



## In Pursuit of Good Ideas

### THE SYRIA TRAIN-AND-EQUIP PROGRAM

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Photo courtesy PO2 Kim Smith, U.S. Department of Defense website.

THE UNITED STATES has struggled to find an effective way to secure its interests and make positive change in the quagmire that is modern-day Syria. The concept of training indigenous Syrians to fight for their own country is central to the overall strategy to counter the Islamic State, but it is a difficult task, to be undertaken in an extremely complex environment. The first Syria train-and-equip program (2014–15) was hampered by excessive policy restrictions and roundly criticized by many, including White House officials, as ill conceived from the start.<sup>1</sup> Congressional leaders deemed the program a “total failure” shortly before the Department of Defense (DoD) suspended it in October 2015.<sup>2</sup> If they are to achieve even a modicum of success, implementers of future “by, with, and through” training efforts in Syria must learn from the deficiencies of the first Syria train-and-equip program. This article explores its development and subsequent failure and offers recommendations for improving future iterations of this effort.

IN OCTOBER 2015, after only thirteen months and more than \$500 million allocated,<sup>3</sup> the United States abandoned its program to train and equip moderate Syrian opposition forces.<sup>4</sup> The decision came amid growing criticism over the ineffectiveness and cost of a program that reportedly yielded fewer than one hundred fighters. Designed as a key part of the Obama administration’s strategy to address the growing threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the train-and-equip program was hampered by significant policy limitations that minimized risk, prohibited boots on the ground, and required working “by, with, and through” Middle East partners.<sup>5</sup> These limitations reflected a mismatch between policy and military

objectives that hindered success from the beginning. Should Washington decide to pursue similar efforts in Syria, it is imperative for policymakers, military strategists, and operators to understand the shortcomings of the first Syria train-and-equip program so they may improve strategy development to meet the complex challenges of the future.

#### ■ A False Start

In May 2014, President Barack Obama unveiled a new counterterrorism strategy that would enable the United States “to train, build capacity, and facilitate partner countries on the front lines” while addressing emerging foreign threats.<sup>6</sup> During his speech at the

U.S. Military Academy, he asked Congress to appropriate \$5 billion toward a Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund that included a “critical focus” on tackling the crisis in Syria.<sup>7</sup> In the following months, the administration worked through Congress to gain funding authorization to train and equip moderate Syrian opposition forces—those without ties to the Assad regime whom the administration deemed as viable and effective partners against extremist elements in Syria. The president also requested authority for the DoD to lead the effort to train and equip vetted participants in partnered nations that included Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.<sup>8</sup> After debate, Congress approved the requested authorizations and funding in September 2014, allowing President Obama to execute a strategy developed by U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) under restrictions imposed by the National Security Council and the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

In the ensuing months, the DoD established training centers in partner nations and began the arduous process of vetting and then training the opposition forces. The program included several hundred U.S. military personnel whose goal was to field a force of approximately 3,000 Syrian fighters in 2015 and an additional 5,400 each year thereafter.<sup>9</sup> In May 2015, almost one year after the president’s speech, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced the start of training for approximately ninety Syrian recruits, with a second class starting in the subsequent weeks.<sup>10</sup> Only four months later, however, in a briefing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, the CENTCOM commander, General Lloyd Austin, testified that “the program had gotten off to a slow start,” and only “four or five” U.S.-trained New Syrian Forces (NSF) were fighting ISIL.<sup>11</sup> And only a few weeks after that, the administration essentially admitted to failure by canceling the training program and shifting focus to providing equipment packages and weapons to a select group of Syrian opposition leaders to continue combating ISIL.<sup>12</sup>

The administration’s rather slow decisionmaking, coupled with a long bureaucratic approval process and a tendency to micromanage tactical details,

contributed heavily to the failure of the first Syria train-and-equip program. Cautious policymakers sought to diminish political risk by minimizing the likelihood of U.S. casualties. They also wanted to avoid a long and potentially unwinnable conflict in an extremely complex operational environment.

