

# An Enhanced Train-and-Equip Program for the Moderate Syrian Opposition:

## A Key Element of U.S. Policy for Syria and Iraq

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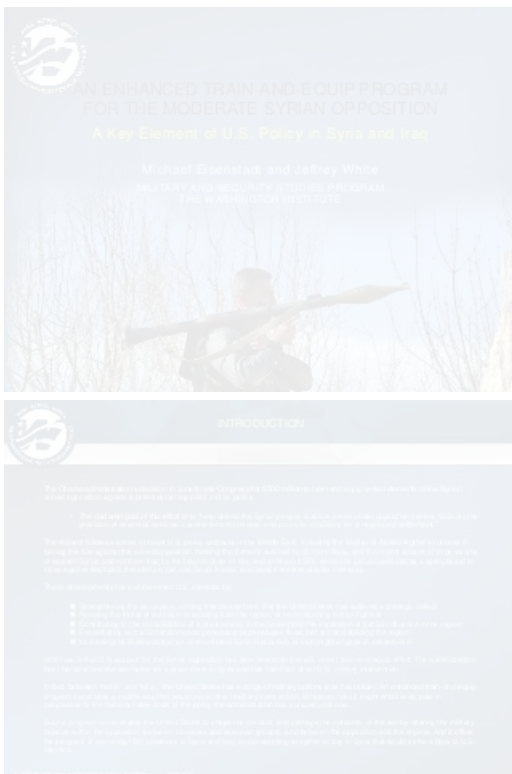


Brief Analysis

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**Such a program should strengthen the moderate opposition militarily and enhance its political and informational capabilities, while disrupting Salafi-jihadist recruitment.**

**T**he Obama administration's decision in June to ask Congress for \$500 million to train and equip vetted elements of the Syrian armed opposition signals a potential turning point in U.S. policy in the Middle East. The request follows a series of major U.S. policy setbacks in the region, including the Bashar al-Assad regime's success in turning the tide against the armed opposition, making the former's survival much more likely, and the recent seizure of large swaths of eastern Syria and northern Iraq by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which the group could use as a springboard to move against Baghdad, threaten Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and launch terrorist attacks overseas.



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Until now, lethal U.S. support for the Syrian opposition has been limited to a small, covert train-and-equip effort. An enhanced train-and-equip program could enable the United States to shape the conduct, and perhaps the outcome, of the war by altering the military balance within the opposition (between moderate and extremist groups) and between the opposition and the regime. And it offers the prospect of stemming ISIS advances in Syria and Iraq, and preventing a regime victory in Syria that would strike a blow to U.S. interests.

In light of the Syrian conflict's destabilizing impact on the broader Middle East, the risks an enhanced train-and-equip program might entail likely pale in comparison to the demonstrable costs of the policy the administration has pursued until now.

## **GOALS OF AN ENHANCED TRAIN-AND-EQUIP PROGRAM**

The moderate Syrian opposition is not likely to "win," and the United States is almost certainly not going to "solve," Syria's civil war -- at least not any time soon. But those should not be the criteria by which the utility and value of an enhanced train-and-equip program are assessed.

Such a program could enable the United States to secure its vital interests and mitigate some negative impacts of the Syrian civil war, without direct U.S. intervention. More specifically, it could enable the United States to:

- Build up the moderate opposition as an alternative to Salafi-jihadist opposition groups and, potentially, to the Assad regime.
- Offer the regime the choice between a ruinous, open-ended conflict and a diplomatic solution.
- Maintain pressure on the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Iran, to deter adventurism on their part.
- Cause ISIS to draw down its forces in Iraq in order to counter the challenge to its position in Syria, thereby relieving pressure on the Nouri al-Maliki government.

- Demonstrate to Iran the costs of IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani's regional policies, and that the United States will defend its vital interests even while engaged in nuclear negotiations with the Islamic Republic.

Even if the moderate opposition proves unable to do much more than it is currently doing, it could maintain pressure on the Assad regime and tie down the forces of its Iranian, Hezbollah, and perhaps Iraqi Shiite allies, thereby limiting their ability to engage in activities or adventurism elsewhere.

If the moderate opposition proves more capable, the train-and-equip effort could be further expanded, and its goals adjusted, to pressure the regime to reconsider its rejection of a diplomatic solution to the civil war. If the regime still proves unwilling to negotiate, and the moderate opposition proves capable of holding and effectively governing liberated areas, replacement of the regime might become a viable option.

Finally, if the moderate opposition proves incapable of meeting any of these expectations, the effort could be scaled back or terminated -- though it might prove difficult for the administration to pull the plug after having doubled down on the opposition.

## ELEMENTS OF AN ENHANCED TRAIN-AND-EQUIP PROGRAM

**A**n enhanced program should strengthen the moderate opposition by transferring arms and equipment, providing more advanced training, and improving command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) and logistics capabilities via a unified assistance mechanism:

**Lethal assistance:** More arms of all types, especially mortars/artillery, antiarmor weapons (recoilless rifles, RPGs, antitank guided missiles), anti-aircraft artillery, and perhaps small numbers of man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) issued to carefully vetted personnel -- coupled with an intense information campaign magnifying their achievements.

**Training:** More sophisticated instruction in the employment of weapons and small-unit tactics (e.g., complex ambushes, assaults on fortified positions, mortar/artillery raids, and anti-aircraft ambushes). Better training in the use of anti-aircraft artillery could compensate for restraint in the supply of MANPADS.

**C3I:** Such assistance would enhance the opposition's ability to plan and coordinate operations on the regional and national levels, as well as to identify and exploit regime vulnerabilities and provide adequate advance warning of regime military operations.

**Logistics:** More vehicles, a maintenance and repair capability, more war material (e.g., ammunition, food, medical supplies, and spare parts), and a unified logistics system, which would allow the opposition to prioritize support among constituent groups based on operational needs.

**Unified assistance mechanism:** A fragmented train-and-equip effort -- in which different donors supply arms to different groups through disparate channels -- has reinforced the fragmentation of the opposition; a unified effort will at least ensure that the assistance mechanism does not exacerbate the problem.

Military assistance, as described above, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. An enhanced train-

and-equip effort should take a comprehensive approach that also strengthens the opposition's political and informational capabilities, while staunching and disrupting the recruitment of fighters by Salafi-jihadist groups:

**Political organization:** Insurgency is primarily a political form of warfare, and the United States must help the moderate opposition create a credible, inclusive political organization that can work with the military opposition, out-recruit extremist opposition groups, and effectively govern liberated areas.

**Information activities:** Psychological warfare and propaganda are critical in insurgency. To this end, the United States should bolster the moderate opposition's profile, magnify its military achievements (to help recruitment), discredit extremist opposition groups, and undermine regime morale by creating the perception of growing military momentum and inevitable victory.

**Disruption of extremist recruiting:** Efforts to build up the moderate opposition should be accompanied by efforts to reduce the flow of fighters to extremist opposition groups by countering the radicalization of Syrian communities and interdicting Sunni foreign fighters en route to Syria. The vast scope of this problem, however, poses formidable challenges.

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

While an enhanced train-and-equip program might well succeed as a standalone option, various enabling activities could create synergies to promote opposition success. Some of these activities would require direct U.S. military intervention and would therefore entail greater risk for the United States -- albeit for greater potential payoff. These include:

- cyber operations and sanctions targeting the assets of key regime insiders in order to exacerbate tensions within the regime and between the regime and its supporters
- joint intelligence, planning, and operations cells to enhance the effectiveness of moderate opposition forces
- intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and other support to facilitate opposition attacks against regime air bases, storage areas, and lines of communication, in order to disrupt government resupply operations
- small numbers of U.S. Special Forces advisors to enhance the opposition's military effectiveness
- unmanned or manned airstrikes on ISIS in Syria (or Iraq), perhaps facilitated by U.S. Air Force combat controllers on the ground with Syrian opposition forces
- narrow or broad no-fly zones in areas where U.S. personnel are active, and where air-defense coverage is light or relatively easily suppressed

In considering a more direct military role, Washington would need to balance potential benefits against the risk of mission creep, escalation, and inadvertently creating a recruiting windfall for ISIS.

## MANAGING RISK

An enhanced train-and-equip effort would entail various kinds of risk: (1) reputational/operational risk if U.S.-supplied arms were used in war crimes or transferred to violent extremists; (2) risks to U.S. trainers based in neighboring states who might be attacked by regime proxies; and (3) policy risks, including the possibility of blowback (e.g., that a train-and-equip program might inadvertently empower extremists) and escalation by Syria, Hezbollah, or Iran.

While some of these risks may be exaggerated (e.g., Syria, Hezbollah, and Iran are heavily committed and their response to expanded U.S. support for the opposition would therefore likely be restrained) and some can be managed (e.g., MANPADS can be provided incrementally, in small quantities), others cannot (e.g., U.S. leverage over the opposition would be limited, even in the best of circumstances). And the law of unintended consequences will always remain in play.

But the policy pursued by Washington until now has also entailed heavy costs: sectarian polarization and destabilization of the Middle East, the growth of Iranian influence in the region, and ISIS's recent successes in Iraq. The decision to ramp up support for the moderate opposition thus offers at least a first step toward halting the decline in America's position in the Middle East and reversing a number of negative trends and developments that have undermined U.S. interests in the region and elsewhere since 2011.

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