

Rising Extremism: The Debate Over U.S. Arms Sales to Iraq

Written by Jennifer Taw

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JENNIFER TAW, JAN 19 2014

In the first weeks of 2014, a debate arose among American policymakers and political observers as to whether the United States should sell Apache attack helicopters to Iraq.[1] Prime Minister Nour al-Maliki's government insisted that it needed the aircraft to combat al Qaeda, whose offensives in Fallujah and in Anbar province more generally were gaining serious momentum.[2] The Obama administration publicly stated that it would like to fulfill Maliki's request and several officials expressed the opinion that not to do so would be reckless and inconsistent with US interests in combatting extremism in Iraq. Some American legislators pushed back against such a sale, however, arguing that it would be irresponsible to arm the Maliki government given ongoing sectarian tensions in the country.

At stake for the United States in this debate are several competing interests. First, al Qaeda affiliates' spread in the Middle East and North Africa have become a major concern for the US; al Qaeda's gains in Iraq, in particular, have been galling. Helping the Iraqi government take a stand against these forces would be entirely consistent with Americans' desire to eviscerate the extremist organization and its offshoots. Yet, the sale of Apache helicopters would do little to help in the immediate conflict. It takes years to deliver and field aircraft once an arms deal has been made.[3] Apaches could well be useful in the future – they are very effective in counterinsurgency operations as well as in more conventional efforts[4] – but a sale today or this year could not give the Maliki government the immediate advantage against al Qaeda that his envoys and some Americans are claiming it would represent.[5]

Second, the US would like Iraq to successfully weather the transition from dictatorship to democracy. A stable Iraq with effective power sharing among Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds would set an example for the rest of the region. It could help offset rising Iranian regional hegemony, curb and even roll back the spread of extremism, and provide a bulwark against Syria's meltdown. It would allow for a freer flow of oil out of Iraq and an improvement in the conditions in the country as the economy finally got back on its feet. Today, though, such a positive outcome appears unlikely. Sectarian violence is on the rise, Syria's conflict is spilling over the borders, Iranian sway in the country appears to be increasing, and Maliki's strong-arm tactics to repress Sunni dissent have been described by many as contributing to, rather than reducing, increased extremism.[6] Under these conditions, a US sale of Apaches to Iraq could have either positive or negative effects, depending on how it was conducted. Ideally, such a sale could be used as an inducement: before an Apache deal were inked, the US could demand assurances from Maliki that he would improve domestic power sharing and limit Iran's influence in the country. Alternatively, however, if not undertaken carefully, a US decision to provide Maliki with Apaches could be perceived as a strong sign of US approval for the Iraqi prime minister and his domestic actions and even, regionally, as American prioritization of Shias over Sunnis. If a sale were understood in this way, it could not only antagonize US allies like Saudi Arabia, but rather promote increased recruitment into al Qaeda in Iraq, achieving precisely the opposite aim of the counterterrorism justifications being made for such a sale.

Third, the US likes to sell arms. Doing so fortifies the US defense industry both absolutely and relative to competitors, strengthens US influence relative to other countries, creates economies of scale for the production of American weapons, and includes the diplomatic, economic, and strategic benefits of providing long-term US training and maintenance alongside the purchase of defense articles. Selling Apaches to the Iraqis, however, is unnecessary for achieving this goal. The US has already sold Iraq over \$14 billion worth of weapons since 2005.[7] America remains

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Iraq's main supplier of advanced weapons, ensuring the US greater relative influence via arms sales than other countries and protecting US defense industry predominance. And the US is still selling arms to Iraq; in 2013, it sold Maliki's government Hellfire missiles and surveillance drones. Since 2011, it also has sold Iraq 36 F-16s, though they have yet to be delivered.[8]

Of course, it is worth noting that this profusion of arms sales to Iraq undermines the Americans' ability to use an Apache deal as an inducement. Moreover, Maliki's government has already successfully bought attack helicopters from Russia and expects the delivery of yet more in 2014.[9] That Maliki nonetheless continues to request the Apaches speaks to their prestige value, but under these conditions it is unlikely that the US holds much of a trump card. At best, the Americans could mitigate any potential negative fallout from such a sale by being cautious in their presentation of it, making rhetorical and practical assurances to Iraqi and regional Sunnis such a sale does not represent in any way an American preference for the Shia community.