### ■ An Intractable Problem

Five years of conflict in Syria have produced over a quarter million fatalities and even more displaced persons, emphasizing the cost of an intractable civil war among government, rebel, transnational, and external actors, all fighting to hold onto or seize power. The multipolar environment consists of domestic and international stakeholders with both common and competing interests. Understanding the stakeholders and their respective interests is paramount to understanding the very nature of the conflict.

Hafiz al-Assad seized power in Syria in 1970 and installed a military government led primarily by Alawites, members of a minority religious sect that is an offshoot of Shiite Islam, which incorporates Christian and other elements. After Hafiz died in 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad became president.<sup>13</sup> Although not all Alawites fully support the regime, many feel caught between Assad’s demands for loyalty and their fear of Sunni retaliation, sure to follow any change in regime.<sup>14</sup>

Directly opposing the Assad government are several political organizations claiming to represent the Syrian people,<sup>15</sup> among them the National Coalition of Revolution and Opposition Forces, which President Obama recognized in 2012 as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.<sup>16</sup> Since neither the coalition nor any other political organization wields significant influence over the multitude of armed opposition groups in Syria, the question of which group to partner is a difficult one. So far, the opposition groups have been unable to unite the many disparate organizations into a single coalition, which has complicated efforts to negotiate a political transition. Further reinforcing the fragmentation of the opposition are multiple

international actors who have stakes in Syria, as well as ties to various opposition groups.

Iran, where followers of Shia Islam are in the majority, supports the Syrian government with arms and finances to exert greater regional hegemony. Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni-majority Gulf states seek to limit this Shia influence. Iran also seeks to keep regional Sunnis from uniting because they present a threat to its interests in the region. Iran has compelled Hezbollah, a Lebanon-based Shia militia, to fight in support of the Assad government, even though fighting in Syria is not Hezbollah's primary interest. Hezbollah, which pledges allegiance to the Ayatollah Khomeini, entered the conflict after Iran hinted it might not continue to provide them with advanced weaponry, which is often transported through Syria.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Iran seeks to preserve the current Syrian regime so both Syria and Hezbollah can continue to antagonize Israel and to strengthen the crescent of Shia influence that stretches from Baghdad to Damascus to Beirut.

Russia's relationship with Syria represents the final Soviet-era connection to the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> The Russian military has renewed deep connections through military advisor exchanges, weapons sales, and the Tartus naval facility. Russia is also deeply concerned that the fall of the Assad government will cause even greater instability in the region.<sup>19</sup> This fear prompted its recent military actions in Syria, aimed to preserve Assad's hold on Damascus. Vladimir Putin also knows that fighting among Islamic extremists and the various militias risks spreading regional conflict into the Caucasus region, where Russians fought bitterly against the Chechens.<sup>20</sup>

Although Turkey generally aligns with the West and the Sunni Gulf states, elements within it have supported ISIL. In 2014, Turkish intelligence operatives were caught transporting weapons from Turkey bound to ISIL fighters in Syria.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Turkish border towns have allowed foreign jihadists to transit into Syria and build logistical hubs.<sup>22</sup> These elements supported ISIL because it fought against the Syrian Kurds and the Syrian regime. But an increasing number of

attacks against Turkish population centers threaten the government's control and internal security. Turkey responded by closing its border with Syria, yet the government remains conflicted between national security priorities and geopolitical objectives.

Finally, some transnational stakeholders and threats are relevant. To radical jihadists, the Islamic state is a veritable "city on a hill." They view it as a utopia of Muslim law and order that will inevitably grow and eventually usher in the apocalypse. ISIL leaders and followers alike believe in strict interpretation of the Quran, which includes a literal implementation of sharia law. ISIL must hold territory where it can implement sharia, which establishes its legitimacy.<sup>23</sup> After capturing towns and villages in Syria, ISIL rapidly establishes Islamic courts, provides law enforcement, distributes food, implements education programs for children, and executes a powerful information campaign.<sup>24</sup> Only after the group's rapid rise and expansion in Syria, coupled with Assad's response to internal Sunni dissidence, did the United States decide to act. ISIL threatens to destabilize the region further and undermine U.S. interests by threatening Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf.<sup>25</sup>

