

C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition
By ERIC SCHMITT, The New York Times
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WASHINGTON — A small number of C.I.A. officers are operating secretly in southern Turkey, helping allies decide which Syrian opposition fighters across the border will receive arms to fight the Syrian government, according to American officials and Arab intelligence officers.

The weapons, including automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, ammunition and some antitank weapons, are being funneled mostly across the Turkish border by way of a shadowy network of intermediaries including Syria's Muslim Brotherhood and paid for by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the officials said.

The C.I.A. officers have been in southern Turkey for several weeks, in part to help keep weapons out of the hands of fighters allied with Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups, one senior American official said. The Obama administration has said it is not providing arms to the rebels, but it has also acknowledged that Syria's neighbors would do so.

The clandestine intelligence-gathering effort is the most detailed known instance of the limited American support for the military campaign against the Syrian government. It is also part of Washington's attempt to increase the pressure on President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, who has recently escalated his government's deadly crackdown on civilians and the militias battling his rule. With Russia blocking more aggressive steps against the Assad government, the United States and its allies have instead turned to diplomacy and aiding allied efforts to arm the rebels to force Mr. Assad from power.

By helping to vet rebel groups, American intelligence operatives in Turkey hope to learn more about a growing, changing opposition network inside of Syria and to establish new ties. "C.I.A. officers are there and they are trying to make new sources and recruit people," said one Arab intelligence official who is briefed regularly by American counterparts.

American officials and retired C.I.A. officials said the administration was also weighing additional assistance to rebels, like providing satellite imagery and other detailed intelligence on Syrian troop locations and movements. The administration is also considering whether to help the opposition set up a rudimentary intelligence service. But no decisions have been made on those measures or even more aggressive steps, like sending C.I.A. officers into Syria itself, they said.

The struggle inside Syria has the potential to intensify significantly in coming months as powerful new weapons are flowing to both the Syrian government and opposition fighters. President Obama and his top aides are seeking to pressure Russia to curb arms shipments like attack helicopters to Syria, its main ally in the Middle East.

"We'd like to see arms sales to the Assad regime come to an end, because we believe they've demonstrated that they will only use their military against their own civilian population," Benjamin J. Rhodes, deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, said after Mr. Obama and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir V. Putin, met in Mexico on Monday.

Spokesmen for the White House, State Department and C.I.A. would not comment on any intelligence operations supporting the Syrian rebels, some details of which were reported last week by The Wall Street Journal.

Until now, the public face of the administration's Syria policy has largely been diplomacy and humanitarian aid.

The State Department said Wednesday that Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton would meet with her Russian counterpart, Sergey V. Lavrov, on the sidelines of a meeting of Asia-Pacific foreign ministers

in St. Petersburg, Russia, next Thursday. The private talks are likely to focus, at least in part, on the crisis in Syria.

The State Department has authorized \$15 million in nonlethal aid, like medical supplies and communications equipment, to civilian opposition groups in Syria.

The Pentagon continues to fine-tune a range of military options, after a request from Mr. Obama in early March for such contingency planning. Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told senators at that time that the options under review included humanitarian airlifts, aerial surveillance of the Syrian military, and the establishment of a no-fly zone.

The military has also drawn up plans for how coalition troops would secure Syria's sizable stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons if an all-out civil war threatened their security. But senior administration officials have underscored in recent days that they are not actively considering military options. "Anything at this point vis-à-vis Syria would be hypothetical in the extreme," General Dempsey told reporters this month.

What has changed since March is an influx of weapons and ammunition to the rebels. The increasingly fierce air and artillery assaults by the government are intended to counter improved coordination, tactics and weaponry among the opposition forces, according to members of the Syrian National Council and other activists.

Last month, these activists said, Turkish Army vehicles delivered antitank weaponry to the border, where it was then smuggled into Syria. Turkey has repeatedly denied it was extending anything other than humanitarian aid to the opposition, mostly via refugee camps near the border. The United States, these activists said, was consulted about these weapons transfers.

American military analysts offered mixed opinions on whether these arms have offset the advantages held by the militarily superior Syrian Army. "The rebels are starting to crack the code on how to take out tanks," said Joseph Holliday, a former United States Army intelligence officer in Afghanistan who is now a researcher tracking the Free Syrian Army for the Institute for the Study of War in Washington.

But a senior American officer who receives classified intelligence reports from the region, compared the rebels' arms to "peashooters" against the government's heavy weaponry and attack helicopters.

The Syrian National Council, the main opposition group in exile, has recently begun trying to organize the scattered, localized units that all fight under the name of the Free Syrian Army into a more cohesive force.

About 10 military coordinating councils in provinces across the country are now sharing tactics and other information. The city of Homs is the notable exception. It lacks such a council because the three main military groups in the city do not get along, national council officials said.

Jeffrey White, a defense analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy who tracks videos and announcements from self-described rebel battalions, said there were now about 100 rebel formations, up from roughly 70 two months ago, ranging in size from a handful of fighters to a couple of hundred combatants.

"When the regime wants to go someplace and puts the right package of forces together, it can do it," Mr. White said. "But the opposition is raising the cost of those kinds of operations."