

The New Syrian Force: Down but Not Necessarily Out

by [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Aug 11, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alqwt-alswryt-aljdydt-mntkst-lkn-ghyr-mqsat-baldrwrt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alqwt-alswryt-aljdydt-mntkst-lkn-ghyr-mqsat-baldrwrt)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



Brief Analysis

After the recent defeat, key questions must be addressed regarding the size of U.S.-supported units deployed, the thoroughness of battlefield knowledge, and the broader program's overall direction.

In mid-July, small elements of the New Syrian Force (NSF), the product of the U.S. train-and-equip program, were deployed into Syria from Turkey. They quickly came to grief in combat, not against their putative enemy, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), but against Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), an al-Qaeda affiliate.

The July 31 clash and follow-on events were a complex affair, shedding light on the train-and-equip program for the NSF. Whereas the outcome is not necessarily a final verdict on the NSF or the program, it raises questions once again about the program's purpose and viability on Syria's dangerous battlefields. Namely, while one defeat does not mean the program should be ended, it does mean the serious challenge of fighting in Syria must be recognized and the program's scope and purpose reexamined.

Key Questions About the Program

Even before the initial deployment of the NSF, major questions existed on matters such as the feasibility and logic of the force's mission; its combat capabilities; its size relative to the scope of its mission; its concept of operations; and how it would be directed and supported in combat. (For an assessment of these early concerns, see the Institute PolicyWatch "[Train and Equip Not Enough for U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebels](#)."

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/train-and-equip-not-enough-for-u.s.-backed-syrian-rebels>) These issues had not been resolved prior to July, and they remain largely unresolved in the debacle's wake.

What Happened

Clear portents of trouble for the NSF were visible well before the actual clash. In late 2014, JN had already attacked and essentially defeated two U.S.-backed groups, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and Harakat Hazm, active within JN's area of operation in northern Syria. These groups, which had received significant U.S. support but were not part of the train-and-equip program, were thus effectively removed from the military equation.

Beginning in September 2014, the United States had also carried out airstrikes on JN-associated elements in the so-called Khorasan Group. Most recently, on July 8, strikes reportedly killed a senior Khorasan leader, stirring animosity toward both the U.S. air operations and what JN regarded as antagonistic U.S. surrogates and collaborators.

Additionally, signs of problems within the train-and-equip program itself included slow progress in recruiting and vetting personnel, a correspondingly small number of actual program graduates, and departures due to various forms of disillusionment. The rigorous vetting process and the requirement to formally commit to fight only ISIS, also known as the Islamic State, appear to have been the biggest reasons for the low personnel tally.

The Action and Its Outcome

The full details of the late July action are not yet known, and uncertainties remain, but the basic elements appear clear. On July 12, a small NSF force, variously reported as having fifty-four or sixty men, was sent into the operational area of "Division 30," a U.S.-supported unit in northern Aleppo. On July 30, JN moved against Division 30, capturing some of its leaders and then attacking its forces on July 31, compelling the division's withdrawal from its headquarters near Azaz, in northern Aleppo province. During the fighting, the United States provided air support, striking JN forces and apparently preventing what would have been a greater defeat for the NSF elements, which were caught up in the action.

The grim outcome for the NSF included at least one killed, five or more captured, and the breakup and dispersal of its remaining members -- along with being a major embarrassment for the train-and-equip program. Consequences for Division 30 included prisoners taken, the forced withdrawal from its headquarters, and a humiliating public pledge not to fight JN.

What the Events Say About the U.S. Program

The major program weaknesses exposed by these events include the decision itself to send such a small force into Syria. Given the heavily armed and capable forces that could oppose the deployment, small NSF elements were undoubtedly at high risk of being attacked and defeated. The deployment also suggests a poor understanding of the complex situation on the ground.

As for the employment concept, it appears to have been to embed a small NSF element within a rebel unit already supported by the United States. The seeming advantage of such an approach was that the United States would have sufficient understanding of the unit's capabilities, confidence in its leadership, and awareness of the situation on the ground. But the concept held the weakness of depending on some cooperation, or at least the absence of active resistance, from other armed elements in the area. As it turned out, the optimistic scenario failed to play out, revealing the deployment concept's fundamental flaws in both design and execution.

Since the event, reporting has indicated that control of the NSF group passed from U.S. personnel to Division 30 after the group entered Syria. While integrating certain NSF elements into existing U.S.-supported rebel formations is probably necessary, at least until large NSF units are available, such an approach puts a premium on good knowledge of these existing formations. Such knowledge appears to have been lacking here, given Division 30's easy defeat by JN.

Moreover, some U.S. accounts indicate the NSF fought well, but the extent to which the NSF, as opposed to Division

30, was involved in the actual combat is not clear. And while JN forces reportedly suffered significant casualties, it is unclear to what extent those were inflicted by the NSF as opposed to Division 30 or U.S. airstrikes. JN, for its part, claims most of its casualties were from the U.S. attacks.

U.S. air support for the NSF, most likely coordinated by U.S.-trained NSF personnel, appears to have averted a larger disaster. The United States has now stated it will provide defensive air support for the NSF against all threats, in addition to offensive support against ISIS. While this assertion needs to be tested, it does go some way toward resolving a key question about the U.S. program.

Implications

Alongside being an embarrassment, the defeat of the nascent NSF in its first Syrian sortie has practical implications. Indeed, the loss of personnel, the almost certain loss of arms and equipment, and the scattering of the force reflect -- short of outright annihilation or pell-mell flight -- about as bad a military result as one can conceive. Likewise, the profound risks of deploying small NSF forces on uncertain Syrian battlefields were exposed. Consequences will likely include punctured morale for NSF elements in training and a corresponding blow to recruitment.

A further question raised by the debacle includes who is responsible for decisionmaking on commitment of the NSF and how this particular decision was made. Related questions involve the relationship and syncing of the reported CIA clandestine-support program for select rebel forces, presumably including Division 30, and the U.S. Department of Defense train-and-equip program.

As this episode shows, JN clearly will not accept a significant U.S.-backed force in its area of operations in northern Syria. Its previous actions to eliminate the SRF and Harakat Hazm, and now its strike against Division 30 and collaterally the NSF, must be considered in any future NSF deployments. More broadly, the NSF must be prepared to fight from the moment it enters Syria against a spectrum of highly capable enemies: ISIS, other Islamists, warlords, and regime fighters.

Likewise, establishing a very detailed picture of the situation on the ground is essential before the entry of forces. The United States must have a means of obtaining real-time, accurate information on what is happening to U.S.-supported forces. Beyond receiving reports from U.S.-trained fighters, the United States must develop its own means of collecting data and evaluating battlefield developments, a requirement that likely means U.S. personnel on the ground.

The U.S. response to the blunder, unfortunately, appears so far to suggest business as usual: difficulties are to be expected, lessons will be learned, challenges will be met, operations are proceeding as planned.

Inexperienced or newly formed military units often do not fare well in their first combat test, so the problems encountered by the NSF are not altogether surprising. Two more groups of fighters are said to be in the pipeline, and they and their trainers should gain from the first group's experience. Furthermore, the combination of the reported JN withdrawal from the Turkish border area north of Aleppo and the potential creation of a border security zone by Turkey and the United States could reduce the immediate threat to NSF forces as they deploy into Syria. It is therefore too early to write the program off as a total failure. Nevertheless, the seriousness of what happened in the closing days of July suggests the program needs to be more fundamentally rethought, repurposed, and reenergized.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-
analysis/syria)