### ■ Strategic Indecision: Too Little, Too Late

President Obama did not announce a U.S. strategy until almost three years into Syria's civil war. The strategy was an overt attempt to address the growing problem of instability caused by the conflict, and a response to the rise of ISIL. From 2011, the administration and Congress debated the extent of proposed U.S. action and support to the moderate Syrian opposition forces in countering the Assad regime. This debate was influenced by recent U.S. experience in Libya, where rapid regime change was not desired but ultimately occurred, leaving the country in chaos. Reluctant to take significant military action against Syrian government forces, the United States initially, but slowly, rendered overt, nonlethal, and humanitarian assistance, as well as covertly providing military equipment.<sup>26</sup>

Concerns over equipping and arming opposition

groups in Syria also stoked intense debate within the administration's inner circle. This contributed to an atmosphere of indecision and produced mixed guidance as the administration sought to establish a feasible strategy.<sup>27</sup> These concerns also hindered a timely U.S. response to the conflict that enabled al-Qaeda's local affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, to gain a stronger foothold in the region, thereby diminishing prospects for success.

Meanwhile, Assad's violent attacks against his enemies further weakened moderate opposition groups and galvanized support for extremists. By June 2014, when President Obama finally proposed to train and equip moderate Syrian opposition forces, Assad was still in control, and ISIL held territory in both Iraq and Syria. ISIL had by then established itself as a well-funded fighting force with significant military experience.

The Syria train-and-equip program required both congressional approval and authority to train and equip Syrian opposition forces, and this process delayed the provision of much-needed aid and support for almost a year. Congress did not approve President Obama's proposal until September 18, 2014, and it took even longer for CENTCOM to establish the training infrastructure needed to execute the plan and vet the first trainees. As a result, training for the first class of ninety fighters did not commence until May 2015. Subsequent classes were even smaller. In his testimony before Congress in July 2015, Secretary Carter attributed the low numbers to vetting procedures and requirements to identify potential extremists so as to limit the risk to trainers and to U.S. interests.<sup>28</sup> While the dearth of potential recruits was partially attributable to the human toll of the prolonged Syrian civil war and the growing appeal of ISIL, the requirement for candidates to sign a pledge to fight only ISIL and not the Assad regime also dissuaded many from participating. Had the administration taken a more proactive approach from the outset of the civil war, extremist groups such as ISIL and Nusra might not have grown so strong, and the United States would have had better military options vis-à-vis ISIL and improved prospects of pressuring the Assad regime to accept a diplomatic settlement.

In addition to citing the administration's inability to issue timely guidance, critics argue that what little guidance it did provide was vague and irresolute. Colonel Richard Outzen, a senior military fellow in the Center for Strategic Research at the National Defense University, argues that recent policy and actions have fallen short of U.S. promises for support to Syrian opposition groups.<sup>29</sup> One example stems from an August 2012 briefing in which President Obama announced that Assad's use of chemical weapons in Syria would have "significant consequences."<sup>30</sup> Less than a year later, though, when Assad's forces used chemical weapons against rebel forces and civilians, the administration followed with inaction.<sup>31</sup> The infamous "red line" drawn by President Obama proved meaningless. Critics perceived the struggle to develop a feasible strategy as indecisiveness on the part of the administration toward greater military action. Delays in decisionmaking and slow implementation of approved programs ultimately enabled ISIL to make significant military and territorial gains as the situation in Syria worsened, which in turn enabled it to use Syria as a springboard for its return to Iraq.

