

Pentagon Trains “Moderate” Syrian Rebel Army. \$500 Million to Train 60 Rebels. Where Did the Money Go?

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“I can look out at your faces and see you had the same reaction I do, which is that that’s an awfully small number.” (60 Trainees) So said American Defense Secretary Ash Carter in [testimony](#) before an incredulous Senate Armed Services Committee on July 7, explaining that the \$500 million American project, announced over a year ago, to train and arm a new Syrian rebel army to bring the Islamic State to its knees and force a political settlement on the Syrian regime simultaneously has, to date, trained just 60 fighters.

It’s been 53 months since the Syrian uprising started, 48 months since President Obama called for regime change in Syria, 29 months since the Islamic State took over northeast Syria, 14 months since they took over northwest Iraq, and 11 months since Obama promised to destroy them, and the entirety of the U.S.’ publicly-announced ground strategy to dislodge the Islamic State from Syria and end the war there is embodied in five dozen “trained” Syrians in Turkey somewhere.

The weeks following Carter’s testimony would bring no more reassurance. On July 29, [reports emerged](#) that Jabhat al-Nusra, al Qaeda’s Syria affiliate, had captured a group of fighters from Division 30, a rebel group U.S. officials had earlier claimed was among those participating in the train-and-equip program. What would happen when the U.S.’ chief nemesis crossed the U.S.’ handpicked fighters? Division 30 responded by issuing a statement asking its “brothers” in JAN to release the fighters for the sake of the opposition’s “unity” and [refused to fight](#) JAN. The extent of the Pentagon’s response was to vigorously deny that any of the captured Division 30 fighters were themselves recipients of U.S. training.

It’s easy to understand the consternation of the senators at the Carter hearing. How could the U.S. foreign policy establishment possibly be so incompetent?

To move beyond incredulity and consternation, we need to put this training project in context. Over four brutal years of civil war, the U.S. has announced a succession of programs to aid “moderate” anti-government fighters in Syria – all similarly modest, even embarrassingly so. But U.S. rhetoric about these programs has been jumbled and self-contradictory, and has had only the most tenuous connection to events on the ground – and to the true scale of U.S. involvement in Syria. The wide gulf between rhetoric and reality evinces a deliberate public information strategy to conceal the nature of that involvement.

The U.S. and Syria's Rebels – Rhetoric

Starting in [March 2012](#), a year into the conflict, officials at the White House and the State Department began claiming that the U.S. was directly aiding the Syrian armed opposition with “nonlethal aid,” such as communications gear and medical supplies.

A year later, after the outgoing Pentagon and State Department chiefs Leon Panetta and Hillary Clinton embarrassed the administration by making internal disagreements over Syria public, the incoming Secretary of State John Kerry [announced](#) that President Obama was going to begin “direct assistance” to the Syrian armed opposition, “though nonlethal,” including “food and medical supplies.” The [Associated Press](#) hailed this non-announcement as “a significant policy shift.”

Four months later, in June 2013, responding to mounting reports of regime chemical weapons use and the fall of the strategic city of Qusayr to regime forces, American officials told the [New York Times](#) that “the Obama administration...has decided to begin supplying the rebels for the first time with small arms and ammunition.” White House Advisor Ben Rhodes, however, would only speak of “[direct military support](#)” to the opposition: “He would not specify whether the support would include lethal aid, such as weapons.” Since this was the third time direct nonlethal support for the armed Syrian opposition had been announced “for the first time,” we can sympathize with the journalist who complained at the next day’s State Department [press briefing](#), “I have to say – I hope I’m not alone in this – there is still quite a lot of confusion.”

The amounts of “nonlethal” aid that the opposition was said to receive were always small. By May 2014, it totaled just [\\$80 million](#), and [included](#) “552,000 MREs, 1,500 medical kits, vehicles, communications equipment, generators, and over three tons of surgical and triage medical supplies.” Spread out over two years and a battlefield the size of Syria’s, these figures are only marginally more impressive than Carter’s 60 trained fighters.