In the end, a US sale of Apache helicopters to the Maliki regime would at best have no substantive effect on Maliki's short-term ability to combat al Qaeda in Iraq and at worst, if undertaken without adequate care, would immediately antagonize Iraqi and regional Sunnis and contribute to increased extremism. Such a sale would offer the US little power in terms of an inducement in light of Iraq's ability to buy attack helicopters elsewhere and given the multitude of other American arms sales into the country. On the upside, American manufacturer Boeing would definitely benefit from an Apache deal with Iraq, with concomitant benefits in terms of US jobs and retention of the American competitive edge. Ultimately, it is likely that the debate, which already appears to be shifting in favor of the arms sale, will be decided on this final basis. Fortunately, the Obama administration and relevant members of Congress appear to be sensitive to the political harms such a decision could cause and they are likely to take steps to assuage concerns, even while approving the sale.

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[1] "U.S. Senators Hesitate Sending Arms to Iraq Fearing Wider Sectarian Conflict," *RT*, January 9, 2014, <http://rt.com/news/senators-hesitate-sending-iraq-347/> [accessed January 17, 2014]; Carla Babb, "Iraqi Ambassador: New Iraq Chooses Its Own Partners," *Voice of America*, <http://www.voanews.com/content/iraqi-ambassador-new-iraq-chooses-its-own-partners/1827688.html> [accessed January 17, 2014]; "Senate Moves Toward Supporting U.S. Helicopters for Iraq," Reuters, January 9, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/10/us-usa-iraq-helicopters-idUSBREA081MP20140110> [accessed January 17, 2014]

[2] Loveday Morris and Ernesto Londoño, "Iraq's Maliki Says He Has Asked for Weapons from U.S., Will Also Seek Training for Troops," *Washington Post*, January 16, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqs-maliki-says-he-has-asked-for-weapons-from-us-will-also-see-training-for-troops/2014/01/16/0f369ed6-7ea0-11e3-9556-4a4bf7bcdb84_story.html [accessed January 17, 2014]

[3] "Once an LOA has been signed, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), a Defense Department agency that oversees security assistance programs, buys the item or items from U.S. manufacturers. This purchase normally goes through Defense Department procurement channels, and may not happen quickly; the time lag between an LOA and a delivery can take a year or more, particularly for complex weapons systems," an excerpt from "Just the Facts," a joint project of the Center for International Policy, the Latin America Working Group Education Fund, and the Washington Office on Latin America, http://justf.org/Program?program=Foreign_Military_Sales, [accessed January 17, 2014]

[4] For more on the Apache helicopter's utility, see: "The Green Book," *ARMY Magazine* 63:10 (October 2013), 291, http://www.ausa.org/publications/armymagazine/archive/2013/10/Documents/WeaponsAviation_GreenBook2013.pdf

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[5] David Kenner, "Maliki's Deputy Blames Him for Fallujah's Fall," Passport, *Foreign Policy*, January 13, 2014, http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/01/13/malikis_deputy_blames_him_for_fallujahs_fall [accessed January 17, 2014]

[6] "Iraq Arrests: A Crackdown on Opponents?" *Al Jazeera*, December 30, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2013/12/iraq-arrests-crackdown-opponents-201312308362314635.html> [accessed January 17, 2014]; Tony Capaccio, "Gates Says al-Qaeda in Iraq Seizes on Anti-Sunni Maliki," *Bloomberg Politics*, January 13, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-01-14/gates-says-al-qaeda-in-iraq-seizes-on-anti-sunni-maliki.html> [accessed January 17, 2014]

[7] Richard Sisk, "US to Ramp Up Arms Deliveries to Iraq," *Military.com*, January 6, 2014, <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2014/01/06/us-to-ramp-up-arms-deliveries-to-iraq.html> [accessed January 17, 2014]

[8] Gopal Ratnam, "U.S. Providing Drones and Missiles to Aid Iraq in Terror Fight," *Bloomberg Politics*, December 26, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-12-26/u-s-providing-drones-and-missiles-to-aid-iraq-in-terror-fight.html> [accessed January 17, 2014]

[9] "Russia to Become Iraq's Second Biggest Arms Supplier," *BBC News*, October 9, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-19881858> [accessed January 17, 2014]; "Iraq Receiving Russian Arms Under \$4.3B Deal," *DefenseNews*, October 17, 2013, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20131017/DEFREG03/310170015/Iraq-Receiving-Russian-Arms-Under-4-3B-Deal> [accessed January 17, 2014]

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