### ■ The Need to Avoid "Another Iraq"

Given the complexity of the situation in Syria, the United States has understandably been reluctant to get involved in yet another interminable conflict. After all, recent U.S. incursions in the Middle East have not fared well. As one administration official noted, "In Iraq, the U.S. intervened and occupied, and the result was costly disaster. In Libya, the U.S. intervened and did not occupy, and the result was costly disaster. In Syria, the U.S. neither intervened nor occupied, and the result is a costly disaster."<sup>32</sup> The implicit takeaway for many officials was to emphasize prudence and to avoid becoming directly involved. This attitude reflected a desire to minimize political risk. The determination that Syria is not important enough to gamble American blood and treasure on has a certain political logic to it.<sup>33</sup> As a general rule, if a military action seems too small to advance a military objective, it is probably being

done for political reasons.<sup>34</sup> Because the president was understandably wary of becoming entangled in another morass in the Middle East, the administration did not want to head down the slippery slope of intervention.

A reluctance to act, however, has not always been matched by a reluctance to speak.

Since August 2011, both President Obama and officials in his administration have simultaneously called for Assad's resignation and pressed the UN Security Council to condemn the Syrian government.<sup>35</sup> Then they made unfulfilled threats in 2012 to retaliate with force against the use of chemical weapons. This penchant for strong words unsupported by decisive action raised doubts about American commitment to the region. It also created deep-seated fears among many officials that such indecisiveness would cause serious damage to vital U.S. interests if the Obama administration did not resolutely address the problems plaguing Syria.<sup>36</sup>

Until May 2014, lethal U.S. support for the Syrian opposition had been limited to a small, covert train-and-equip effort.<sup>37</sup> Then, in June 2014, after UN-backed negotiations for peace failed and ISIL occupied swaths of eastern Syria, President Obama finally requested funding and authorization from Congress for the train-and-equip program. The stated objectives were to defend Syrians from the regime, to defend them from terrorists, and "to promote the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria."<sup>38</sup> In other words, while the Obama administration publicly embraced limited overt intervention in the conflict in Syria, the goal was a "negotiated settlement."<sup>39</sup> The scope of the policy was explicitly limited in that it would not put U.S. troops on the ground, which the president deemed unnecessary for accomplishing this goal. Instead, the United States would find effective, moderate Syrian partners to push back ISIL, though how this would bring about the desired political outcome was never made clear.<sup>40</sup> And while the policy sought to avoid U.S. involvement in another protracted Middle East conflict, its narrow focus created significant challenges for military planners seeking to accomplish the objectives they were assigned.

## ■ Crippling Policy Constraints

Having decided to act, the United States saddled the train-and-equip program with burdensome constraints by its policy of "no boots on the ground." That particular restriction created multiple challenges in execution, starting with geography. Candidates could not be trained in Syria because the United States had no presence there. International support had to be gained to establish training bases outside Syria, and the fighters had to be extracted from and reinserted into the Syrian battlefield, which was fraught with danger. The second challenge was identifying whom to train. As mentioned above, candidates were vetted extensively to ensure they were not associated with any known terrorist groups. While this protected U.S. interests, it presented a serious challenge to CENTCOM's ability to recruit sufficient fighters to develop even a modest force.

Perhaps the most restrictive and unrealistic limitation was the requirement to fight ISIL and not Assad. Trainees were required to sign a pledge that they would only engage ISIL.<sup>41</sup> This was problematic from the start, because the singular issue on which "moderate" Syrian opposition groups could agree was their hatred for Assad. For most of them, ISIL was only a peripheral concern. Syrian opposition forces fighting the Islamic State welcomed the assistance of the United States and coalition for their campaign, but questioned why the Americans would not take military action against Assad's government or provide a more robust effort to degrade ISIL.<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, it was unrealistic to require minimally trained opposition fighters operating on their home turf to fight an enemy of the United States' choosing. While administration officials stated that trained opposition forces misusing or redirecting U.S. assistance for their own purposes would not receive further support, many in Congress who questioned how U.S. money, weapons, and training might ultimately be employed remained skeptical that the threat of cutting off supplies was sufficient to influence the actions of the NSF.<sup>43</sup>

U.S.-trained Syrian forces were also sure to attract

the attention of rival militia groups, ISIL, and the Assad regime, all of which had strong incentives to make an example of them by preventing their efforts from gaining traction. Providing kinetic support to these trained forces was hotly debated in Washington, but decisions were delayed. In March 2015, during testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter stated that the administration had not made its own legal determination whether the United States had sufficient authority to defend the NSF against attacks by the Syrian government.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the first NSF class was recruited, trained, and reinserted without the promise of coalition defensive fires. In other words, the administration was willing to train and arm these fighters and to insist on whom they must fight yet did not assure them of support if they came under attack from Assad. Surely, this policy did little to inspire NSF confidence.