Occasionally – usually at moments of pressure to “do something” – American officials let it be known that the U.S. was actually sending “lethal” aid to the rebels as well. In September 2013, after President Obama was forced to back down from his threat to bomb Syria after the Damascus countryside chemical weapons massacre, the [Washington Post](#) reported that, “according to U.S. officials,” arms shipments from the CIA, “limited to light weapons and other munitions that can be tracked” had begun “arriving in Syria.” The *Post* described this as “a major escalation of the U.S. role in Syria’s civil war.”

In April 2014, after the breakdown of peace talks in Geneva and several months of regime successes in retaking lost ground, U.S. government officials leaked the news that the U.S. had provided rebels in Syria with twelve 20-year-old antitank missile launchers – news that was given exhaustive coverage by the *Post*, the [Wall Street Journal](#), [USA Today](#), the [Brookings Institute](#) and the [Foundation for the Defense of the Democracies](#), among others.

Mostly, however, U.S. officials maintained the line of “nonlethal aid” in public. In December 2012, a “senior administration official” [told reporters](#), “until we understand how these arms promote a political solution, we do not see how provision of arms is a good idea.” In April 2013, Acting Assistant Secretary of State Elizabeth Jones [reaffirmed](#), “We do not believe that it is in the United States or the Syrian people’s best interest to provide lethal support to the Syrian opposition.” Asked about the possibility of sending arms in February 2014, a senior U.S. official [told the BBC](#), “We already, as you know, provide non-lethal aid.”

Three days before Mosul fell to the Islamic State, National Security Advisor Susan Rice stated publicly, for the first time, that the U.S. “is providing lethal and non-lethal support” to the “moderate, vetted opposition” in Syria. In reporting this statement, the staff of the Israeli daily [Haartez](#) noted, “Rice gave more details than are usually provided by Obama administration officials.”

With so much contradictory information, it is little wonder that confusion reigned on this point, not only among the general public, but among American media organs and policymakers. Thus, after the fall of Mosul, the [New York Times](#) claimed that the city’s fall had increased “scrutiny” on “the decision by the Obama administration not to arm moderate Syrian rebels at the outset,” and [Hillary Clinton](#) was quick to note that she “pushed very hard” for arming moderate rebels. This past June, outgoing [Daily Show](#) host Jon Stewart ruthlessly mocked various Republican figures for proposing arming rebels in Syria, and implicitly praised Obama for not doing so. In criticizing the current nuclear deal with Iran, the [Wall Street Journal](#) recently editorialized, “The U.S. could have armed the Free Syrian Army to defeat Iran’s allied Assad regime in Damascus” to get a better deal.

These statements reveal the widely-held assumption that the U.S. has avoided engagement in the Syria conflict, but these statements can only exist in blissful denial of publicly-available information about the reality of the U.S.’ role in Syria since 2011.

The U.S. and Syria’s Rebels – Reality

Among the publicly-reported details of that role:

- January 2012: According to the [New York Times](#), three and a half months before the administration first announced “nonlethal aid” to the opposition, a secret CIA-assisted airlift of arms to the rebels began, which by March 2013 would comprise 160 flights and “an estimated 3,500 tons of military equipment.” The CIA helped “Arab governments shop for weapons,” and “vetted rebel commanders and groups to determine who should receive the weapons as they arrive.”
- June 2012: The [New York Times](#) reported that the CIA was in Turkey helping U.S. allies in the region decide which Syrian rebel groups should receive “automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, ammunition and some antitank weapons,” which were “being funneled mostly across the Turkish border by way of a shadowy network of intermediaries including Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood and paid for by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.”
- August 2012: [Reuters](#) reported that the CIA was helping to “direct vital military and communications support to Assad’s opponents” from Turkey, under the authority of an intelligence finding from the president earlier in 2012, which “broadly permits the CIA and other U.S. agencies to provide support that could help the rebels oust Assad.”

