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CIA Expands Role in Syria Fight

Agency Feeds Intelligence to Rebel Fighters, in Move That Deepens U.S. Involvement in Conflict

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3/22/2013

The Central Intelligence Agency is expanding its role in the campaign against the Syrian regime by feeding intelligence to select rebel fighters to use against government forces, current and former U.S. officials said.

The move is part of a U.S. effort to stem the rise of Islamist extremists in Syria by aiding secular forces, U.S. officials said, amid fears that the fall of President Bashar al-Assad would enable al Qaeda to flourish in Syria.

Demonstrators chant and wave opposition flags during a protest of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad Friday.

The expanded CIA role bolsters an effort by Western intelligence agencies to support the Syrian opposition with training in areas including weapons use, urban combat and countering spying by the regime.

The move comes as the al Nusra Front, the main al Qaeda-linked group operating in Syria, is deepening its ties to the terrorist organization's central leadership in Pakistan, according to U.S. counterterrorism officials.

The provision of actionable intelligence to small rebel units which have been vetted by the CIA represents an increase in U.S. involvement in the two-year-old conflict, the officials said. The CIA would neither confirm nor deny any role in providing training or intelligence to the Syrian rebels.

The new aid to rebels doesn't change the U.S. decision to not take direct military action. President Barack Obama last year rejected a CIA-backed proposal to provide arms to secular units fighting Mr. Assad, and on Friday he reiterated his argument that doing so could worsen the bloodshed.

He also warned that Mr. Assad's fall could empower extremists. "I am very concerned about Syria becoming an enclave for extremism because extremists thrive in chaos, they thrive in failed states, they thrive in power vacuums," Mr. Obama said at a news conference in Amman, Jordan.

The new CIA effort reflects a change in the administration's approach that aims to strengthen secular rebel fighters in hope of influencing which groups dominate in post-Assad Syria, U.S., European and Arab officials said.

The CIA has sent officers to Turkey to help vet rebels that receive arms shipments from Gulf allies, but administration officials say the results have been mixed, citing concerns about weapons going to Islamists. In Iraq, the CIA has been directed by the White House to work with elite counterterrorism units to help the Iraqis counter the flow of al Qaeda-linked fighters across the border with Syria.

The West favors fighters aligned with the Free Syrian Army, which supports the Syrian Opposition Coalition political group.

Syrian opposition commanders said the CIA has been working with British, French and Jordanian intelligence services to train rebels on the use of various kinds of weapons. A senior Western official said the intelligence agencies are providing the rebels with urban combat training as well as teaching them how to properly use antitank weapons against Syrian bunkers.

The agencies are also teaching counterintelligence tactics to help prevent pro-Assad agents from infiltrating the opposition, the official said.

Among other U.S. activities on the margins of the conflict, the Pentagon is helping train Jordanian forces to counter the threat posed by Syria's chemical weapons, but isn't working directly with rebels, defense officials say.

The extent of the CIA effort to provide intelligence to Syrian rebels remains cloaked in secrecy. The U.S. has an array of intelligence capabilities in the region, mainly on the periphery of the conflict.

The U.S. uses satellites and other surveillance systems to collect intelligence on Syrian troop and aircraft movements as well as weapons depots. Officials say powerful radar arrays in Turkey are likewise used to track Syrian ballistic missiles and can pinpoint launch sites.

The U.S. also relies on Israeli and Jordanian spy agencies, which have extensive spy networks inside Syria, U.S. and European officials said.

The current level of intelligence sharing is limited in scope because the CIA doesn't know whether it can fully trust fighters with the most sensitive types of information, several U.S. and European officials said. The CIA, for example, isn't sharing information on where U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies believe the Syrian government keeps its chemical weapons, officials said.

Rebel leaders and some U.S. lawmakers say more robust U.S. support is needed to turn the tide in the civil war. These officials say the CIA's current role comes as too little, too late to make a decisive difference in the war.

In a letter to Mr. Obama this week, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin, a Michigan Democrat, joined Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona in calling for the president to take "more active steps to stop the killing in Syria and force Bashar al-Assad to give up power."

Sens. Levin and McCain urged the White House to consider using precision airstrikes to take out Mr. Assad's air force and Scud missile batteries, among other military options.

The CIA got a green light from the White House last year to look for ways to provide limited support to the rebels, current and former officials said. But officials say the ramp-up has been slow, in part because of the difficulty of identifying reliable partners among the Syrian opposition to work with the U.S.

A senior U.S. official said the decision to provide actionable intelligence to vetted rebel units "shows that we're working on the humanitarian level and the diplomatic level and on the intelligence level."

"This would be a more direct level of engagement on the intelligence front," the official added.

Officials said one of the advantages of providing actionable intelligence to rebel units is that such information is generally of operational use for a limited period because would-be targets move around the battlefield.

Arms, in contrast, can be used for years and passed between groups, reducing U.S. control over where they end up.

The shift in part reflects growing Israeli concerns about the limited ability of the U.S. to shape the outcome in Syria. In recent months, Israeli officials have privately pressed their European and American counterparts to strengthen secular forces in Syria because of concerns that the al

Nusra Front will become more entrenched the longer the civil war drags on, according to Israeli and European officials.

Israeli officials are concerned that the U.S. reluctance to more directly intervene will limit Washington's leverage in a post-Assad Syria. "Israel would welcome America's influence in shaping the post-Assad Syria" said a senior Israeli official involved in deliberations on the neighboring Arab country.

U.S. and European officials said they fear that the al Nusra Front, which has seized control of swaths of northern Syria, could dominate the country once Mr. Assad falls.

U.S. counterterrorism officials said they have seen a growth in communications among operatives from al Nusra Front, al Qaeda in Iraq and al Qaeda's central leadership in Pakistan. Officials also report growing numbers of al Qaeda fighters traveling from Pakistan to Syria to join the fight with al Nusra.

The ties to al Qaeda's central operations have become so significant that U.S. counterterrorism officials are debating whether al Nusra should now be considered its own al Qaeda affiliate instead of an offshoot of al Qaeda in Iraq, as it has generally been viewed within the U.S. government, according to a person familiar with the debate.

Al Nusra is "an organization that resembles an army more than a quaint little terrorist group," said Seth Jones, an al Qaeda specialist at the Rand Corp. think tank in Washington. "As this war drags on against Assad and as long as they are able to build up their capabilities, it's going to make it all the more harder to target them once the regime falls."