Ultimately, the realities of battle rather than forethought and prudent planning forced the decision. In July 2015, small elements of the initial trained NSF class deployed into northern Syria and quickly encountered their first firefight, not with government forces or ISIL, but with the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. The result was one killed, five captured, and the remainder of the NSF dispersed.<sup>45</sup> The event raised serious questions about the feasibility and logic of the force's mission, combat capabilities, concept of operations, and size.<sup>46</sup> More importantly, only after the NSF was engaged in live combat did the United States finally make an official policy decision to provide them with defensive air support against all threats, in addition to offensive support against ISIL.<sup>47</sup> This delayed guidance typified how a sluggish administration decision cycle could not keep pace with rapidly changing facts on the ground.

### ■ The Struggle for Clarity

These problems plaguing the train-and-equip program highlight the importance of the relationship between policy and strategy. A strategy relates means to ends, which requires clarity about goals, resources, and

tactics for their use.<sup>48</sup> Policy, however, precedes strategy. Policy restrictions define the limits of potential U.S. military actions, and military strategy must be designed within those restrictions. Some have called the train-and-equip program bad strategy, but that criticism is off-target. Training and equipping Syrian rebels was not the most effective or proactive strategy imaginable, but it was the *only* one available given the administration's self-imposed restrictions regarding no U.S. boots on the ground, rigid vetting standards, and the requirement to fight only ISIL. The policy constraints resulted in a narrow range of strategic options.

The train-and-equip program did not fail for lack of effort or an earnest desire to make a positive impact toward stability for people living in a country ravaged by civil war. It was developed and executed by hundreds of U.S. and partner-nation professionals working to enable Syrians to shape the conduct and the outcome of the war. At the operational level, the coalition worked diligently to cultivate a moderate "third-way" partner.<sup>49</sup> The Obama administration, however, set ambitious goals while burdening planners and trainers with onerous restrictions that made it impossible to achieve them. The train-and-equip program was a byproduct of political indecision and tepid commitment that sought to keep the United States from becoming bogged down in another Middle Eastern conflict, but it effectively undercut its own chances for success.

What resulted was a mismatch between the means and ends of U.S. strategy. The administration consistently set constraints on the train-and-equip effort that precluded achievement of U.S. policy objectives: the defeat of ISIL and a negotiated transition in Syria. Even if recruiting and use had been successful, it was never clear how the NSF could engage ISIL exclusively, or how its actions would "promote the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria."<sup>50</sup> The absence of a clear and achievable plan undermined U.S. credibility, squandered resources, time, and influence, and contributed to a policy debacle in Syria.<sup>51</sup>

Half-hearted efforts to solve extremely difficult problems do not advance U.S. interests. The initial Syria

train-and-equip program has rightly been called a talking point.<sup>52</sup> It was initiated too late and given little opportunity to make any significant difference. This program underscores the propensity of the administration to focus narrowly on counterterrorism operations, thereby avoiding other measures that might have prevented the events that eventually led to the rise of ISIL.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, failure to act decisively in Syria has made room for other nefarious actors to occupy spheres of influence abandoned by the United States.<sup>54</sup> Vladimir Putin is a prime example of a world leader who views U.S. passivity as an invitation for opportunism, and this has allowed Russia to take a more active and often competing role in the region.<sup>55</sup>

