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Train and Equip Not Enough for U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebels

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The administration needs to make sure that its imminent creation of a new rebel force is conducted with clear political goals, a concrete military strategy, and due consideration of likely operational contingencies.

As the U.S. train-and-equip program for vetted Syrian rebels reportedly approaches its long-delayed kickoff, many questions remain unanswered about its nature and purpose. Setting the new force's mission, strategy, capabilities, operations, process of commitment, and relationship to other opposition forces on Syrian battlefields will be critical to its prospects for success.

WHAT WILL THE FORCE'S MISSION BE?

According to the Pentagon spokesman, the new force will have at least three missions: defending civilians, conducting offensive operations against the "Islamic State"/ISIS, and supporting the political opposition. Left out of this is any stated mission against Bashar al-Assad's forces, though that may be implied in the defensive mission. Whether clashes with the regime are viewed as inevitable or not, Washington needs to be clear in its expectations from the outset: fighting both ISIS and the regime would be a very large mission demanding significant numbers, heavy arms, extensive sustainment, and in all likelihood air support.

TO WHAT DEGREE WILL IT BE TRAINED AND EQUIPPED?

It is unclear if the force will consist of large maneuver units or small company/battalion-size units. Also unclear is whether it will be a lightly armed infantry force or a more heavily equipped "combined arms" force with infantry, indirect-fire, antiarmor, and anti-aircraft capabilities. Size matters -- larger maneuver units are more capable of holding or taking ground and defeating enemy forces

than smaller units.

Syria's battlefields are replete with tanks, artillery, and other heavy weapons, and regime ground forces have significant air support. To counter such weapons, U.S.-backed forces will need either ample capabilities of their own or external support from foreign aircraft and/or ground forces. This was demonstrated in the fighting for Kobane in Aleppo province, where Kurdish fighters were at a significant disadvantage against ISIS heavy weapons until coalition air intervention turned the tide.

Offensive operations are generally more demanding, requiring a higher state of training, better command and control, and better logistical capabilities. Sustained operations are especially demanding. How and to what extent will these capabilities be built into the force?

WHO WILL SET ITS STRATEGY AND DIRECT ITS OPERATIONS?

The new force should not be just another armed group -- it will have to operate within some strategy, and its operations will have to be controlled and perhaps integrated with other operations in Syria and possibly Iraq, hopefully in conjunction with U.S./coalition interests. At present, however, there is no opposition political or military organization capable of fulfilling these roles. So will the new force operate under U.S./coalition control or some ad hoc arrangement, such as the "operations rooms" now used to coordinate rebel operations in some parts of Syria?

WHEN WILL IT BE READY?

The timeline envisioned for creation of the force seems lengthy, with three yearly increments of 5,400 troops being trained and equipped. While this protracted approach might suit Washington's current view of the situation, conditions in Syria could change radically, affecting the force's mission and requirements. Battles and territory will be won and lost by the combatants in Syria over the next three years, shaping their fortunes and the context in which the U.S.-backed force would operate.

WHEN AND WHERE WILL IT BE COMMITTED?

Committing the new force piecemeal, with overly ambitious missions, and/or on heavily contested battlefields could result in its early failure or destruction. This argues for a cautious initial commitment of relatively large units into relatively quiet or less threatened areas of Syria. Washington and its partners should not allow political pressure or operational exigencies to force a premature or ill-placed commitment.

IS THE FORCE LARGE ENOUGH?

Around 16,000 personnel seems small for any force that aims to have decisive effects on the Syrian war. Its potential opponents would number in the tens of thousands, and it would likely have to divide itself between offensive and defensive operations over large swaths of territory, potentially spreading itself too thin. These factors could be mitigated by good strategy and well-conceived operations, but they need to be addressed beforehand, and expectations for the force need to be managed.

HOW WILL IT BE SUSTAINED?

The force will likely be committed to a long-term struggle inside Syria, so combat units will need to be sustained accordingly. They will take casualties, expend supplies (ammunition, medicine, food, etc.), and lose equipment to destruction, capture, and breakdown, all of which must be made up if the force is to remain effective. For offensive operations, everything must be moved to where units are fighting, and increased requirements for resupply must be anticipated.

This means that a robust logistics system must be in place to support the combat forces. Will it be provided by outside actors, at least to the point of crossing the Syrian border? To whatever extent the force is expected to provide its own logistics, it will need men, organization, and equipment for that purpose. This means fewer troops available for combat. Additionally, can Turkey and Jordan be relied on to provide the access needed for the duration of the commitment?

HOW WILL IT BE SUPPORTED?

Given the scope and difficulty of the force's expected missions, it will almost certainly require combat support from U.S./coalition forces. And in the likely event that rebel elements run into difficulty during battle, they will need to be bailed out.

The war has already shown the need for large amounts of firepower to counter enemy heavy weapons and break stubborn resistance. A U.S.-trained force could not afford to become involved in protracted siege-type operations as many rebel and regime units have. It would need to be able to call on heavy fire support to break resistance quickly or respond to heavy attacks. This requirement can be reduced by providing the force with robust heavy weapons capabilities, but it probably cannot be eliminated. This means that personnel, organizations, and procedures must be in place to ensure that adequate support is provided in a timely manner. In effect, the force would have to be integrated into U.S./coalition air and perhaps ground operations.

Moreover, the coalition will have to at least consider the possibility that ground intervention may sometimes be needed to rescue friendly rebel elements. Both ISIS and regime forces will likely seek the rapid destruction of any U.S.-trained units. Washington could not allow such a development since it might prove deadly to the entire enterprise.

HOW WILL IT RELATE TO OTHER OPPOSITION FORCES?

Syrian battlefields are often complex, with a wide range of moderate, Islamist extremist, and regime forces present. Will U.S.-trained units be told which forces they can cooperate with and under what conditions, or will commanders have the flexibility and initiative to work with other opposition elements as they deem fit? What will be more important to Washington, winning battles against ISIS or maintaining the "purity" of the forces it has trained? This is not a theoretical question, since other groups that reportedly received U.S. assistance are believed to have cooperated operationally with al-Qaeda-affiliated groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra.

CONCLUSION

Building and deploying a U.S.-backed force to fight effectively in Syria goes well beyond the train-and-equip mission. Washington must expect that the force will encounter major difficulties and be challenged directly by experienced, heavily armed adversaries. Issues of strategy, operations, capabilities, sustainment, and support should all be addressed as the process moves forward. The United States cannot afford a Syrian "Bay of Pigs" in which its new force is routed or destroyed due to bad strategy, a poorly conceived operational concept, weak capabilities, or lack of support.

U.S. planners may already be addressing some of these issues, or perhaps they will tackle them as the program proceeds. In any case, creating an American-backed force and committing it to battle is not an endeavor to be taken lightly. It should be carried out with clear political and military goals in mind, a concrete military strategy for achieving them, and due consideration of likely operational contingencies. These have not been characteristics of the Obama administration's approach to Syria thus far.

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