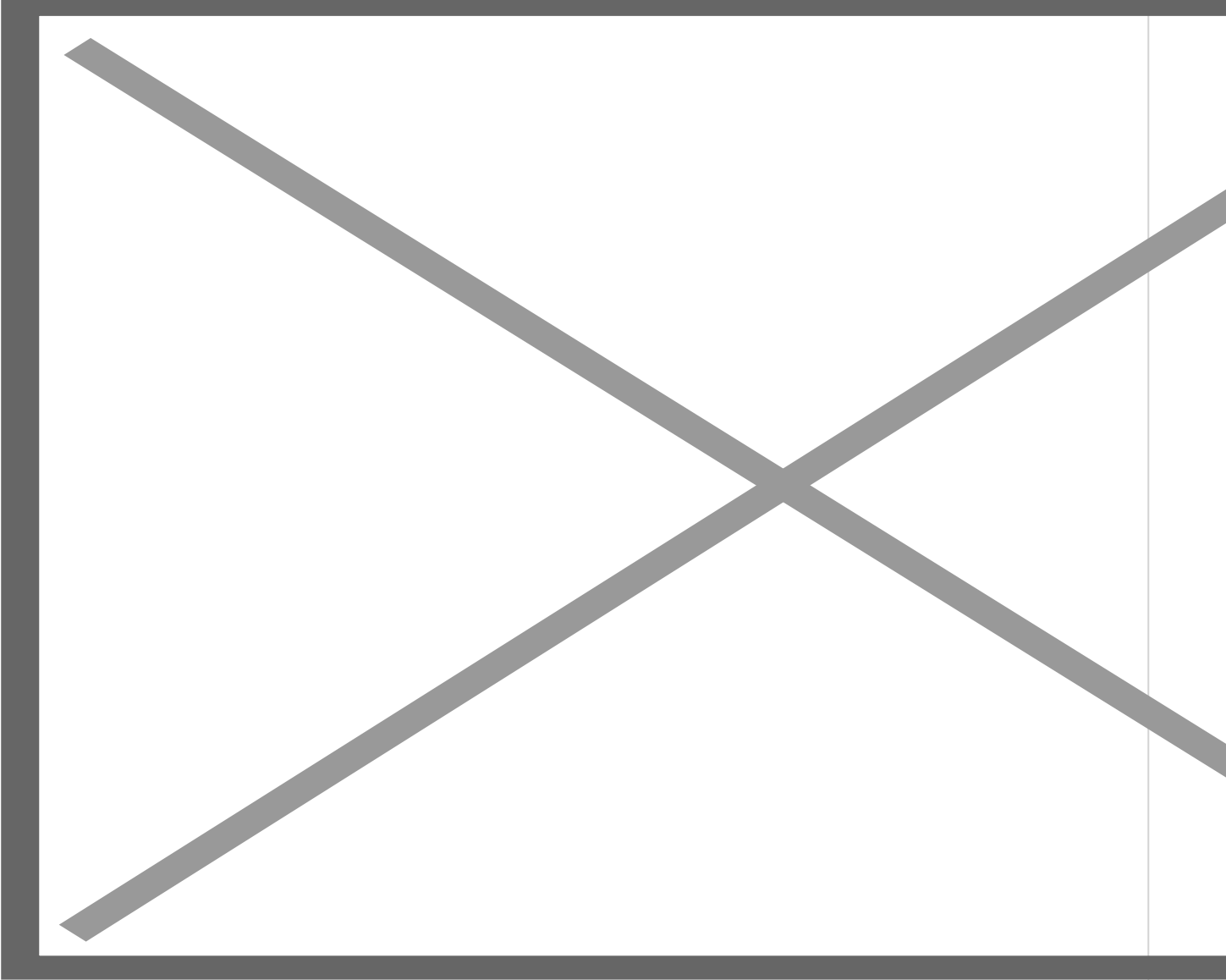


Report confirms U.S. bolstered armed groups to oust Assad in Syria

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An RCA fighter in Palmyra. The group still receives a salary from the U.S. government Credit: Eduardo Soteras for The Telegraph

Washington, December 22 (RHC)-- The United States prepared and bolstered an armed group in southern Syria weeks prior to the offensive that ousted President Bashar al-Assad, a Western media report says.

In the first indication that Washington had prior knowledge of the offensive, the group known as Revolutionary Commando Army (RCA) revealed it had been told to scale-up its forces and "be ready" for an attack that could lead to the end of the Assad government, the Telegraph reported.

The RCA fighters, trained by Britain and the U.S., were told "this is your moment" during a briefing by U.S. Special Forces stationed in the Arab country before Assad was toppled on December 8th, the report noted.

The RCA fighters said Washington had prior knowledge of the offensive, which was mainly led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The RCA was told to increase its forces and prepare for a major attack that could "end" the Syrian government.

Capt Bashar al-Mashadani, an RCA commander said in the weeks preceding the offensive, the RCA's ranks were expanded by smaller "freelance" units, all of which were briefed at the US al-Tanf air base.

"They did not tell us how it would happen," al-Mashadani told The Telegraph from a former Syrian army air base on the outskirts of the city of Palmyra. "We were just told: 'Everything is about to change. This is your moment. Either Assad will fall, or you will fall.' But they did not say when or where, they just told us to be ready."

The RCA is an armed group established by defected Syrian Arab Army (SAA) troops and is headquartered in the al-Tanf area, near the Syria-Jordan-Iraq border area, in southern Syria.

US forces are also stationed in the al-Tanf area, where they claim to be fighting the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group in the region.

According to the British newspaper, the RCA remains on the U.S.'s payroll, as Washington claims to require their assistance to prevent the resurgence of Daesh. All members of the force continued to be armed by the U.S. and to receive their salary of \$400 a month.

The group has now filled a major void vacated by the former government forces, taking over one-fifth of the country's territory and pockets north of the capital.

Among the chief targets of the U.S.-backed operation was Palmyra, known for its ancient ruins. Palmyra was among the main objectives of the U.S.-backed operation, according to The Telegraph. Fighters who captured the Russian-controlled air base in Palmyra were reportedly told to prepare to take such action in early November.

The sources also said that Americans coordinated communication between RCA and HTS during the offensive. The HTS and its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, are terror-listed by the US.

The report indicates not only that Washington knew about the offensive led by HTS, but that it had precise intelligence about its scale. It would therefore be only one of many ironies if the US has been in an effective alliance with a group like HTS, which was al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, the report said.

A senior delegation of U.S. diplomats on Friday arrived in Syria to speak directly to the representatives of HTS, which is designated a terrorist group by Washington.

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