Clarity in vital national interests is critical. The short-lived first iteration of the Syria train-and-equip program emphasizes the need for the United States to match words and deeds, means and ends, and to develop feasible strategies commensurate with the interests at stake. The desire to avoid another Middle East quagmire is understandable enough, but the adoption of half-measures ultimately undermines U.S. interests and credibility.<sup>56</sup> U.S. policy toward Syria has lacked clarity in determining vital national interests, as well as timely and decisive policy decisions that could have enabled the formulation of an achievable strategy.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, implementation is not a second-order concern; the execution of strategy is just as important as sound policy design.<sup>58</sup> The idea of training Syrians to take their country back may be appealing, but an idea that cannot be successfully implemented is one that perhaps ought not be pursued.<sup>59</sup> Effective strategy requires clear policy guidance and realistic objectives. Unfortunately, the first Syria train-and-equip program had neither.

### ■ Recommendations

Despite the cancellation of the first train-and-equip program, several key takeaways from this experience could benefit military strategists, policymakers, and operators alike. These lessons are particularly relevant for any subsequent version of Syria train-and-equip, should the Obama administration decide to reverse

the “operational pause” implemented in October 2015.<sup>60</sup> The following six recommendations address how policymakers and military personnel can improve upon the first Syria train-and-equip program.

- 1. Provide strategic vision.** Without a vision, everyone becomes a tactician. Ideally, the National Security Council (NSC) should envision how a subsequent train-and-equip program will bridge the wide gap between ends (setting conditions for a peaceful transition in Syria), and means (developing capable indigenous forces to counter ISIL). A primary weakness of the initial train-and-equip concept was the absence of an inherent connection between, on the one hand, efforts to degrade, dismantle, and defeat ISIL and, on the other, the goal of removing Assad through a negotiated settlement of the Syria conflict. It was never clear how a program geared to train moderate opposition forces (and which, in the end, trained only a few dozen fighters) would help accomplish the national security goals of defeating ISIL and setting conditions for a peaceful transition from Assad. The NSC should clearly state the president’s vision by describing how a limited effort like the train-and-equip program would accomplish his strategic goals. By doing so, it will leave adequate space for CENTCOM and the Combined Interagency Task Force to develop the operational and tactical details of a plan specifically designed to accomplish and then execute their strategic vision. If the NSC cannot answer the basic question of how degrading and destroying ISIL will help achieve a political transition in Syria—two desirable but discrete objectives—perhaps it is better to go back to the drawing board.
- 2. Streamline decisionmaking by delegating authority to the operational level.** In the first iteration of the train-and-equip program, the NSC was responsible for the outcome and DoD for the execution, but no one really owned the decisionmaking process. This proved extremely problematic,

since timely responses to specific requests for authorities, support, and policy adjustments were choked in the endless cycle of interagency committee meetings. Agile decisionmaking is vital to any surrogate training effort, especially concerning the defense of U.S.- or coalition-trained fighters with airpower. Furthermore, CENTCOM should not have to question its authority and permission to protect trained fighters on the battlefield.

The solution to this particular problem is delegation. Greater decisionmaking authority should be delegated to the CENTCOM commander, who can then empower the one- or two-star general executing the program. Otherwise, the effort will flounder, as operators wait interminably for yet another decision from Washington. If complex interagency programs are to succeed, they require empowering leaders at the operational level to make the majority of operational and tactical decisions. Deferring every decision to a Washington committee is a formula for inaction that impedes tactical success. Delegating authority will prevent bureaucrats from becoming consumed with tactical details and help to keep strategic, operational, and tactical concerns and discussions in proper alignment.

3. **Develop from the bottom up by using experienced trainers.** U.S. and coalition trainers who have worked with Syrian rebels understand both the capabilities and limitations of each indigenous group. After more than a year's experience in the field, they are extremely knowledgeable about the fractured nature of the Syrian opposition, as well as the myriad of groups operating in northern and southern Syria. Those who have already worked with the opposition are in a unique position to give the most useful feedback on what does and does not work in training Syrian forces. They should be the first to answer basic questions of whom to train, for how long, and where to insert them. They should also assess

what tactical-level results we can expect from each class and how to maintain effective relationships with fighters the United States neither commands nor controls. Policymakers should seek their recommendations first to determine what lies in the realm of possibility and to shape effective policies that will enable any subsequent train-and-equip program to succeed.

