

CIA warned arming Syrian “rebels” unlikely to succeed

Bill Van Auken
17 October 2014

In a revealing report commissioned by the Obama administration, the US Central Intelligence Agency called into question Washington’s policy of arming Syrian “rebels,” pointing out that such operations in the past had seldom proven successful.

Under mounting political pressure from the factions of the ruling class and as part of a drive by US imperialism to launch another war in the Middle East, the White House and Congress nevertheless approved \$500 million last month to fund and arm “moderate” rebels in Syria.

According to a *New York Times* story published Wednesday revealing the existence of the CIA report on the track record of US arming of insurgencies, the study was commissioned “in 2012 and 2013 in the midst of the Obama administration’s protracted debate about whether to wade into the Syrian civil war.”

In reality, by that time, the US administration was already wading knee-deep in blood in Syria. It had set up a secret CIA station in southern Turkey to coordinate the shipment of arms and money, as well as foreign fighters, to the so-called “rebels,” carried out in large measure through US regional allies, particularly the monarchical regimes in Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the Islamist government in Turkey. At the same time, a CIA station in Benghazi, Libya, which became publicly known after it was assaulted by an Islamist militia in September 2012, was engaged in shipping large quantities of weapons from the captured stockpiles of the Gaddafi regime to Syria.

Then in April 2013, Obama authorized a CIA program to train “vetted rebels” at a secret base in Jordan to be sent back into Syria as ground troops in the US-orchestrated war for regime change.

Since then, the entire operation has blown up in Washington’s face, with Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

(ISIS), the strongest component of the armed militias seeking the overthrow of Syria’s government of President Bashar al-Assad, sending its forces into Iraq to link up with a Sunni insurgency and wrest roughly a third of that country’s territory from the hands of the US-backed government.

Now, according to the new strategy outlined by Washington, the Pentagon’s arming and training of Syrian forces in Saudi Arabia is to be directed at forging a ground force to fight ISIS first, and only at some later date, to be turned against the Assad government.

According to the *Times*, the CIA study found that the tactic of the US arming and training insurgents to achieve its aims overseas “rarely works” and proved even more ineffective “when the militias fought without any direct American support on the ground.”

The exception was said to be the CIA’s orchestration of the mujahedeen war against the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan, which ultimately toppled the regime in Kabul and forced a withdrawal of Soviet troops after a decade of fighting that claimed as many as 1.5 million lives and turned a third of the country’s population into refugees. This “success,” achieved with the direct aid of Pakistan’s military-intelligence apparatus, yielded years more of civil war in which hundreds of thousands died, while a section of the Islamist forces with which the CIA worked intimately set up Al Qaeda.

The CIA document also reportedly reviewed such monumental fiascos as the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, which was quashed by Cuba, as well as the 1980s contra war against Nicaragua, carried out under the Reagan administration, which bled the Central American country but failed to topple the Sandinista government.

There are undoubtedly parallels between the Syrian operation and the contra war, both of which were waged for regime change utilizing armed militias that have carried out wanton violence and terror against civilians. As in the Syrian campaign, where Qatar and Saudi Arabia have served as conduits for US support, so in Nicaragua, Washington first relied on similar services from the Argentine military dictatorship. And, as in Syria, covert aid was joined with overt funding approved by the US Congress—some \$360 million between 1981 and 1988.

The mayhem sponsored by Washington in Nicaragua, which cost tens of thousands of lives, has been multiplied many times over by the crimes carried out in the drive to redraw the map of the Middle East to serve the interests of US imperialism. Over the course of a decade, US interventions have effectively destroyed three countries—Iraq, Libya and Syria—while claiming well over a million lives. History will record these events as among the worst war crimes on record.

It is now clear that, having stoked a sectarian civil war that has claimed well over 100,000 lives in Syria, while turning millions into refugees, the Obama administration has concluded that it is incapable of solely relying on any of the so-called “rebels,” including those trained by the CIA, to act as allies against ISIS.

Tellingly, no representatives of either the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA)—now largely a fiction maintained by Syrian exiles and their foreign backers—or the Syrian Opposition Coalition, which has cast itself as an alternative government, were invited to participate in the meeting at Andrews Air Force Base of the so-called anti-ISIS coalition cobbled together by Washington.

Retired Marine Gen. John Allen, who is directing the coordination of the US military and the other members of the coalition, told reporters Wednesday, “At this point there is not formal coordination with the FSA.”

Allen indicated that Washington’s intention is to recruit and train its own “vetted” Syrian mercenary force. “It’s not going to happen immediately,” he said. “We’re going to work to establish the training sites now, and we’ll ultimately go through a vetting process and beginning to bring the trainers and the fighters in to begin to build that force out.”

The McClatchy news agency quoted Ahmad Tomeh,

the “prime minister” of the Syrian opposition’s “interim government,” as saying that during a visit to Istanbul last week Allen met briefly with members of the Syrian exile group, but held no talks with so-called FSA commanders and offered no aid.

Washington’s attitude is in part an acknowledgment that the FSA commands virtually nothing in terms of forces on the ground in Syria. And in part it is a coming to grips with the fact that the armed groups that do exist are for the most part linked to either ISIS or the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate, the al-Nusra Front, an inconvenient truth under conditions in which the US is attacking ISIS on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border.

Meanwhile, the Syrian civilian opposition was described as mired in “disarray” and “regional feuding” in a *Washington Post* article published Wednesday by columnist David Ignatius. He reported that at a three-day meeting of the Syrian Opposition Coalition in Istanbul last week, “Qatar and its allies in the Muslim Brotherhood insisted on re-election of their candidate for ‘prime minister,’ Ahmad Tomeh, and threatened to cut off all funding to the opposition if he wasn’t confirmed.” Other factions, who derive their funding from Saudi Arabia, strongly opposed the move and boycotted the final vote.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact