



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on June 14, 2014

## Unknown Quantity of U.S. Weapons Now in Hands of Militants in Iraq

Even as Senators Mitch McConnell, John McCain, and other congressional Republicans are urging President Obama to rush aid to the beleaguered Iraq government, Pentagon officials have acknowledged there is no way to know the amount of American arms that have fallen into the hands of the Iraq and Syrian militants now battling to overthrow the Baghdad regime.



The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an al-Qaeda affiliate, is “driving some of these vehicles, they’re in possession of some of this stuff, but I’d be loathe to tell you that we actually have a really solid sense of what they’ve got,” Pentagon Press Secretary Rear Adm. John Kirby told reporters Friday. The State Department, meanwhile, expressed concerns that by rushing more military hardware to Iraq, the United States could end up arming the wrong side.

“We are certainly concerned that the fact that [ISIS] has gotten its hands on so many weapons, both in Syria and Iraq, is a very serious security concern for both countries,” State Department Deputy Press Secretary Marie Harf told reporters. “But we do believe that there is a path forward here working with the Iraqi army to bolster their capacity. But it needs to be matched by a political commitment to bring the country back together to do so. So we know it’s a challenge, certainly.”

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The survival of the government elected after the U.S. and coalition forces ousted Saddam Hussein is increasingly in doubt since ISIS captured the cities of Mosul and Tikrit and began advancing on Baghdad. Dr. Michael Knights, a former adviser to the Iraqi government and a fellow at the Washington Institute, told The Hill that 60 out of 243 Iraqi army battalions and their equipment “can’t be accounted for” after those forces fled Mosul and abandoned their gear. The abandoned weapons and equipment include hundreds of Humvees, tanks, and infantry fighting vehicles, as well as mortars, small arms, and ammunition, Knights said. Some of it has already been seen in neighboring Syria where ISIS has established a safe haven, he said.

The United States has plans to supply \$15 billion worth of military equipment to Iraq, including F-16 fighter jets and 24 Apache attack helicopters, with the shipments expected to begin as early as this summer. Defense Department officials say, however, that deliveries of the weapons are contingent upon the ability of the Iraqi forces to hold onto them.

The U.S. promised Iraqi officials earlier this year they would accelerate deliveries of attack helicopters, surveillance drones and Hellfire missiles after ISIS captured the city of Fallujah, the scene of fierce fighting between militants and U.S. forces in 2004. U.S. officials now fear that the battle for a democratic Iraq, which cost more than 4,000 American lives and trillions of U.S. dollars, could be lost without some kind of effort to bolster Iraqi defenses.



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President Obama said he does not contemplate sending ground troops back into Iraq, but he has not ruled out other military options, including U.S. air strikes. On Friday, the president defended the investment the United States has made in training and equipping Iraqi forces, but expressed disappointment in their performance against ISIS.

“The fact that they are not willing to stand and fight and defend their posts against admittedly hardened terrorists, but not terrorists who are overwhelming in numbers, indicates that there is a problem with morale, a problem in terms of commitment, and ultimately that is rooted in the political problems that have plagued the country for a very long time,” Obama said. Further military intervention by the United States depends on a “serious and sincere effort by Iraq’s leaders to set aside sectarian differences,” he said.

“We can’t do it for them,” Obama said. “And in the absence of this type of political effort, short-term military action, including any assistance we might provide, won’t succeed.”

Obama’s words call to mind President Kennedy’s assessment of the Vietnam War in a September 1963 interview with Walter Cronkite on CBS News. Despite all the military assistance the United States had given South Vietnam, it was up to the people to defeat the Communist forces in their own land, Kennedy said, adding,

I don’t think that unless a greater effort is made by the government to win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisers, but they have to win it — the people of Vietnam — against the Communists.

In the end, they did not win it, despite a U.S. military presence in South Vietnam that peaked at more than half a million troops during the decade-long war. Vietnam was also a war in which significant amounts of American-made weapons were captured by the enemy — in that case the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army — or abandoned by the army of the Republic of Vietnam.

More recently, U.S. weapons supplied to the rebel forces in Libya’s civil war in 2011 were used against Americans [in the infamous September 2012 attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi](#). Some of those weapons were later used by jihadists in Syria, as reported extensively in [The New American](#).

McConnell, the Senate majority leader, called on the president Friday to render immediate assistance to the Baghdad regime. The Kentucky Republican blamed the deteriorating situation on Obama’s withdrawal of all U.S. troops at the end of 2011.

“The Iraqi security forces are now less capable than when the president withdrew the entirety of our force without successfully negotiating a remaining U.S. presence capable of preserving our gains and mentoring our partners,” McConnell said.

“If we had left a residual force behind, we would not be facing the crisis we are today,” said McCain. “We had a stable government” in Iraq, the Arizona Republican and 2008 presidential nominee said on the *Morning Joe* radio program Friday. “But the president wanted out, and now, we are paying a very heavy price. And I predicted it in 2011.

But negotiations over a new Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq in 2011 ended with the al-Maliki government’s refusal to grant U.S. troops immunity from prosecutions in Iraqi criminal court for crimes committed in that country. And McCain, a Vietnam veteran who spent five-and-a-half years as a prisoner of war in Hanoi, might recall that having a residual force in South Vietnam following the armistice in



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1973 did not prevent the overrunning of Saigon and the Communist triumph there two years later. Somehow, the lesson that all the governments of the world aren't ours to preserve or depose as we see fit may eventually be recognized in Washington, D.C., though not necessarily in the minds of diehard interventionists such as McConnell and McCain.

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