4. **Temper expectations.** *Undersell and overdeliver.* If the NSC is guilty of being unresponsive, the DoD is guilty of giving overly optimistic assessments of what can be accomplished under such heavy policy restrictions and in a chaotic environment like Syria. Military staff officers must strive to give the most realistic estimates possible to those approving policy and funding—namely, the interagency and Congress. This requires clearly articulating assumptions to manage expectations. Because program outcomes will fall on a spectrum of success, it is advisable always to present best-case and worst-case scenarios, together with their likelihood. Instead of saying, for instance, that the goal of the train-and-equip program is to produce 5,400 recruits a year,<sup>61</sup> it is better to emphasize that results could be “anywhere between 0 and 5,400 recruits a year.” Then, define the likelihood based on specific conditions that will either benefit or hinder the program. This approach facilitates expectation management, which is essential when results are so unpredictable. Failure to meet stated goals is often viewed as a strategic failure, and in many cases fuels political rivalries and agendas. In these authors' experience, it's better to undersell and overdeliver on results.
5. **Exercise strategic patience.** Teaching someone to fish is slow; and any “by, with, and through” strategy takes time. Results do not happen overnight. U.S. efforts to train Iraqi security forces during Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and NEW DAWN attested to the painstakingly slow tempo

of host-nation operational timelines. These are not Americans we are training; they are Syrians who will learn and fight at their innate pace.

6. **Ask for what you need, and if you don't get it, be willing to call time-out.** If the rules set by Washington policy remain so restrictive there is no chance for operational success, military leaders should be willing to admit an effort just will not work under the restrictions. This is extremely difficult to do with a fledgling program that is under development, but it is better to decide internally to pause or cancel a questionable effort than to be shut down after an embarrassing congressional hearing. Sometimes a failed effort is worse than no effort at all.

## ■ Conclusion

In summary, if policymakers set a clear and realistic vision for training Syrians, effectively align ways, means, and ends, facilitate the decisionmaking process by delegating greater authority to the combatant commander, and rely on firsthand expertise of trainers, they will increase the chances of success. If military executors set realistic expectations, clearly articulate assumptions, determine their required authorizations, and are willing to fold on a bad hand, they may be able to avoid the pitfalls of the first train-and-equip debacle. But even if policy, plans, and execution are drastically improved in subsequent iterations, the outcome for any train-and-equip effort remains highly uncertain because of the very nature of the mission.

The Achilles' heel of any effort to train and arm

indigenous forces is the lack of any actual control over the fighters. The United States can gain only a degree of influence through limited training, weapons, money, or the promise of resupply and defense. This makes the entire effort a gamble. Even the best-trained and most highly skilled Syrian rebels are still free agents who will act in their own interests, which may or may not correspond with U.S. interests. Their U.S.-provided weapons could kill hundreds of ISIL fighters, or they might wind up in the hands of terrorist organizations like al-Nusra. Trained Syrian forces could engage ISIL forces near Raqqa, or they might decide to attack the Assad regime forces near Damascus. There is no way to know what they will do. In putting its credibility and prestige on the line by training and arming fighters, the United States gives the opposition a certain degree of leverage. This fact should temper U.S. expectations regarding what can be achieved on the battlefield in Syria.

If trained and armed indigenous forces can defend themselves, provide occasional targeting information for coalition jets overhead, and hold liberated terrain, it should be considered a successful first step, even if the initial gains are strategically insignificant. Such progress might enable the United States to contemplate more ambitious future efforts. To get there, however, the United States must be willing to do more than it has done to date. Should it prove unwilling or unable to do so, there is no reason to expect the future to look much different than the past—with more carnage and destruction in Syria, and additional harm to U.S. interests in the region and beyond.



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## ■ Notes

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