



Obama's Trying to Train Syrians and Iraqis to Fight ISIS. Easier Said Than Done.

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When it comes to the U.S. plan for destroying the Islamic State, American airstrikes are in, American ground forces are out. The Obama administration and its allies are instead launching efforts to train the rebel forces fighting the militants inside Syria and retrain the shattered Iraqi Army.

Camps are being built in Jordan and northern Iraq to train Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, and 10,000 Sunni "national guard" troops. For the United States, there's a feeling of *déjà vu*, as the U.S. military spent \$26 billion to train and equip the Iraqi security forces from 2004 to 2011.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Georgia have offered to host training for an initial 5,000 Syrian fighters before sending them back to the battlefield. Last week, Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey indicated that the United States and its allies would eventually need to train as many as 15,000 Syrian rebels if land seized by the Islamic State is going to be retaken.

"Building partner capacity," which basically translates to strengthening security forces in other countries, has become a cornerstone of the Obama administration's foreign policy, although it did not invent the term. And it's far from the first White House to rely on it as a foreign policy tool. For decades, from Vietnam to Colombia, the United States has been advising and equipping foreign militaries for a whole host of reasons. But under the Obama administration, the practice has spread largely in response to increasingly disperse terrorist threats. From Afghanistan to Somalia to Yemen, building security forces has become central to America's engagement with hot spots around the world.

It's President Barack Obama's go-to foreign policy tool partly because it builds on the idea that the people in these countries have to have a stake in their own security and that if they are a big

part of the solution, that security will be longer lasting. Obama hits this theme in almost all of his national security speeches.

"American power can make a decisive difference, but we cannot do for Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region," Obama said Sept. 10 during his speech to the American public on the threat posed by the Islamic State.

But training foreign forces also allows the United States to avoid having to put large numbers of its troops on the ground, another top priority for Obama. In the case of Afghanistan, where the United States has spent \$62 billion training Afghan security forces, it is essential to accelerating the withdrawal of U.S. troops, who are supposed to completely leave the country by 2017, with the exception of small detachments assigned to the mammoth American Embassy in Kabul.

In West Africa, U.S. military personnel are being sent in not to treat patients with Ebola directly, but to train local health care professionals to deal with the epidemic, which has far surpassed the capacity of the governments of Liberia and Sierra Leone.

"When the mission is important enough, but not so important that we should do it ourselves, this is the obvious alternative," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

But while the U.S. military has more experience and resources to do this than any other country, the track record remains mixed and is scattered with spectacular failures. And as the Obama administration launches ambitious new efforts in Iraq and Syria, experts point to the pitfalls inherent in training any security force.

One of the big risks is that the people you train aren't who they say they are, meaning they may be willing to flee a battle or even to defect to the other side, Preble said.

There are a handful of poster children for the times when U.S. training either went wrong or was unable to stop bad actors from doing bad things.

Among them is Amadou Haya Sanogo, who participated in six different military training missions in the United States between 1998 and 2010, and then went on to launch a military coup in Mali in 2012. He has since been charged with torturing and killing soldiers who did not agree with him.

Another military coup leader, Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, attended the U.S. Army War College in Pennsylvania during his time in the Egyptian military in 2006.

One of the central justifications that support U.S. military training programs is that they create invaluable personal relationships between U.S. and foreign officers that can then be called upon in times of crisis.

This was true to some extent in Egypt. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and senior U.S. military officials made numerous calls to Sisi after he led a coalition as army chief to remove Mohamed Morsi from power in July 2013. American defense officials say their relationships helped prevent the military from taking excessive measures, but it clearly didn't rein it in entirely.

Another mistake the United States has repeatedly made is creating a security force that is out of balance with a country's resources and therefore skews its place within a country's society.

"Getting the right formula for a military is important. You need to take it on. You can't ignore it," said John Norris, the executive director of the Sustainable Security and Peacebuilding Initiative at the Center for American Progress. "But the Pentagon has a tendency to treat militaries in a vacuum and not look at where militaries sit in the fabric of a society."

