

US escalates CIA intervention on Syrian-Turkish border

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Washington has rushed a beefed-up contingent of CIA operatives to Turkey's southern border in a bid to escalate the war for regime-change in neighboring Syria.

Citing US officials familiar with the plan, the Associated Press reported Friday that this "modest surge" by the US intelligence agency over the past few weeks "has helped improve rebels' political organizing skills as well as their military organization."

The AP describes the buildup as "part of a two-pronged effort by the Obama administration to bolster the rebels militarily without actually contributing weapons to the fight, and politically, to help them stave off internal power challenges by the well-organized and often better-funded hardline Islamic militants who have flowed into the country from Iraq and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf region."

Weapons and funding have come from Washington's closest allies in the Arab world, the Saudi monarchy and the monarchical regimes in Qatar and the other Persian Gulf states. Al Qaeda elements and other Islamist jihadist forces have played an increasingly prominent role in the US-backed bid to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad by stoking a sectarian civil war.

There can be little doubt that the Al Qaeda forces, which have come from as far away as Chechnya, have been brought into Syria with the covert support of Washington and its Arab allies. The Obama administration and the CIA are attempting to use these forces for tactical advantage, while seeking to cobble together a puppet regime out of other, more pliable elements. This effort has centered on a combination of Western-backed opposition figures with no popular support in Syria and military defectors from the Syrian army command.

A Turkish and French agreement, backed by Washington, has produced a new "Syrian National Army" claiming to coordinate military councils opposed to Assad in various parts of the country. At its head is Maj. Gen. Muhammad Hussein al-Haj Ali, who defected last month. The ex-general is demanding that the Free Syrian Army, which had claimed to be coordinating the array of anti-government militias, and the Syrian National Council, the fractious group of Western intelligence assets, Islamists and defectors, subordinate themselves to his command. The leader of the FSA has rejected the general's demand.

The CIA surge in Turkey was accompanied by an unannounced visit to that country by the agency's director, David Petraeus. He carried out a one-day visit to Ankara on Monday, amid reports that he held talks with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, and National Intelligence Organization chief Hakan Fidan.

At the top of the agenda was tightening coordination between Washington and Turkey in the bid to effect regime-change in Syria. It is likely that Petraeus offered Turkey increased US support for operations in Syria in part to mend diplomatic fences between Washington and Ankara. The Turkish government was reportedly stung by the US failure to support its demand for the imposition of a "safe haven" inside Syria for those fleeing the ongoing violence. Such a measure would involve direct foreign military intervention and partition of Syrian territory, while creating a protected base of operations for the so-called rebels.

Foreign Minister Davutoglu appeared before the United Nations Security Council last week to make the case for carving out such a territory. Some 80,000 Syrians have crossed the border into Turkey and thousands more are expected to follow suit.

Washington failed to side with its NATO ally on the proposal, which almost certainly would have been vetoed by Russia and China.

The Turkish daily *Zaman* quoted an unnamed “intelligence analyst” as saying that with Petraeus’s trip, “the US is ... trying to make up for lack of support for Turkey’s non-starter call for a humanitarian safe zone inside Syria.” He added that, in addition to Syria, Petraeus and his Turkish counterparts discussed coordinating counterinsurgency operations against the PKK Kurdish separatist guerrillas, which have stepped up operations since the onset of the civil war in Syria.

Calls for a Syrian intervention came from some of those attending a meeting of European Union foreign ministers held in Cyprus Friday.

“Can we let a civil war take hold indefinitely because some countries are exercising their veto right in the Security Council?” Belgian Foreign Minister Didier Reynders said, referring to Russia and China. “I have to say that there is now hesitation between that absolute respect of a Security Council agreement and the duty to intervene.”

France and Italy issued a joint letter calling on the EU ministers to hold an “extraordinary meeting” devoted to a “substantial strategic discussion” about Syria during the UN General Assembly later this month. The letter, quoted by the DPA news agency, warns, “Should we fail in Syria, stability in the Middle East would be disrupted and Europe's security ... be seriously threatened.”

Meanwhile, in an indication that Washington is once again preparing to employ alleged dangers from “weapons of mass destruction” as a pretext for another Middle East war, the *Washington Post* Thursday carried a major article entitled “Worries Intensify Over Syrian Chemical Weapons,” citing unnamed US intelligence and military officials.

The thrust of the piece is that the threat of a “complete breakdown of authority” in Syria, the product of the US and Western-backed civil war for regime-change, would place Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles at risk, necessitating Western intervention to secure them.

According to the *Post*, these fears have “hastened preparations for securing the sites with foreign troops, the US and Middle Eastern officials said.”

The article adds that “if weapons sites are overrun during fighting—or if loyalist forces are seen preparing for a chemical attack—plans call for sending elite foreign military forces to secure the arms under fire, if necessary, according to the officials.”



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