In January 2013, Scott Stewart, an analyst at the private intelligence firm Stratfor, [concluded](#) based on an examination of weapons seen in opposition-released videos that “the current level of external intervention in Syria is similar to the level exercised against the Soviet Union and its communist proxies following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.”

All of this predates the announcement of John Kerry’s “significant policy shift” to provide “food and medical supplies” to the opposition. It also predates the State Department’s April

2013 affirmation that, “We do not believe that it is in...the Syrian people’s best interest to provide lethal support to the Syrian opposition.”

The scale of the material aid reportedly delivered to the armed Syrian opposition by the U.S. and its allies through these operations dwarfs anything discussed in the government’s public statements. In February 2014, the Abu Dhabi daily [The National](#) reported that Gulf states, with logistical help from American intelligence, had delivered \$1.2 *billion* in weapons and supplies to rebels in Syria since July 2013 *alone*:

“That amount is set to rise to as much as \$2bn, with Saudi Arabia, which oversees the fund according to rebels, seeking to put in between \$400m and \$800m in additional money over coming months.”

All such numbers have to be taken with a grain of salt, but the scale of Syria’s insurgency makes the figure credible.

In addition, while the U.S. loudly trumpeted its worries about inadvertently supporting “extremists” in Syria, its coordination with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in this period – now well-known – belies this commitment. At one point, the U.S. [publicly suspended](#) its “nonlethal aid” program to “moderate rebels” after their warehouses in northern Syria [were seized](#) by “extremists.” The demonstration would have been more convincing if the “extremists” in question had not been from a group known as the Islamic Front, widely acknowledged to be [bankrolled](#) by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. A December 2013 report from the Brookings Institute looking at funding from Gulf countries for extremist groups in Syria [claimed](#) that “The U.S. Treasury is aware of this activity...but Western diplomats’ and officials’ general response has been a collective shrug.”

These reports of U.S. involvement in facilitating the arming of the opposition have never been refuted, or even denied. They are simply ignored, and lost in the confusion created by the landslide of contradictory public statements. The fact that leading newspapers and public figures now reprimand the Obama administration for *not* arming the rebels demonstrates the success of this apparent public information strategy.

The New Plan

This history should inform how we view U.S. government claims about its current doings in Syria.

In the public eye, at least, the effort to aid existing opposition groups in Syria has been replaced by a plan to create a new Syrian rebel army from scratch, training and equipping them in a neighboring country. But all the evidence suggests that this effort is no more serious, and no more central to the U.S.’ real plans in Syria, than the “nonlethal aid” program that consumed so much attention and public debate while American intelligence, with American regional allies, was organizing massive arms shipments to the opposition.

Obama first announced this new train-and-equip program [June](#) of last year. Congress approved funding for it in September. By November, recruitment for the new army [still had not begun](#). By January, a host country for the program [still had not been chosen](#), despite offers from four countries. In February, Turkey and the U.S. finally signed an [agreement](#) to begin training the force in Turkey, with Turkish and U.S. officials giving contradictory answers about whether the force would be allowed to fight the Assad regime. The Chairman

of the Joint Chiefs of Staff recently claimed that the Islamic holy month of [Ramadan](#) was slowing the training process because, “there’s a lot of folks that are interested in being with their families during that period” – a problem no other fighting force in Syria seems to have. In a devastating post-mortem published in July, [Jamie Dettmer](#) of *The Daily Beast* observed that the original plan called for training 15,000 soldiers by 2018, and asked “whether Syria would even exist by the time the envisaged force was at full strength.”

If this program were truly central to the U.S.’ Syria strategy, it is difficult to believe that this level of delay and recruitment failure – and now, attacks from Jabhat al-Nusra – would be tolerated. No doubt the military and intelligence officers tasked with its implementation are working sincerely. But for the U.S. foreign policy establishment as a whole, this program likely serves the same purposes as the State Department’s 2012-2014 initiatives to deliver MREs, radios and med kits to fighters in Syria: to demonstrate that the U.S. is involved, to create a public impression of an involvement so limited that it does not saddle the U.S. with any responsibility for the human catastrophe in Syria, and to consume media and legislative branch attention that might otherwise be directed at the main activities of the U.S. and its allies in Syria.