The U.S. government will say the military component is part of a whole-of-government approach, but that gets "distorted on the ground when the U.S. is pouring money into the military and making the military the priority," Norris said.

In Afghanistan, where the United States is undertaking its biggest training mission to date, the cost of financing the Afghan security forces far exceeds the country's GDP. In 2013, the Afghan GDP was only about \$2 billion, while it costs roughly \$5 billion a year to pay for the military and police.

The stated end-strength goal for the Afghan National Security Forces is 352,000. That goal is almost complete, with the latest tally at 340,000. To lessen the cost of sustaining it, NATO has said it could reduce the force to 228,500 by 2017, but only if security conditions permit.

The United States has spent billions of dollars training Afghans, but it has also spent large sums to train soldiers in Eastern European countries to eventually go to Afghanistan to train Afghans. The Obama administration requested roughly \$99 million in 2014 to train and equip Central and Eastern European countries to support NATO operations in Afghanistan.

As the Iraqi security forces crumbled this summer in the face of the Islamic State's advance -- after the United States spent at least \$26 billion on training and equipping them over the last decade -- lawmakers began to ask whether they should expect the same to happen in Afghanistan after U.S. troops leave there.

"I watch and analyze the mistakes in Iraq, and I think many of them are going to come to pass in Afghanistan," Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.) said at a hearing in July. She was assured by defense officials that what has come to pass in Iraq is unlikely to occur in Afghanistan, as long as the United States and its NATO allies maintain their commitment there.

Meanwhile, the jury is also still out in Africa, where training foreign militaries to tackle homegrown terrorist threats is dominating U.S. engagement with several countries. Niger, which has received \$40 million in 2014, is one of the biggest recipients of what is known as "1206

funding," money that allows the Defense Department to train foreign militaries for the purpose of counterterrorism.

But by far the single largest recipient of 1206 funding is Yemen, which received \$147 million between 2012 and 2014, in addition to other forms of U.S. security assistance. The money is being used to procure reconnaissance and surveillance aircraft, drones, helicopters, and counterterrorism training for the country's special forces.

In his Sept. 10 speech on the U.S. strategy against the Islamic State, Obama cited the examples of Yemen and Somalia as places where the "strategy of taking out terrorists who threaten us, while supporting partners on the front lines, is one that we have successfully pursued."

But Yemen plunged into a violent political crisis last month when Shiite Houthi rebels with ties to Iran overran the capital city of Sanaa after facing little resistance from security and military forces.

So where has this strategy worked? A former senior defense official pointed to the example of Bosnia and Kosovo, where NATO and now European forces have provided border assistance, police training, and peacekeeping forces since conflict ended in both countries.

"I think that's a model for how it should work if you have to go in during an actual crisis," he said. "It proves you don't need to maintain a huge footprint, but you do have to stay committed to keep things under control," the official said, drawing a parallel to Iraq, where the United States withdrew all of its troops in 2011 after negotiations to secure a status-of-forces agreement fell through.

But echoing what others said, the former defense official said the military component cannot be the only part of the strategy.

"You have to have a clear political end state up front and then you have to resource that end state," the former senior defense official said. "This is strategy 101: You fight wars for a purpose. If you're going to go in and arm a country's military, then the political objective should drive that."

Looking ahead to Syria, experts say the task there is practically mission impossible.

Not only will the Syrian rebels be fighting the Islamic State, which at this point is the dominant opposition group inside the country, but they will also face a battle-hardened Syrian army with an air force at its command.

"Standing up forces in the midst of a crisis is always more difficult," the former senior defense official said.

But in Syria, the United States is not trying to build a professional military that sits within the fabric of a functioning state, Norris said. Instead, the goal is to immediately upgrade the fighting

capability of an insurgent force, and there are few people on the ground to monitor that process if mistakes are made.

"You can probably make substantial improvements pretty quickly, in terms of intelligence, communications, and logistics capability," Norris said, adding: "The challenge isn't when the fighting is ongoing but when the fighting stops."