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U.S., allies look to expedite Syria transition planning amid rapid rebel gains

By Karen DeYoung and Anne Gearan

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The United States and like-minded governments are rushing to fund and legitimize a newly formed Syrian opposition group amid fear that plans for a political transition are being outpaced by rebel military gains, U.S. and European officials said.

France, the first of several European governments to officially recognize the Syrian National Coalition, has sent diplomats in recent weeks to the Syrian border to hand out cash to the group's representatives for distribution to local political councils, a senior French official said Tuesday.

The Obama administration is considering a similar approach. But because of U.S. law, the money would be given "in coordination with the SOC" and would be carried into Syria by nongovernmental organizations already distributing American aid, a U.S. official said.

The coalition was formed last month, under the tutelage of the United States and regional governments, as a last-ditch effort to bring disparate forces opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad under an umbrella that could lure his remaining supporters away from him. Since then, international backers have moved rapidly to bolster its legitimacy by providing diplomatic recognition and money for it to dole out to local groups.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and other leaders plan to announce increased funding at a Friends of Syria meeting next week in Morocco, even as the United States continues to reject direct military aid to Syrian rebels.

Clinton is also expected to announce U.S. recognition of the group as “the legitimate representative” of the Syrian people, anointing it as the transition authority that would take over after Assad’s anticipated fall and following in the footsteps of France, Britain, Spain, Italy and other nations. U.S. officials, who were not authorized to discuss the issue, said a final administration decision awaited Clinton’s return from a European trip this week.

“Now that there is a new opposition formed, we are going to be doing what we can to support that opposition,” Clinton told reporters in Brussels on Wednesday. She urged a political settlement, which the Syrian regime has steadfastly rejected, and said Assad’s fall is “inevitable.”

In the meantime, Clinton said, the United States is worried about what Assad might do as his hold on power slips, [repeating fears expressed earlier](#) in the week by President Obama and others.

“Our concerns are that an increasingly desperate Assad regime might turn to chemical weapons or might lost control of them to one of the many groups that are now operating within Syria,” Clinton said.

She spoke at NATO headquarters, where the alliance on Tuesday approved Patriot antimissile defenses for Turkey. Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said NATO is still opposed to wider air protection for rebels inside Syria.

With a steady flow of arms from foreign supporters in the region and weapons seized from overtaken Assad arsenals, rebel forces have [scored impressive recent gains](#), clearing government troops from the border with Turkey and scoring tactical victories in the suburbs of Damascus, the capital.

“It is bloody and long,” the French official said of the 20-month-old uprising. “But my feeling is there has been an acceleration of dynamics in the last few weeks, an erosion of the regime while the morale of the activists is higher and higher. I believe it is now possible the regime will fall soon. Whether that is weeks or months, I don’t know.”

The growth of extremist factions within the rebel ranks has increased the urgency of developing a political alternative to match opposition military gains, according to the French official and others, all of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing diplomatic talks.

“This is a real concern for the United States, for France and for the Syrians themselves,” the French official said. “The quicker the fall of the regime and the stronger the political alternative, the more you empower it ... the more likely that Syrians themselves will be able to resist radicalization.”

This official and others outlined several possible scenarios in the coming weeks, ranging from full opposition control to a retreat of Assad's forces to an area along the Mediterranean coast controlled by his minority Alawite sect, to a regime effort to maintain control over a swath of land from the city of Homs west to Assad's Hezbollah allies in neighboring Lebanon.

The political goal of the Obama administration and its allies is to establish the opposition coalition as a legitimate voice of authority and aid inside Syria, while pushing the group to finalize plans for a transition government that can quickly take over after either a military win or a cease-fire negotiated between the coalition and the remnants of the Assad government.

In the meantime, the administration has set up working groups in Washington to prepare for various "day after" scenarios, including provision of essential services and securing Syria's chemical weapons.

Assad has shown no interest in negotiating his departure, and the opposition has said it will not talk with the regime until he leaves.

Assad's intransigence is aided by Iran, his closest regional ally, and Russia, a longtime arms supplier. Russia, along with China, has repeatedly blocked U.N. Security Council resolutions condemning Assad.

Although some European officials say they detect signs that Russian support for Assad is waning, a U.S. official said the administration has seen "zero movement" in Russia's position.

The administration has also accused Iraq of allowing Iranian arms shipments to Syria to overfly its territory. A delegation of U.S. officials, led by Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller, was in Baghdad on Wednesday to discuss this and other defense issues.