

Regional Dimensions of the Syria Train-and-Equip Program

[Soner Cagaptay](#) and [Andrew J. Tabler](#)

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Augmenting the planned force could help address intensifying threats posed by ISIS, along with Iran-backed militias and the Assad regime.

Washington's train-and-equip program for the Syrian moderate opposition began this month. The fact that all the training will take place in Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar means the program will have substantial regional implications. At a bare minimum, the program serves as these Sunni countries' first coordinated attempt to create a substate actor force to confront Iranian influence in Syria through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah instead of less-organized nonstate actors, such as the jihadists and Salafists. The program also offers a potential opportunity for the United States to organize a more efficient force to retake the ungoverned spaces lost by the increasingly Iran-dominated and sectarian government in Syria, while simultaneously confronting the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

Background

The U.S. Department of Defense's three-year, \$500 million Title 10 program for 15,000 moderate opponents of the Bashar al-Assad regime is designed to train a force to retake areas currently held by ISIS and other jihadists in Syria. Yet the program's end goals have been cause for tremendous early tensions. In particular, most opposition members seek to overthrow the Assad regime, with defeating ISIS their secondary goal in the broader Syrian war. On this count, the spread of jihadist influence in Syria's opposition-controlled territory has increasingly pushed moderate opposition members outside Syria's borders. In addition, some moderate opposition elements seem to have either joined ISIS or left the field of battle altogether. The longer it takes to operationalize the program, the harder it will likely be to attract recruits.

A number of immediate tactical and strategic benefits are linked to training moderate opposition elements in regional countries. One involves breaking the pattern whereby moderate opposition members invariably work with jihadists, who often have superior arms and training. A main focus here is Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate that, although with a "softer" touch, nevertheless shares ISIS's hard end goals of creating an Islamic state and restoring the Caliphate -- albeit at a later historical stage than that pursued by ISIS. Indeed, the principle of preventing moderate coordination with Jabhat al-Nusra and similar groups has been central to U.S. vetting and recruitment, with the plan being apparently to threaten continued access to U.S. supplies should such coordination occur. Second, building the new force from scratch is seen as promoting a coherent chain of command heretofore unavailable to the moderate opposition inside Syria, owing to localization, ideology, and competing external patrons.

Of the challenges faced by the nascent force, the greatest may be its limited scope. ISIS's harsh tactics and military prowess mean a force of only 5,000 per year is unlikely to dislodge jihadists from significant areas of Syria for years to come. Possibly mitigating this weakness would be the participation of defected Syrian military officers, who would be better trained for combat. In the event ISIS loses ground imminently, either Jabhat al-Nusra or the Assad regime will have the numbers, and potentially the resources, to retake ceded ISIS territory. This fact is not lost on regional allies who propose training larger numbers of moderates through the program. While the U.S. contribution is fixed in Congress's 2015 appropriations bill, Section 9016 says the secretary of defense "may accept and retain contributions, including assistance in-kind, from foreign governments to carry out activities." This means additional involvement from regional parties could significantly augment the train-and-equip program's capacity. Turkey has already said it could train up to 10,000 fighters this year, although given the delayed start of the Turkey-based program, this number seems unlikely to be achieved.

An area of convergence for the United States and its regional allies may concern air support. In his January interview with *Foreign Affairs*, Assad said that "any troops that don't work with the Syrian army are illegal and should be fought" -- indicating he could attack U.S.- and allied-trained forces. With Washington and its regional allies wanting to avoid a Bay of Pigs scenario, providing air cover to guard against this possibility would seem a natural common interest.

Regional Concerns

Turkey. The train-and-equip program will provide countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia with a potential proxy

on the ground against the Damascus regime, which the two states have long opposed. Specifically in the Turkish case, the U.S. language outlining the mission is intentionally vague -- it does not necessarily rule out the Assad regime as a future target. Turkish policymakers therefore seem content at the moment, believing that the program's expressly anti-Assad recruits could one day be used to fight the regime. This holds the potential for mission creep that would be welcomed by many regional players but not the Obama administration, with the United States becoming a party to the broader Syrian war once ISIS is degraded inside both Syria and Iraq.

A second concern is the potential "Pakistanization" effect of the train-and-equip mission on the Turkish security forces. In the 1980s, Pakistan worked with Washington to train Afghan militants. In this arrangement, Islamabad brought in nearly 80,000 Afghan fighters to be trained on Pakistani soil with U.S. assistance, and then sent them back into Afghanistan to fight the Soviets. Some of these militants subsequently "trained" their local trainers, infiltrating their cadres and shaping the thinking of Pakistan's security services. Mushahid Hussain Syed, the chairman of the Pakistani Senate's Defense Committee, was recently cited identifying this risk in an article by Turkish columnist Fehim Tastekin. This fear of "Pakistanization," among other factors, explains why the Turkish military has opted to stay out of the train-and-equip program, instead delegating the mission to its special forces, an effective but small and isolated branch of the Turkish Armed Forces.

Qatar. Support from Qatar for the train-and-equip program will be interesting to watch given the country's reported backing of Islamist groups currently fighting inside Syria. On a few occasions, Qatar has reportedly played a vital role in gaining the release of hostages, most notably those belonging to the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) held by Jabhat al-Nusra. Any Qatari support for the train-and-equip program could be viewed as hostile by the jihadists the program aims to uproot. Like Turkey, Qatar is seen as a general supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and its proxies in Syria and therefore will remain focused on ousting Assad while participating in the effort to degrade ISIS in Syria. It also remains unclear what impact the Qatari-Saudi detente following Saudi King Salman's ascension to the throne will have on the train-and-equip program.

Saudi Arabia. King Salman is focused on diminishing ISIS while rolling back the Iran-supported Houthi rebels in Yemen and will continue to seek the ouster of Tehran's ally Bashar al-Assad. Recent rumored increases in Saudi support to Syria's rebels indicate that the kingdom is supporting the effort in particularly southern as well as northwestern Syria to roll back the Assad regime, and in many cases direct IRGC and Hezbollah involvement.

Jordan. The Hashemite Kingdom finds itself in a Catch-22 on Washington's train-and-equip program. On the one hand, reports quoting Jordanian officials indicate a real concern about the spread of Iranian influence inside Syria, particularly in the south. Jordan is keen to roll back jihadist advances and keep ISIS out of southern Syria. This is why Amman seems eager to start the program -- and reportedly the Jordanian training site might be the first to churn out soldiers. On the other hand, Jordan lives under the shadow of the Assad regime's continued existence. Amman fears a massive wave of refugees that would accompany any regime offensive, as well as the spread of jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra from southern Syria into its territory. Indeed, together with Ankara, Amman could suffer more than any other regional state from reprisal attacks by Assad and ISIS supporters alike.

Big Picture

As a framework, the train-and-equip program offers an opportunity to create a new substate force to combat Iran-backed pro-regime militias and the Assad regime while squeezing out jihadists. The problem, however, is that the Assad regime and Iran-backed militias are gaining fast and the jihadists are also advancing, as seen by their recent assault on the city of Idlib.

As moderates themselves are squeezed out by jihadists and the Assad regime, the best option for defeating both -- in whatever order -- may now be an augmented U.S.-led train-and-equip program. Expanding the original intended force of 15,000 personnel seems appropriate given the threat and could encourage vital regional buy-in for the program, while also likely boosting recruitment for a force slated to fight ISIS first and Assad later.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](#), named by the Foreign Policy Association as one of the ten most important books of 2014.

Andrew Tabler is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics. His publications include ["Syria's Collapse and How Washington Can Stop It"](#) (Foreign Affairs, July-August 2013) and the 2011 book [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](#) (Chicago Review Press).