

US Mission to Train Syrian “Opposition Forces” Goes Awry

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In October 2015 the US administration abandoned its efforts to build up a new rebel force inside [Syria](#) to combat the Islamic State, acknowledging the failure of its \$500 million campaign to train thousands of fighters and announcing that it will instead use the money to provide ammunition and some weapons for groups already engaged in the battle. The [decision](#) to change the policy was made after mounting evidence that the training mission had resulted in no more than a handful of American-trained fighters.

The Pentagon spent 384 million dollars out of initially planned \$500 million program on the preparation of 150 fighters, instead of almost 3,000 militants it originally planned to train. At that point, US officials [declared](#) this program a bitter failure and shut it down, without ever mentioning that the Pentagon spent 2 million dollars per fighter trained.

Since then it has changed its tact and started backing alternative groups. In southern Syria the US launched a new project – the New Syrian Army (NSA), a Sunni rebel group aligned with the Free Syria Army (FSA), and mainly made up of locals from Syria’s Deir ez-Zor Governorate. With its strength of a few hundred fighters, it has received training in Jordan, as well as arms from the US and UK. Furthermore, the US-led coalition provided air and artillery support.

On July 4, the US-backed New Syrian Army [suffered](#) another crippling defeat as a result of Islamic State (IS) massive attack at Bir Mahrutha near the Syria-Jordan border.

This is the second setback in a row right after the US-trained force was defeated at Al-Bukamal on the Iraqi border.

On June 28, the NSA launched the al-Bukamal offensive, also known as Operation Day of Wrath. Al-Bukamal, just a few miles from the Iraqi frontier, is a key gateway city on the border between Syria and Iraq where the Euphrates River crosses the frontier. In 2014 it was captured by IS to effectively erase the border between Syria and Iraq. Losing it would be a huge symbolic and strategic blow to the Islamic State group.

The Pentagon-trained counterterrorism force dispatched 200 of its 300 fighters to the area. The advance was aided by anti-IS elements inside the city. Islamic State fighters encircled the rebels in a surprise ambush. They reportedly inflicted heavy casualties on the NSA forces seizing satellite communications equipment and weapons. It’s hard to say if the group will exist as a coherent force after such a rout.

It was logical to assume that such a large operation conducted by trained troops with

cutting-edge equipment and surprise on their side was well prepared. Thorough planning was expected to be based on reliable intelligence and extensive logistic support. Evidently, it was not the case.

It's impossible to understand how could such an attack, with all advantages on the side of the NSA, end in disaster. It will go down as one of the most striking defeats ever suffered by an American-backed Syrian force. In a broader sense, it shows that one more time the US military has failed in one of the training programs it runs in support of fighting the Islamic State. The crushing defeat represents yet another failure by the US to create an effective anti-IS Arab force in Syria. Earlier training missions had also gone awry.

It's not Syria only. After disbanding the Iraqi military in the wake of the 2003 invasion, the US spent more than \$25 billion through fiscal year 2012 to build a new force. Yet several Iraqi divisions collapsed under Islamic State attacks in 2014 and 2015, with soldiers shedding their weapons and uniforms and fleeing the battlefield. In the battle of Mosul (June 2014) around 1500 IS fighters defeated 30,000 Iraqi troops.

In [Yemen](#), American-trained troops and counterterrorism forces crumbled against attacks by Houthi rebels who wound up overrunning the capital in 2014 forcing the government into exile. The battle is now being fought mostly via a Saudi-led air campaign, which is hardly a success story.

In Afghanistan, the United States has spent about \$65 billion to build the army and police. In October 2015 US-backed Afghan security forces [suffered a setback](#) in Kunduz.

Today thousands of Afghan Army, police and militia defenders display [poor performance](#) against the Taliban force, which is much smaller in numbers.

In northwest Africa, the United States has spent more than \$600 million to combat Islamist militancy, with training programs stretching from Morocco to Chad. American officials once heralded Mali's military as an exemplary partner. But in 2012, battle-hardened Islamist fighters returned from combat in Libya to rout the military, including units trained by United States Special Forces. That defeat, followed by [a coup](#) led by an American-trained officer, Capt. Amadou Haya Sanogo, astounded US commanders.

French, United Nations and European Union forces now carry out training and security missions in Mali.

The American government has invested nearly \$1 billion in the overall strategy in Somalia. But even with the gains, the Shabab militants have been able to carry out [bombings in Mogadishu](#), the capital, and in neighboring countries.

Tens of billions of dollars spent by the US in recent years to train security forces across the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere have not succeeded in transforming local fighters into effective, long-term militaries. It calls into question the effectiveness of the American conflict management policy. «*Our track record at building security forces over the past 15 years is miserable*», [said](#) Karl W. Eikenberry, a former military commander and United States ambassador in Afghanistan.

The US cooperation with Kurds in the northern part of Syria has its limits, while all the attempts to form a capable Sunni Arab fighting force have failed. It means, the policy aimed at bringing to power a pro-American puppet regime with its military trained by US

instructors and armed with US-made weapons is questionable at best. It just does not work, neither in Syria, nor in Iraq, nor in any other country. US officials should acknowledge these realities.

At the same time, a broader regional coalition could be a powerful tool against the Islamic State. True, the United States still has a strong military presence in the area, as well as strong ties to the Kurds. But it also has weak points, such as poor intelligence in Syria and a failed military training program for the Syrian opposition, a troubled relationship with the ineffective Iraqi government and few links with Iran. Russia has the leverage in Syria that the US lacks: military partnership with the Syrian government and its forces operating on the ground, working ties with other actors like the Iranian government, and an intelligence-sharing agreement with Iraq, Syria, and Iran, that could well include Iranian allies like Hezbollah.

Working together, the US and Russia could take advantage of their respective ties with the regional actors. It is worth mentioning Henry A. Kissinger's Primakov Lecture at the Gorchakov Fund in Moscow in February 2016, where he [emphasized](#) that *«Today threats more frequently arise from the disintegration of state power and the growing number of ungoverned territories. This spreading power vacuum cannot be dealt with by any state, no matter how powerful, on an exclusively national basis. It requires sustained cooperation between the United States and Russia, and other major powers»*.

Perhaps, Syria will never be the same country we knew for the past seventy years. It will have to be put together again in a totally new way. This can only result from negotiations among the various Syrian players (minus IS, Jabhat al-Nusra and some other extremist groups), with the assistance of the international community, including the US and Russia.

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