



International New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1KUvGBe>

POLITICS | NEWS ANALYSIS

Finger-Pointing, but Few Answers, After a Syria Solution Fails

By **PETER BAKER** SEPT. 17, 2015

WASHINGTON — By any measure, President Obama’s effort to train a Syrian opposition army to fight the Islamic State on the ground has been an abysmal failure. The military acknowledged this week that just four or five American-trained fighters are actually fighting.

But the White House says it is not to blame. The finger, it says, should be pointed not at Mr. Obama but at those who pressed him to attempt training Syrian rebels in the first place — a group that, in addition to congressional Republicans, happened to include former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

At briefings this week after the disclosure of the paltry results, Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary, repeatedly noted that Mr. Obama always had been a skeptic of training Syrian rebels. The military was correct in concluding that “this was a more difficult endeavor than we assumed and that we need to make some changes to that program,” Mr. Earnest said. “But I think it’s also time for our critics to ‘fess up in this regard as well. They were wrong.”

In effect, Mr. Obama is arguing that he reluctantly went along with those who said it was the way to combat the Islamic State, but that he never wanted to do it and has now has been vindicated in his original judgment. The I-told-you-so argument, of course, assumes that the idea of training rebels itself was flawed and not that it was started too late and executed ineffectively, as critics maintain.

Either way, it underscored White House sensitivities about the widening Syrian catastrophe. With more than 200,000 killed in the civil war, a wave of refugees flooding into Europe, and Russia now flying in arms and troops, the president finds himself with a geopolitical and humanitarian mess that will most likely not be settled before he leaves office in 16 months.

Mr. Obama has long considered Syria a quagmire that defies American solutions, and aides are hoping to keep him from being held responsible for something that, they argue, he never really had the power to fix. But with images of drowned children and Russian tanks, the president has come under increasing fire from multiple directions.

The Russians accuse him of making the crisis worse by opposing the autocratic government of President Bashar al-Assad in its fight against terrorists like the Islamic State, also called ISIS or ISIL. Republicans accuse him of passivity and fecklessness, of sitting back while the conflict spread across the region.

But there is no consensus among critics about what should be done. During back-to-back presidential debates on Wednesday night, Republican candidates were divided between those advocating more American involvement and those suggesting stepping back and letting the Syrians fight it out themselves.

“I openly and repeatedly warned that if we did not find moderate elements on the ground that we could equip and arm, that void would be filled by radical jihadists,” Senator Marco Rubio of Florida said. “Well, the president didn’t listen, the administration didn’t follow through and that’s exactly what happened. That is why ISIS grew.”

Donald J. Trump, the businessman, and Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky went the other direction, embracing disengagement. “Syria’s a mess,” Mr. Trump said. “Why are we fighting ISIS in Syria? Let them fight each other and pick up the remnants.”

Mr. Paul added, “Sometimes both sides of the civil war are evil, and sometimes intervention makes us less safe.”

The idea of bolstering Syrian rebels was debated from the early days of the civil war, which started in 2011. Mrs. Clinton, along with David H. Petraeus, then the C.I.A. director, and Leon E. Panetta, then the defense secretary, supported

arming opposition forces, but the president worried about deep entanglement in someone else's war after the bloody experience in Iraq.

In 2014, however, after the Islamic State had swept through parts of Syria and Iraq, Mr. Obama reversed course and initiated a \$500 million program to train and arm rebels who had been vetted and were told to fight the Islamic State, not Mr. Assad's government.

The program was financed last December and started in May with the goal of training 5,400 in the first year, but military officials said only 100 to 120 had actually been trained. The first 54 graduates suffered a devastating attack by a Qaeda affiliate in July, forcing the Pentagon to draw up plans to revamp the program by dropping larger numbers of fighters into safer parts of Syria.

Appearing at a Senate hearing on Wednesday, Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, head of the United States Central Command, conceded that only four or five trained rebels were actually fighting now.

"We have to acknowledge that this is a total failure," Senator Jeff Sessions, Republican of Alabama, said in response. "It's just a failure. I wish it weren't so, but that's the fact. It's time to — way past time to react to that failure."

Military officials said the few trained rebels might still prove useful in specific roles, like calling in American airstrikes. But the military has had better results from working with Kurdish forces who have stepped up to fill the place of American-trained Syrians on the ground, first at Sinjar, then at Kobani and most recently in the stretch of Syria south of the Turkish border from the Euphrates River to the Iraqi border.

The White House all but washed its hands of the training program after General Austin's testimony.

"It is true that we have found this to be a difficult challenge," Mr. Earnest said. "But it is also true that many of our critics had proposed this specific option as essentially the cure-all for all of the policy challenges that we're facing in Syria right now. That is not something that this administration ever believed, but it is something that our critics will have to answer for."

Some of those critics said the program failed because it was delayed and limited. "The White House plan is two-plus years late and fundamentally flawed

because it restricts volunteers from fighting against Assad, which is their priority objective,” said Gen. Jack Keane, a retired Army vice chief of staff.

Some Syrian rebels who asked for American arms in 2011 and 2012 eventually gave up and allied themselves with more radical groups, analysts said, leaving fewer fighters who were friendly to the United States. “The reason it failed is because we got the politics wrong,” said Andrew J. Tabler, a Syria specialist at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Ryan C. Crocker, a retired career diplomat who was an ambassador to Afghanistan under Mr. Obama, said the president was right to think a train-and-arm program would not work. But the president, Mr. Crocker added, should have either continued to resist it or at least taken ownership of it rather than blame others for its failure.

“How un-presidential that sounds — ‘We didn’t want to do it, we thought it was unsound but you made us do it,’ ” said Mr. Crocker, now dean of the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. “It’s just indicative of their whole approach to Syria, which is not to have a policy. This is the worst thing they could say.”

A version of this article appears in print on September 18, 2015, on page A10 of the New York edition with the headline: Finger-Pointing, but Few Answers, After a Syria Solution Fails .