



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on October 12, 2015

Pentagon Modifies Syrian Rebel Training, Drawing U.S. Further Into War

Finally acknowledging that its efforts to train and equip anti-Islamic State (ISIS) rebels in Syria have been a disaster, the Defense Department announced Friday that it is putting that program on “operational hold.” But don’t think this means the United States will be getting out of the Syrian civil war anytime soon: The Pentagon is merely replacing this rebel-aid program with another one having the potential to be even worse.



Handed \$500 million in taxpayer dollars from Congress — which, as Senator Tim Kaine (D-Va.) recently [pointed out](#), hasn’t even debated U.S. involvement in the Syrian war — the Obama administration has until now been taking individuals vetted by the U.S. military out of Syria, training and equipping them, and then returning them to Syria to fight.

The results have been quite [embarrassing](#). Initially expected to train thousands of rebels, the program’s goal was eventually reduced to just 500 fighters over two years, and even that proved too optimistic. Thus far, the program has turned out just two “classes” of rebels totaling about 125, both of which turned out to be flops almost as soon as they returned to Syria. The first class was defeated by al-Qaeda; the second class, whose leader the Pentagon says it never trained, turned all its U.S.-made equipment over to al-Qaeda.

“We have been looking now for several weeks at ways to improve that program,” Defense Secretary Ashton Carter [said](#) Friday. “I wasn’t satisfied with the early efforts in that regard, and so we’re looking at different ways to achieve, basically, the same kind of strategic objective.”

The [Washington Post](#) explained the basics of the latest approach:

Under the new plan, leaders of groups already battling the Islamic State undergo vetting and receive a crash course in human rights and combat communications. Many of them have already received that training outside Syria, officials said.

Eventually the Pentagon plans to provide ammunition and basic weapons to those leaders’ fighters and would carry out airstrikes on targets identified by those units. Most, if not all, of the rank and file would be neither vetted nor trained by the United States.

Far from removing the United States from the fray, the new policy “marks an expansion of U.S. involvement in Syria’s protracted ground war and could expose the Obama administration to greater risks if weapons provided to a wider array of rebel units go astray, or if U.S.-backed fighters come under attack from forces loyal to [Syrian president Bashar al-]Assad and his allies,” observed the *Post*.

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Reporters certainly weren’t buying the notion that the U.S. government has suddenly become expert at identifying rebels worthy of its assistance.



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In a Friday [press briefing](#), RT's Gayane Chichakyan asked State Department spokesman John Kirby why the existing train-and-equip program hadn't worked, reminding him that Carter [told](#) Congress in July that "it turns out to be very hard to identify" rebels who are both reliable and not likely to transfer weapons to ISIS-aligned groups. Kirby declined to comment, referring her to the Defense Department.

"I wanted the State Department to answer that question because that the train-and-equip program hasn't worked goes to the heart of what the Obama administration's new policy can achieve," Chichakyan [explained](#). "Who will the U.S. be equipping? If the training part failed because they couldn't identify the right people, then why would the equipping work better?"

Kirby did say the rebels who will be trained and armed under the new program are those in whom the U.S. government has a "measure of confidence" to do the right thing.

Matt Lee of the Associated Press asked, "What unit of measurement are we talking about here?... Don't you need to be totally satisfied that these people are not rampant human rights abusers and beheaders and confident that they are not going to fight Assad but rather ISIL? I mean, I don't understand 'a measure' of confidence. Is that a foot, a quart? What is it that gets them across that hurdle?"

"I don't think we can enumerate that," Kirby replied, adding that it will be "based on knowledge and experience in the practicality of having worked with and vetted some of these leaders."

In other words, trust us. (Left unsaid, for good reason: "When have we ever let you down?")

According to the *Post*,

The new approach appears to have originated with the victory of Syrian Kurdish forces, backed by U.S. airstrikes, against the Islamic State in the northern Syrian border town of Kobane early this year. American officials were impressed by the Kurdish units' tenacity and their ability to capitalize on U.S. air power.

Some of the rebel units that could receive new U.S. support are part of what the administration calls the Syrian Arab Coalition, located in areas near where Kurdish fighters operate along the border with Turkey, from the Euphrates River east toward Iraq. U.S. officials hope those Arab fighters, along with Kurdish units, can help isolate Raqqa and the Islamic State leadership there.

That presents its own problems, reported the [New York Times](#). First, "anti-Assad insurgents say they have never heard of a group called the Syrian Arab Coalition." Second, "many Arabs ... are wary of the Kurds' project to create semiautonomous areas and have accused Kurdish militias of carrying out ethnic cleansing in the mixed area."

Then there is the matter of Russia's involvement in the Syrian war. Russian president Vladimir Putin has made it clear that his aim in entering the conflict is to eliminate ISIS and preserve the Assad regime, while the Obama administration has called for Assad's resignation and has armed rebels seeking to overthrow him. "While the units receiving support under the Pentagon's new plan are supposed to be primarily battling the Islamic State, it appeared likely that Assad and the Russians would still view them as a target," wrote the *Post*. That, combined with the fact that these units will be receiving support from U.S. planes "in close proximity to the Russian planes," could put the United States and Russia — two powerful, nuclear-armed states — on a collision course.

In short, failure to follow the Constitution and the Founders' advice to avoid foreign entanglements could trigger a much broader war while providing training and weapons to anti-American terrorists. Moreover, it is unlikely to achieve the administration's stated objectives. "Tens of billions of dollars



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spent in recent years to train security forces across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia have rarely succeeded in transforming local fighters into effective, long-term armies,” noted the *Times*.

Congress should cut off funding for Obama’s Syrian misadventure and demand that he withdraw the United States from the conflict unless and until lawmakers declare war on that country. Should he refuse, Congress should take the next constitutional step and impeach him. Given the legislature’s record of ceding its constitutional powers, particularly with regard to foreign policy, to the executive branch, such a course of action is highly improbable — but it is by no means impossible.

Photo of Syrian rebels: AP Images



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