

US-trained Division 30 rebels 'betray US and hand weapons over to al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria'

Pentagon-trained rebels are reported to have betrayed US and handed weapons over to Jabhat al-Nusra immediately after entering Syria



Jabhat al-Nusra, affiliated to al-Qaeda, took the technicals, guns and ammunition from the US-trained Division 30 in northern Aleppo Photo: Reuters

By Nabih Bulos, Amman

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Pentagon-trained rebels in Syria are reported to have betrayed their American backers and handed their weapons over to al-Qaeda in Syria immediately after re-entering the country.

Fighters with Division 30, the “moderate” rebel division favoured by the United States, surrendered to the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, a raft of sources claimed on Monday night.

Division 30 was the first faction whose fighters graduated from a US-led training programme in Turkey which aims to forge a force on the ground in Syria to fight against Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Isil).

A statement on Twitter by a man calling himself Abu Fahd al-Tunisi, a member of al-Qaeda's local affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, read: "A strong slap for America... the new group from Division 30 that entered yesterday hands over all of its weapons to Jabhat al-Nusra after being granted safe passage.

"They handed over a very large amount of ammunition and medium weaponry and a number of pick-ups."



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Abu Khattab al-Maqdisi, who also purports to be a Jabhat al-Nusra member, added that Division 30's commander, Anas Ibrahim Obaid, had explained to Jabhat al-Nusra's leaders that he had tricked the coalition because he needed weapons.

"He promised to issue a statement... repudiating Division 30, the coalition, and those who trained him," he tweeted. "And he also gave a large amount of weapons to Jabhat al-Nusra."

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a monitoring group, reported that seventy-five Division 30 fighters had crossed into Syria from Turkey early the day before with “12 four-wheel vehicles equipped with machine guns and ammunition”.

US Central Command confirmed about 70 graduates of the Syria “train and equip” programme had re-entered Syria with their weapons and equipment and were operating as New Syrian Forces alongside Syrian Kurds, Sunni Arab and other anti-Isil forces.

The latest disaster, if true, will be the second to befall the programme. Last month, after the first group of fighters re-entered, the militia was attacked and routed by Jabhat al-Nusra, which stormed its headquarters and kidnapped a number of its members.

At the weekend, the group’s chief of staff also resigned, saying the training programme was “not serious”.

In the statement, Lieutenant Colonel Mohammad al-Dhaher complained of insufficient numbers of trainees and fighters, inadequate supplies, and even “a lack of accuracy and method in the selection of Division 30’s cadres”.


The latest developments have only added to the scorn heaped on the much-criticized \$500 million (£320m) program, which aimed to forge a 5,400-strong force of “moderate” rebels to combat Isil.

It has been hampered by problems almost from the outset, with rebels complaining of a laborious vetting process. The biggest point of contention is that they are only allowed to fight Isil, not the Assad regime, which is the principal enemy for most opposition groups.



General Lloyd Austin told the Senate Armed Services Committee that only "four or five" US-trained rebels were still fighting the Islamic State Photo: AP

Last Wednesday, General Lloyd Austin, head of US Central Command, shocked leaders in the US Senate's armed services committee when he said there were only handful of programme graduates still fighting inside Syria. "We're talking four or five," he said.

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