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CIA preparing to deliver rebels arms through Turkey and Jordan

By Greg Miller and Joby Warrick

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The CIA is preparing to deliver arms to rebel groups in Syria through clandestine bases in Turkey and Jordan that were expanded over the past year in an effort to establish reliable supply routes into the country for nonlethal material, U.S. officials said.

The bases are expected to begin conveying limited shipments of weapons and ammunition within weeks, officials said, serving as critical nodes for an escalation of U.S. involvement in a civil war that has lately seen a shift in momentum toward the forces of President Bashar al-Assad.

Syria experts cautioned that the opposition to Assad remains a chaotic mix of secular and Islamist elements, highlighting the risk that some American-provided munitions may be diverted from their intended recipients.

But U.S. officials involved in the planning of the new policy of increased military support announced by the Obama administration Thursday said that the CIA has developed a clearer understanding of the composition of rebel forces, which have begun to coalesce in recent months. Within the past year, the CIA also created a new office at its headquarters in Langley to oversee its expanding operational role in Syria.

“We have relationships today in Syria that we didn’t have six months ago,” Benjamin J. Rhodes, Obama’s deputy national security adviser, said during a White House briefing Friday. The United States is capable of delivering material “not only into the country,” Rhodes said, but “into the right hands.”

The confidence conveyed by Rhodes’s statement is in contrast to the concerns expressed by U.S. intelligence officials last year that the CIA and other U.S. spy agencies were still struggling to gain a firm understanding of opposition elements — a factor cited at the time as a reason the Obama administration was unwilling to consider providing arms.

“The Syrian puzzle has come into sharper focus in the past year, especially the makeup of various anti-regime groups,” said a U.S. official familiar with CIA assessments of the conflict. “And while the opposition remains far from monolithic, its military structures and coordination processes have improved.”

The official, like most others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence assessments and planning.

The increased certainty is one of several factors that led to the reversal of a U.S. policy against providing lethal aid that had been in place since the uprising began in Syria more than two years ago.

Rhodes said the change was driven by a new determination by U.S. intelligence agencies that Assad’s regime had used chemical weapons, including sarin gas, on at least four separate occasions. Obama also faced mounting pressure to intervene more aggressively as members of Congress and overseas allies became increasingly alarmed that Assad’s forces were gaining strength with expanded assistance from Russia and Iran.

For the CIA, the shift on Syria marks a return to a covert-action role that was familiar to the agency during Cold War-era conflicts but that gave way to increasingly direct lethal operations as the agency’s drone campaign surged in the years following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The agency’s mission in Syria carries substantial risks, including a long-standing fear that arms could fall into the hands of extremists who may seek to impose Islamist rule in Syria or turn those weapons against targets in Israel and other Western countries.

That concern accounts for initial limits imposed by Obama that will allow the delivery of rifles and other munitions, but not — at least for now — antitank or anti-aircraft weapons that rebels have desperately sought.

Obama’s decision to approve CIA weapons shipments, spelled out in an updated covert-action finding recently signed by the president, may also signal that the administration is now prepared to endorse the delivery of heavier arms by regional allies.

“The Qataris and Saudis have been chomping at the bit,” said Will McCants, a research analyst at CNA Analysis and Solutions and former counterterrorism adviser at the State Department.

“They’ve been wanting to give heavy weapons, including antitank and antiaircraft, from the beginning. And it’s us that has put the brakes on it.”

The CIA shipments will be aimed at bolstering the capabilities of an umbrella group known as the Supreme Military Council. The council is headed by Gen. Salim Idriss and other former Syrian military officers who favor the creation of a democratic government, although the network includes avowedly Islamist groups.

Some are members of the Syrian Liberation Front, a separate alliance that wants Islamist rule in Syria but is regarded as moderate and pragmatist.

Competing groups advocate the creation of an Islamist state. These include the Syrian Islamist Front as well as more radical groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra — literally “Victory Front” — an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq that is listed as a terrorist group by the Obama administration. Another, Ahrar al-Sham, embraces a similar jihadist ideology and supports the imposition of austere, Taliban-like Islamic rule.

Those groups and potentially dozens of others have been in near-constant flux since the start of the war, adding to the confusion among U.S. analysts. But officials and experts said alliances among rebel organizations in recent months have created clearer ideological boundaries.

The CIA’s expanding role as conduit of nonlethal assistance over the past year has also given the agency deeper insight into the composition of groups and the flow of material, U.S. officials said.

The CIA does not have an established presence inside Syria, one official said. But it has been using bases in Turkey along the Syrian border, near where Idriss is based, since the outset of the conflict.

The agency’s weapons shipments are expected to be concentrated on routes out of Turkey, but U.S. officials said deliveries will also likely flow into southern Syria from Jordan, whose intelligence service has a long-standing relationship with the CIA.

“As the nonlethal aid has ramped up, U.S. intelligence has learned a lot more about who these guys are, who’s trustworthy and who’s not,” said a second U.S. official familiar with the shipment activity.

Less clear is the extent to which the CIA has technical means of monitoring the flow of arms shipments. U.S. military leaders have warned that they have no reliable way to track the heavy weaponry sought by rebel groups, including so-called MANPADs — the man-portable air-defense missiles that could help counter Assad’s air strength but could also be used by terrorist groups against civilian aviation targets.

As part of an effort to reassure the United States, regional allies presented a plan earlier this year in which rebels would be issued a small number of missiles and forced to return empty casings for each before receiving a new supply, said a Middle Eastern diplomat familiar with the plan.

“The Arabs have argued that MANPADs could be provided under highly controlled circumstances,” said the diplomat, who insisted on anonymity in describing private discussions with the United States. “The U.S. administration said it would investigate the matter, but they never responded.”