While this new training program spins its wheels, events on the ground in Syria are moving rapidly. Following the death of King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have set aside their former squabbles and are [cooperating](#) in a renewed push to overthrow the Assad regime. This cooperation is manifest in a new rebel alliance, the [Jaysh al-Fatih](#), led by al Qaeda’s Syria affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. If U.S.’ actions during the first three years of the conflict are any guide, this new joint initiative was not organized without American input or support.

Jaysh al-Fatih may be contributing to the U.S.’s stated goal of regime change in Syria. It may be contributing to an unstated U.S. goal of continuing a war that is very costly for Iran, on whose compliance with the U.S.-brokered nuclear agreement a great deal now rests. Jaysh al-Fatih may now be seen as a crucial counterweight to the Islamic State. It would be irresponsible to assign motivations to the U.S. policymakers from the outside, but unless they have had a recent change of heart, Jaysh al-Fatih’s al Qaeda links and its human rights violations (including [violence](#) against [Christians](#) and Nusra’s threat to forcibly convert [Alawis](#)) are unlikely to be an overriding concern for them. As the [Brookings Institute](#)’s Charles Lister writes, “The vast majority of the Syrian insurgency has coordinated closely with Al-Qaeda since mid-2012,” and the U.S. was helping to arm the Syrian insurgency since early 2012.

It has been necessary throughout the conflict, however, for the U.S. to distance itself from these troubling facts, by conveying the impression that its involvement in the conflict is limited to “nonlethal aid” – or, since last June, a small training program in Turkey.

Why does the U.S. only have sixty fighters to show for its \$500 million, year-old training program? Because it reinforces the narrative – nurtured by a raft of previous hopelessly inadequate, publicly-announced and -debated programs to support the opposition – of the U.S. as a helpless bystander to the killing in Syria, and of President Obama as a prudent statesman reluctant to get involved. While the Senate berates the Pentagon chief over the program’s poor results, the U.S. is meanwhile outsourcing the real fight in Syria to allies with no qualms about supporting al Qaeda against their geopolitical opponents – unless the U.S. is, as before, cooperating directly or indirectly in that support.

Where to Now?

Once it is recognized that the “helpless bystander” narrative is false, and that the U.S. has been deeply involved in the armed conflict almost from the start, it becomes both possible and necessary to question that involvement.

The U.S.’ direct cooperation with Turkey and Gulf states in arming the Syrian insurgency, combined with its refusal to engage in sincere peace talks (as expertly detailed by Hugh Roberts in [The London Review of Books](#)), virtually guaranteed that the war would continue without conclusion. The present crisis – 200,000 dead, over half the population driven from their homes, much crucial infrastructure destroyed and Syria’s territory fractured into multiple de facto statelets that will probably never reunify – is the result. Considering the Syrian people’s welfare, it is difficult to imagine a worse policy outcome. A refusal early-on to interfere in the conflict or countenance regional allies’ cooperation with extremist groups, or a genuine attempt at peace talks later in the conflict, or a full-fledged humanitarian intervention of the sort requested by many opposition figures – almost any policy alternative would have been better.

At this stage, it may well be too late to save Syria, but if U.S. policymakers want to try, a good place to start would be to make ending the violence – without preconditions and without regard for their preferred political outcome – the overriding objective in U.S. diplomacy and covert action. In a multi-religious country like Syria, that must entail restraining the ambitions of openly sectarian militant groups like Jaysh al-Fatih. It will mean walking away from a publicly-declared commitment to regime change in Syria. It will likely also mean straining relations with regional allies already discomfited by the nuclear pact with Iran. But to end the conflict, the policies and positions that have been perpetuating it must be changed.

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