraqi Kurds; Baghdad bomb kills 12', Reuters, 27 Aug. 2014, <<http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/08/26/iraq-security-kurds-idINL5N0QW29U20140826>>;

Several other states, including Albania, Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy and the United Kingdom sent emergency military aid to Iraq, either to the central government or to the KRG forces.²⁹ Such military aid included, for example, 22 million rounds of rifle ammunition from Albania, 150 tonnes of small arms ammunition from Australia, 18 152-mm guns from Bulgaria, 500 tonnes of ammunition from the Czech Republic, 1 million machine gun cartridges from Estonia, thousands of mines and millions of cartridges from Hungary, 600 machine guns from Italy, and a number of machine guns from the UK.³⁰

In Germany, the decision to supply emergency aid to the Kurdish security forces was controversial. Despite the fact that Germany had already exported combat helicopters to Iraq in 2012, the supply of additional arms in early August 2014 was widely perceived domestically as a breach of standard German export control policy not to supply arms to areas of armed conflict.³¹ However, as the situation in Iraq worsened the mood changed and on 1 September 2014 a large majority in the German Parliament voted in favour of a proposal to supply arms to the Kurdish security forces with approval from the Iraqi Government. Actual German arms deliveries included 16 000 rifles and 500 Milan anti-tank missiles.³² The German Government announced that it would stagger the delivery of certain weapons and especially ammunition to the Kurdish forces based on needs assessments. In this way, the German Government hoped to prevent its weapon supplies from being diverted to activities not related to the fight against IS.³³

A request by the Kurdish regional authorities for emergency military aid was also discussed at a meeting of the European Union Political and Security Committee on 12 August 2014, which concluded that such supplies from EU member states could be carried out, but only in close coordination with the Iraqi authorities.³⁴

Chulov, M., 'Iran sends troops into Iraq to aid fight against Isis militants', *The Guardian*, 14 June 2014; and Ryan, M. and Morris, L., 'The U.S. and Iran are aligned in Iraq against the Islamic State—for now', *Washington Post*, 27 Dec. 2014.

²⁹ Coles (note 28).

³⁰ Drennan, J., 'Who has contributed what in the coalition against the Islamic State?', *Foreign Policy*, 12 Nov. 2014.

³¹ Joint Conference Church and Development (GKKE), *Rüstungsexportbericht 2014 der GKKE*, [Arms export report 2014 from the GKKE], GKKE-Schriftenreihe 60, (GKKE, Jan. 2015), pp. 77–84.

³² 'Bundestag unterstützt Waffenlieferungen' [Parliament supports arms supplies], *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 1 Sep. 2014.

³³ German Ministry of Defence, FAQ zu Iraq Hilfe [FAQ on Iraq aid], Press release, 31 Aug. 2015.

³⁴ European External Action Service, Statement by the Spokesperson following today's extraordinary meeting of the Political and Security Committee, 12 Aug. 2014.

Conclusions

The large volumes of arms supplied before 2014 to Iraq and Syria did not halt the rapid advances of IS. Instead, significant numbers of these arms were captured by IS and contributed to its military successes in 2014. By the end of the year the progress of IS had been checked. However, there are many factors that may explain this and it is hard to assess the precise impact of the arms supplies made during 2014.

Initial fears that the recipients might use the weapons supplied as emergency aid in 2014 in sectarian violence have so far not materialized. However, it is too early to make firm conclusions about the long-term consequences of the arms supplies to Iraq and Syria. The experience gained since 2003 shows that military successes can be temporary and that significant volumes of weapons in both countries can rapidly change hands fuelling further conflict. States involved in the supply of arms to Iraq and Syria as part of a strategy to defeat IS must carefully assess the effects of these transfers and their efforts to mitigate the risks involved in supplying arms. Such reflection should occur in all cases but is particularly important in the context of Iraq and Syria where arms are being supplied to several armed factions in a highly complex conflict setting in which the objective of the arms supplies, defeating IS, is only one part of the challenge to end the sectarian violence in both countries.