

CIA Delivers Weapons to Extremist Syrian Rebels

by Ernesto Londoño and Greg Miller via sal - Washington Post *Friday, Sep 13 2013, 9:20am*
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The CIA has begun delivering weapons to rebels in Syria, ending months of delay in lethal aid that had been promised by the Obama administration, according to U.S. officials and Syrian figures. The shipments began streaming into the country over the past two weeks, along with separate deliveries by the State Department of vehicles and other gear — a flow of material that marks a major escalation of the U.S. role in Syria's civil war.



The arms shipments, which are limited to light weapons and other munitions that can be tracked, began arriving in Syria at a moment of heightened tensions over threats by President Obama to order missile strikes to punish the regime of Bashar al-Assad for his alleged use of chemical weapons in a deadly attack near Damascus last month.

The arms are being delivered as the United States is also shipping new types of nonlethal gear to rebels. That aid includes vehicles, sophisticated communications equipment and advanced combat medical kits.

U.S. officials hope that, taken together, the weapons and gear will boost the profile and prowess of rebel fighters in a conflict that started about thirty months ago.

Although the Obama administration signaled months ago that it would increase aid to Syrian rebels, the efforts have lagged because of the logistical challenges involved in delivering equipment in a war zone and officials' fears that any assistance could wind up in the hands of jihadists. Secretary of State John F. Kerry had [promised in April](#) that the nonlethal aid would start flowing "in a matter of weeks."

The delays prompted several senior U.S. lawmakers to chide the Obama administration for not moving more quickly to aid the Syrian opposition after promising lethal assistance in June. The criticism has grown louder amid the debate over whether Washington should use military force against the Syrian regime, with some lawmakers withholding support until the administration committed to providing the rebels with more assistance.

Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), who has pressed the Obama administration to do more to help the rebels, said he felt embarrassed when he met with Syrians along the Turkish border three weeks ago.

"It was humiliating," he said in an interview Wednesday night. "The president had announced that

we would be providing lethal aid, and not a drop of it had begun. They were very short on ammunition, and the weapons had not begun to flow.”

The latest effort to provide aid is aimed at supporting rebel fighters who are under the command of Gen. Salim Idriss, according to officials, some of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity because part of the initiative is covert. Idriss is the commander of the Supreme Military Council, a faction of the disjointed armed opposition.

U.S. officials, speaking about the provision of nonlethal aid, said they are determined to increase the cohesion and structure of the rebel fighting units.

“This doesn’t only lead to a more effective force, but it increases its ability to hold coalition groups together,” said Mark S. Ward, the State Department’s senior adviser on assistance to Syria, who coordinates nonlethal aid to rebels from southern Turkey. “They see their leadership is having some impact.”

U.S. officials decided to expand nonlethal assistance to Syria’s armed rebels after they delivered more than 350,000 high-calorie U.S. military food packets through the Supreme Military Council in May. The distribution gave U.S. officials confidence that it was possible to limit aid to select rebel units in a battlefield where thousands of fighters share al-Qaeda’s ideology, U.S. officials said.

Khaled Saleh, a spokesman for the Syrian Opposition Coalition, said Washington’s revamped efforts are welcome but insufficient to turn the tide of the civil war between rebels and forces loyal to Assad.

“The Syrian Military Council is receiving so little support that any support we receive is a relief,” he said. “But if you compare what we are getting compared to the assistance Assad receives from Iran and Russia, we have a long battle ahead of us.”

‘It’s better than nothing’

While the State Department is coordinating nonlethal aid, the CIA is overseeing the delivery of weaponry and other lethal equipment to the rebels. An opposition official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss covert arms transfers, said U.S. intelligence personnel have begun delivering long-promised light weapons and ammunition to rebel groups in the past couple of weeks.

The weaponry “doesn’t solve all the needs the guys have, but it’s better than nothing,” the opposition official said. He added that Washington remains reluctant to give the rebels what they most desire: antitank and anti-aircraft weapons.

The CIA shipments are to flow through a network of clandestine bases in Turkey and Jordan that were expanded over the past year as the agency sought to help Middle Eastern allies, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, direct weapons to moderate Syrian rebel forces.

The CIA declined to comment.

The distribution of vehicles and communications equipment is part of an effort to direct U.S. aid to Syrian rebels in a more assertive, targeted manner. Before Ward established a team of about two dozen diplomats and aid workers in southern Turkey, Washington was doing little more than paying for truckloads of food and medicine for Syrian rebels. U.S. officials concede that the shipments often went to the most accessible, and not necessarily the neediest, places.

Boosting moderate factions

In addition to boosting support for rebels under the command of [Idriss, who speaks fluent English and taught at a military academy](#) before defecting from the Syrian army last year, U.S. officials in southern Turkey are using aid to promote emerging moderate leaders in towns and villages in rebel-held areas. Across much of the north, Syrians have begun electing local councils and attempting to rebuild communities devastated by war.

Ward's team — working primarily out of hotel lobbies — has spent the past few months studying the demographics and dynamics of communities where extremists are making inroads. Targeted U.S. aid, he said, can be used to empower emerging local leaders who are moderate and to jump-start basic services while dimming the appeal of extremists.

“We feel we're able to get these local councils off to a good start,” said [Ward, a veteran U.S. Agency for International Development official](#) who has worked in Libya, Afghanistan and Pakistan. “We vet individuals who are getting our assistance to make sure they are not affiliated with terror organizations.”

The assistance to local communities includes training in municipal management as well as basic infrastructure such as garbage trucks, ambulances and firetrucks. The areas receiving this aid are carefully selected, U.S. officials said, noting that extremist groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra, are delivering services to communities newly under rebel control.

“If you see new firetrucks and ambulances in places where al-Nusra is trying to win hearts and minds, this might not be a coincidence,” said a U.S. official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to explain details of a sensitive strategy.

The initiatives are part of a \$250 million effort to support moderate factions of the Syrian opposition. Of that, the United States has earmarked \$26.6 million in aid for the Supreme Military Council. The delivery that began this week does not include items that the rebels have long identified as priorities: night-vision goggles and body armor.

Mohammed Ghanem, director of government relations at the Syrian American Council, which supports the opposition, said the U.S. initiatives are steps in the right direction after years of inaction and misguided policies.

“We've definitely seen a structural and conceptual evolution in terms of their understanding of what's going on on the ground,” he said in an interview. “On the other hand, we're always lagging behind. We're not leading. Developments are always like six months ahead of us.”

Ghanem said the effect of U.S. assistance is limited by the number of proxies that Washington must use to deliver it. U.S. officials in Turkey rely on a network of contractors and subcontractors to deliver the aid.

Ward said he hopes the assistance efforts will position the United States to have strong relationships in a postwar Syria.

“When you finally have a free Syrian government, you will know them and they will know us,” Ward said. “We will have been working with them week after week, month after month. These won't be strangers.”

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Handiwork of Syrian Rebels -- CIA allies!

<http://tinyurl.com/nfve3ek>

Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-814.html>