



Pentagon denies US-trained Syrian rebels defected to al Qaeda



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The Pentagon is denying claims that U.S.-trained Syrian rebels defected with their weapons to an al Qaeda affiliate.

"We believe those reports to be false," Pentagon spokesman Navy Capt. Jeff Davis told reporters on Wednesday.

Their weapons and equipment are also still under the control of those rebels, Davis insisted.

Earlier in the day, the Associated Press **reported** that some of the approximately 70 rebels who just returned to Syria after training say they lost contact with one of their officers, and are investigating reports that he defected to the al-Nusra Front, al Qaeda's Syria affiliate.

The U.S.-led coalition fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is training vetted Syrian rebels to take on the terror group.

Approximately 70 rebels in the second class of graduates of the coalition's Syria Train and Equip Program entered Syria over the weekend, according to U.S. Central Command.

The program has come under heavy criticism. Originally envisaging training 5,400 rebels by the end of the year, so far the program has only trained about 120.

Pentagon officials said last week they would not hit their original goal of 5,400 but did not lay out a new target.

The first class of 54 rebels all but disintegrated shortly after they reentered Syria from their training sites and were attacked by the al-Nusra Front.

Only nine from that first class are still alive. Another was killed; one is still in captivity; 11 are available for action but not in Syria, and 14 have returned to Syria and quit the program; and 18 are unaccounted for, according to Centcom spokesman Air Force Col. Patrick Ryder.

Pentagon officials on Monday insisted their weapons were still under the control of a moderate parent group.

The new allegations that the second group of trained rebels defected with their weapons appeared on social media after they entered Syria last week.

TAGS: Syria, ISIS, al Qaeda, Syrian rebels