

US pauses programme to train and equip Syrian rebels

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Washington: The Obama administration announced on Friday it would halt its botched train-and-equip programme to build a Syrian rebel force and focus on supporting forces already engaged in the fighting against the Islamic State (IS).

According to Christine Warmouth, under secretary of defence for policy, the Obama administration would from now on provide equipment and weapons for existing Syrian rebel groups whose leaders have passed through "the same rigorous vetting process that we have used in the original programme."

"In terms of the program we originally conceived, we're going to pause that for now," said Warmouth at a White House press call on the issue. "We've had some significant challenges, so we're going to pause the training that we've been doing where we've recruited specific individual fighters."

The change was a recognition of the failure of US President Barack Obama's flagship anti-IS training programme which initially seeks to recruit 5,400 Syrian rebels each year for three years.

In a testy congressional hearing in September, General Lloyd Austin, who oversees the war against the IS, told US lawmakers that only "four or five" US-trained Syrian rebels currently remained in battle in Syria and the US military would not reach its goal of training 5,400 Syrian fighters any time soon.

Later, the Pentagon corrected the number of US-trained Syrian rebels currently fighting the IS in Syria to nine.

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