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Syrian rebels get arms and advice through secret command center in Amman

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A secret operations command center in Jordan, staffed by western and Arab military officials, has given vital support to rebels fighting on Syria's southern front, providing them with weapons and tactical advice on attacking regime targets.

Rebel fighters and opposition members say the command center, based in an intelligence headquarters building in Amman, channels vehicles, sniper rifles, mortars, heavy machine guns, small arms and ammunition to Free Syrian Army units – although it has stopped short of giving them much coveted anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles.

Officials in Amman denied the command center exists. "We dismiss these allegations. Jordan is not a host or part of any cooperation against Syria. Jordan's interest is to see a stable and secure Syria, one that is able to keep its problems inside its borders," said Mohammad Al Momani, minister of media affairs.

"We will not do anything that will feed violence in Syria," he said.

But Syrian opposition figures familiar with rebel operations in Deraa, about 75 kilometers north of Amman, said Jordan hosted the command center and had tasked senior Jordanian intelligence

officials to work with western and Arab states in helping rebels to plan missions and get munitions and fighters across the border.

The existence of a weapons bridge from Jordan to rebels inside Syria has been a poorly guarded secret since a New York Times expose in March, but few details of its workings have been revealed.

However, according to opposition figures, the command centre – known as “the operations room” – is a well-run operation staffed by high-ranking military officials from 14 countries, including the US, European nations and Arabian Gulf states, the latter providing the bulk of materiel and financial support to rebel factions.

The command centre gets advance notice from the FSA of upcoming military assaults against forces loyal to Bashar Al Assad, Syria’s president, and only hands over weapons if officials at the centre approve of the attacks.

“When we want to make an operation, we arrange for one of our men to have an informal meeting with a military liaison officer from the operations room and they meet up, in a hotel or somewhere in Amman, and talk through the plan,” said an FSA officer involved in the system.

“If the liaison officer likes our idea, he refers it to a full meeting of the operations room and a few days later we go there and make a formal presentation of the plan,” the FSA official said.

Then, western and Arab military advisers at the command center make adjustments to tactics and help determine when and how the operation should go ahead.

They also allocate weapons needed for the attack and, with the plan approved, set up supplies to ensure the FSA has them.

“We run through all the numbers, what we need in terms of men and weapons, and when we’ll get it. It’s all detailed, it’s done in a very exact way,” the FSA official said.

Islamist factions outside of the FSA, including groups aligned to Al Qaeda, are not involved with the operations room and do not directly receive weapons or military advice.

Not all FSA operations in Deraa are approved by the command centre. Sometimes FSA units do not even approach it for support, preferring to carry out operations alone using whatever resources they have.

If they do not have the weapons they need, or if an attack is more complicated to plan, FSA officers will seek support from the command centre.

“We cooperate with one another, they do not control us and we don’t always do as they tell us. It’s more like they give us advice and sometimes we take it and sometimes we don’t,” said another FSA commander involved in the system.

Yet another FSA officer with knowledge of rebel operations in Deraa said units had been supplied with modern Austrian-made rifles – fitted with transparent ammunition magazines – tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition for heavy caliber machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades and mortar-firing tubes and bombs.

In the past two months, FSA units have also been receiving vehicles, equipped with heavy machine guns mounted on the rear bed, and rebel soldiers have been sent to Saudi Arabia for training, FSA officers said.

“There were 80 fighters sent to Saudi last month for training in military communications. In total there have been a few hundred getting training. They come back fully equipped – each with a personal weapon, a pickup lorry for every squad of five men, a heavy machine gun for each squad, plus clothing, boots and that kind of thing,” said an FSA commander.

“There was training before but it is getting better now,” he said

A western diplomat based in the Middle East said the US and European countries were not supplying munitions to rebels but did have liaison officers in regular contact with the FSA.

“Saudi and Qatari-supplied weapons are going across the border from Jordan but not going in the sort of volume that will change the balance of power on the ground.

“Short of an all-out effort involving the US supplying weapons, it will not be enough to topple Assad and it doesn’t come close to offsetting the military support Assad is getting from the Russians,” the diplomat said.

FSA units in Deraa said the international backing came with too many restrictions and was not sufficient to let them make major advances.

“In the summer there was a meeting with the operations room and all of the FSA units in Deraa and we were told very clearly what the rules are. They [the command center] said we are not to attack major regime military installations without approval, that we are only to engage in hit-and-run operations and should not try to hold territory because the regime’s air power means it can hit us if we do,” said an FSA fighter briefed on the talks.

FSA units also had to pledge they would not transfer weapons to militant Islamist groups, including Jabhat Al Nusra, which has a small but powerful presence on Syria’s southern front.

“The command centre has been good for us, it has helped a lot, but we’d like more commitment from them. They don’t really share intelligence information with us, they don’t give us enough weapons to do the job,” said an FSA commander.

“We all think they want to keep Assad stronger than us, they want to keep a balance – we get enough to keep going but not to win,” he said.

The Assad regime has accused Jordan of hosting rebels and helping to prepare an army for an assault on Damascus.

FSA factions in Deraa said that the majority of their supplies – sometimes as much as 80 per cent – was channelled to them via the command centre. But they also described an often complex supply chain, frequently opaque even to those involved, with intelligence agents, private donors and shadowy proxy organisations all moving munitions around.

“It gets very complicated, everyone lies to each other, everyone is trying to control everyone else,” said an FSA commander.