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US to Give Arms, Air Support to Islamist Militias in Syria

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The Obama administration Friday announced an "operational pause" of the disastrously failed Pentagon program for arming and training "vetted rebels" in Turkey and sending them back across the border into Syria.

Instead, Pentagon and White House officials indicated, the focus will now shift to cementing ties with leaders of existing "rebel" militias, consisting overwhelmingly of Sunni Islamist forces with connections to Al Qaeda. US backing to these groups will apparently include both arms and ammunition as well as close air support from warplanes deployed by the US and its so-called coalition.

The policy shift follows the revelation last month by General Lloyd Austin, the commander of US Central Command, that only "four or five" individual US-trained fighters were then on the ground in Syria, and barely 100 more were undergoing training. This, after the allocation of $500 million for the Pentagon to train over 5,000 such fighters within the first year.

Austin's revelation was followed within weeks by the Pentagon being forced to retract its initial denial of verified reports that a group of US-trained fighters sent into Syria had immediately turned over its vehicles and weaponry to the al-Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.

The change in strategy also follows a first week of Russian airstrikes against Islamist forces in Syria, including some that had previously received arms shipments organized by the CIA. Beginning in 2011, the US spy agency set up a clandestine station in Turkey and organized the funneling into Syria of weaponry from Libyan stockpiles after the US-NATO war for regime change had succeeded in toppling and murdering Muammar Gaddafi.

Both Washington and Moscow claim to be waging their respective military campaigns in Syria for the purpose of destroying the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an Al Qaeda offshoot that is the direct product of the unleashing of death and destruction against Iraq, Libya and Syria itself by the US military and CIA.

In reality, however, the US and Russian governments are fighting for opposite aims: Washington, to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad and install an American puppet regime; and Moscow to prop up the Assad government, its sole Middle Eastern ally.

The administration has come under increasing criticism from Republican opponents and sections of the US military and intelligence complex for its supposed "inaction" in the face of the Russian offensive in Syria. This found expression Friday in a column published under the joint byline of Obama's former defense secretary, Robert Gates, and former Bush

administration national security adviser Condoleezza Rice entitled “Countering Putin.”

It calls for actions to “create a better military balance of power on the ground,” including the creation of “no-fly zones” as well as “robust support” for various anti-regime forces and an effort to “solidify our relationship with Turkey,” a principal sponsor of the Islamist militias inside Syria.

The Obama administration’s announcement was also preceded by a letter sent to the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA by a bipartisan group of Senate critics of the administration’s Syria policy calling for an end to the “rebel” training program.

“The Syria Train and Equip Program goes beyond simply being an inefficient use of taxpayer dollars. As many of us initially warned, it is now aiding the very forces we aim to defeat,” stated the letter, which was signed by Democratic senators Tom Udall (New Mexico), Joe Manchin (West Virginia) and Chris Murphy (Connecticut) along with Republican Mike Lee (Utah).

The shift in policy announced Friday will not alter this aspect of the program, but only remove the fig leaf of “moderate” Syrian forces, with the handing over of weapons directly to the Islamists who constitute the dominant force among the anti-Assad “rebels.”

The Pentagon has acknowledged that among the principal obstacles to its training program was the vetting process that was supposed to have excluded those whose views were close to Al Qaeda’s, and the requirement that they engage ISIS as the main enemy, rather than the Assad government. It was unable to find such recruits in anywhere near the numbers projected.

President Barack Obama acknowledged in a press conference last week that the Pentagon’s train-and-equip program “has not worked the way it was supposed to.” He added, “And part of the reason, frankly, is because when we tried to get them to just focus on ISIL,” i.e., ISIS.

It appears that the administration’s answer to this failure is to drop these previous restrictions, providing direct US military aid to forces fighting for the overthrow of the Syrian government, including Islamists who would have been excluded from the Pentagon training program.

In the first announcement of the new program, Defense Secretary Ash Carter, speaking in London following a meeting with his British counterpart, Michael Fallon, said that it would be modeled on “the work we’ve done with the Kurds in northern Syria … That’s exactly the kind of example that we would like to pursue with other groups in other parts of Syria going forward. That is going to be the core of the President’s concept.”

The US coordination with the Kurds, particularly during the ISIS siege of the Syrian city of Kobani, on the Turkish border, involved Kurds providing ground forces, while identifying targets and calling in airstrikes by US warplanes.

As part of the new program, Pentagon officials said that the US military would train “enablers,” leading members of various militias, who would be instructed in how to coordinate with American warplanes in targeting and striking forces on the ground.

The Kurdish “example” has been rendered problematic by Washington’s alliance with Turkey, which has allowed US airstrikes to be launched from Incirlik Air Base and other

bases inside Turkey in return for Washington's tacit approval of Turkish bombing of the Kurds.

The identity of the "other groups" with whom Washington wants to replicate this strategy is far from clear. Some media reports named the "Syrian Arab Coalition" as a likely recipient of US weapons and close air support. Prior to Friday's announcement, however, no one had ever heard of this coalition, which appears to be something that the Pentagon hopes to cobble together from existing "rebel" groups.

The dominant forces fighting the Assad government consist of ISIS, which Washington claims to be committed to destroying, the al-Nusra Front, which is on the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations, and Ahrar al-Sham, another Islamist group whose founders came out of Al Qaeda. Other smaller factions are largely fighting in alliance with these forces.

To the extent that the US military provides air support to these militias, it may well come into direct conflict with Russian warplanes that are bombing them.

Far from a tactical retreat, it appears that the suspension of the Pentagon's train-and-equip program is only setting the stage for a far bloodier war inside Syria, while heightening the real danger of a military clash between the world's two largest nuclear powers, the United States and Russia.

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