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US begins training new “rebel” army for operations in Syria

By Thomas Gaist

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US soldiers have begun training some 100 Syrian fighters in a “secure location” in Jordan in preparation for military intervention in Syria, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter confirmed Thursday. Other contingents will soon begin training at camps run by the US military in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, Carter said.

The militants will receive intelligence and air support from American forces, and the fighters will also receive monetary compensation from the US government, the defense chief said. The US will supply the new fighting groups with pickup trucks with mounted machine guns, as well as other assault weapons and communications gear.

The training will be led by some 400 US soldiers, joined by another 100 military trainers from US allies. The new training programs are intended to prepare rebels for large-scale warfare, according to sources cited by the *Wall Street Journal*. Nearly 4,000 rebels have already been vetted and 400 have been selected to advance to a “second level of review,” according to the *Journal*.

The Pentagon intends for the training facilities and recruitment efforts to “expand over time as the US demonstrates it can support recruits on the battlefield,” according to a US military official who spoke to the *Journal*.

The US is following an “if you build it they will come approach,” a US defense official told the *Journal*. US commanders anticipate that they will win substantial new recruits for the new force based on the various forms of combat support to be provided by the US Central Command (CENTCOM) to the “rebels” once they are deployed to the front in Syria.

According to official statements, the new US forces will supposedly focus on fighting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), rather than on ousting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Such claims highlight the intractable contradictions in US policy in the region, given that ISIS itself originated out of US-backed rebel militias fighting in Syria.

Indeed, the CIA and US military have fomented a brutal civil war in Syria since 2011, funneling weapons, funds, and other forms of support to militant groups including various tendencies linked to Al Qaeda. More broadly, the US has been the leading supporter, for decades, of extremist militants across the Middle East, relying on such groups as cheap and expendable proxies for its hegemonic agenda.

Once the US-trained “rebels” enter combat in Syria, they will almost inevitably come into conflict with the armed forces of the Assad regime. Defense Secretary Carter told the *New York Times*, “If they are contested by regime forces, we would have some responsibility to help them,” adding, “We have not yet decided in detail how we would exercise that responsibility.”

What this means in practice is that the US-trained “rebels” in Syria will provide a virtually unlimited array of pretexts for escalating direct US military involvement, including airstrikes and other attacks on the forces of the Assad regime, in the name of “exercising the responsibility” to protect the US stooge forces from annihilation.

In reality, US war aims extend well beyond targeting the Assad regime or eliminating any single militant faction, ISIS or otherwise. US imperialism is striving to cement its strategic domination of the entire region through the consolidation of a revised political framework, one anchored by Israel, the Saudi monarchy and, if the P5+1 negotiations spearheaded by the White House bear fruit, buttressed by a conciliatory elements within the Iranian bourgeoisie.

The main obstacle to such a region-wide deal is the steady escalation of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Present indications are that the monarchy will continue its onslaught against Yemen, a brutal war that is understood in both Riyadh and Tehran as a proxy conflict between the two powers. The Saudi assault, carried out with state-of-the-art US weaponry, has already claimed hundreds of civilian lives.

Saudi officials vowed Friday to launch a new round of devastating strikes against Houthi positions, just hours after promising to uphold a five-day ceasefire to allow humanitarian aid into the country.

While Turkey and Saudi Arabia are also potential rivals on the regional stage, the two powers have arrived at a temporary partnership over military policy in Syria. “Our views on Syria are aligned with Saudi Arabia,” a Turkish foreign ministry spokesperson said in comments to *Reuters*.

Turkish media said the joint efforts with Riyadh “reflect renewed urgency and impatience with the Obama administration’s policy in the region” and reflected growing Saudi engagement in a “broader proxy war against Iran.”

The two powers have established a joint command post in the northern province of Idlib, where they have sought to rally a coalition of militants against Assad, calling itself the “Conquest Army” and including fighters from the al-Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria.

The Saudi-Turkish-backed coalition has already succeeded in “causing a lot of damage and capturing more territory from the regime,” an FSA adviser claimed in comments to *US News and World Report*. The joint Saudi-Turkish move against the Iranian-backed Assad regime serves to further ratchet up tensions between both powers and Tehran, which views the overthrow of the pro-Iranian government in Damascus as an unacceptable blow to its regional position.

The growth of tensions with Iran was emphasized by the announcement this week that Saudi Arabia may abandon a longstanding official commitment to nuclear disarmament in the Middle East and seek to acquire its own nuclear weapons.

“Our allies aren’t listening to us, and this is making us extremely nervous,” a leading Saudi academic told UPI, explaining the sudden talk of a new nuclear weapons drive. The Saudi scholar noted that a US deal with Tehran would allow Iran to make use of more than \$100 billion in assets currently frozen by sanctions, freeing up fresh resources for Tehran’s regional proxy wars.

Turkish officials have similarly denounced the Obama administration’s Syria policy as not having any coherent strategy for removing Assad and as overly focused on reaching a deal with Tehran. “The region is in need of change,” a senior Turkish official told reporters.

The Turkish official criticized the “lack of tangible steps taken by the international community since the conflict in Syria broke out,” i.e., the insufficient aggressiveness of the US and NATO powers in seeking regime change in Syria.

Whatever the seriousness of the Saudi and Turkish threats against the Assad regime and its allies in Tehran, the hurling of fresh battalions of US-trained militants into the raging inferno of the Syrian civil war, which has already turned large portions of Syria into heaps of rubble while killing and displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians, will only ensure the expansion of the slaughter.

Under the banner of the “global war on terrorism,” the region’s most right-wing and pro-imperialist regimes are being mobilized behind US imperialism’s drive for new military interventions across the region. The US training program is kicking off almost simultaneously with the massive Eager Lion war games in Jordan, involving military units from 18 countries.

Next week, Obama will host a summit May 13-14 of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the organization of the six Persian Gulf monarchies: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Oman. While the main focus will be US reassurances that a nuclear deal with

Iran will not endanger the Arab sheikdoms—on Wednesday the Pentagon revealed plans for a region-wide missile defense system in the Persian Gulf—there will undoubtedly be discussions of the ongoing wars in both Syria and Yemen.