

MIDDLE EAST NEWS | Updated June 26, 2013, 7:26 p.m. ET

# U.S. Begins Shipping Arms for Syrian Rebels

*CIA Aims to Vet and Train Fighters With New Weapons for Deployment by August; Saudi Antiaircraft Missiles Expected*

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WASHINGTON—The Central Intelligence Agency has begun moving weapons to Jordan from a network of secret warehouses and plans to start arming small groups of vetted Syrian rebels within a month, expanding U.S. support of moderate forces battling President Bashar al-Assad, according to diplomats and U.S. officials briefed on the plans.

The shipments, related training and a parallel push to mobilize arms deliveries from European and Arab allies are being timed to allow a concerted push by the rebels starting by early August, the diplomats and officials said, revealing details of a new covert plan authorized by President [Barack Obama](#) and disclosed earlier this month.



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The CIA is expected to spend up to three weeks bringing light arms and possibly antitank missiles to Jordan. The agency plans to spend roughly two weeks more vetting an initial group of fighters and making sure they know how to use the weapons that they are given, clearing the way for the first U.S.-armed rebels to enter the fight, diplomats briefed on the CIA's plans said.

Talks are under way with other countries, including France, about pre-positioning European-procured weapons in Jordan. Saudi Arabia is expected to provide shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles, known as Manpads, to a small number of handpicked fighters, as few as 20 at first, officials and diplomats said. The U.S. would monitor this effort, too, to try to reduce the risk that the

Manpads could fall into the hands of Islamists.

Up to a few hundred of the fighters will enter Syria under the program each month, starting in August, according to diplomats briefed on CIA plans.

At that rate, U.S. and Saudi officials believe it would take four to five months before there are enough rearmed and trained moderate fighters to make a meaningful difference against Mr. Assad's forces and their Hezbollah allies, according to diplomats and U.S. officials.

A spokeswoman for the White House National Security Council, Bernadette Meehan, declined to provide or confirm details on U.S. assistance to rebels, including the timeline for delivery.

The U.S. effort remains marked by debate. With Mr. Obama's decision to arm Syrian rebels after months of White House opposition to the idea, some U.S. officials say the CIA needs to move faster; others argue careful measures are necessary to make sure any fighters armed by the agency don't join pro-al Qaeda groups.



Associated Press

This photo taken Monday by an Aleppo resident shows a Syrian rebel firing his weapon during clashes with forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad.

The death toll in the civil war now exceeds 100,000, the U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said on Wednesday. The most recent United Nations estimate exceeded 90,000.

Mr. Obama's decision reflects growing U.S. fears that Mr. Assad, bolstered by Iranian and Hezbollah fighters and armed by Russia, will prevail in the conflict, according to current and former U.S. officials. The president's decision followed urgent appeals by Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other allies for greater U.S. involvement.

The U.S. shift was a response in part to a determination by intelligence agencies that Mr. Assad used chemical weapons in the conflict, crossing a "red line" set by Mr. Obama, administration officials said.

The U.S. effort is designed to strengthen forces loyal to Gen. Salim Idris, the top Syrian rebel commander backed by the West. The aim is to give them more clout than Islamist extremist antiregime fighters who now dominate in some areas, and eventually to shift the war in the rebels' favor, reversing gains by regime forces bolstered by an influx of Hezbollah fighters, officials said. U.S. intelligence agencies now think that

there are 2,500 to 4,000 Hezbollah fighters in Syria, U.S. officials said.

The CIA has put in place what officials have described as an "elaborate" vetting procedure for the rebels they train. But officials acknowledged the difficulty of getting reliable information about the backgrounds of individual foot soldiers in a country where the CIA has limited intelligence-collection resources.

The agency is under pressure from the White House and Congress to minimize the risk that American arms could be diverted to hardline Islamists, particularly the al Qaeda-aligned al Nusra Front. Mr. Obama rejected a proposal last year for the CIA to arm moderate rebels because of concerns that weapons would end up in the hands of extremists. But administration officials said the agency has a much better understanding today of who's who in the opposition, and has confidence in Gen. Idris's leadership.

Some current and former officials said that caution is warranted.

"I'd rather be a little slow and keep control of the weapons as much as possible, rather than try to move fast in what is likely to be a long, drawn-out war," said Seth Jones, associate director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the Rand Corp.

Citing the U.S.'s track record of arming rebels in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the 1980s, Mr. Jones said the U.S. needs to keep in mind that "this has the potential to go badly."

To be successful, some U.S. officials said, the training effort is going to have to produce moderate rebel forces faster than the most powerful Islamist extremist fighting group, the al Nusra Front, can build up the size of its militant organization.

"Numbers are an issue," said a counterterrorism official. "Al Nusra has added thousands of fighters in the past year. We are going to have to outpace that."

The CIA, in advance of Mr. Obama's decision to provide American arms, had already begun to store Soviet-era weapons, including ammunition for Kalashnikov rifles and armor-piercing antitank missiles. The first rebel units expected to receive arms and training by the U.S. already have military experience using Soviet-era weapons, reducing the need for more extensive training. Many of the rebels are defectors from Mr. Assad's armed forces, which use such weapons.

Russia has been a longtime military ally of Mr. Assad. On Wednesday, a Russian newspaper reported that the country's navy had pulled all its personnel from its naval base in Syria because of risks from the war, according to the Associated Press. The base at Tartus is used mainly to service Russian navy ships in the Mediterranean.

Democrats and Republicans in Congress have been divided on arming the rebels. While the Senate Foreign Relations Committee overwhelmingly approved legislation to arm the rebels in May, a similar measure hasn't advanced in the House.

Key lawmakers on the House and Senate intelligence committees, who met at the White House on Wednesday and oversee the CIA's programs, have asked for more details about the agency's plans, according to officials.

A small bipartisan group of senators, including Kentucky Republican Rand Paul, has introduced legislation to prohibit Mr. Obama from using any funds on activities that would escalate U.S. involvement in the Syrian civil war. Mr. Obama has opted to arm the rebels covertly using the CIA, limiting public disclosures about the effort and restricting oversight to a small group of lawmakers who oversee secret programs.

To accelerate the effort, the CIA is considering putting U.S. military special-operations force units under agency authority to conduct some of the training. The U.S. is also considering using special-operations teams from Jordan and the United Arab Emirates to ramp up the training effort, officials said.

Saudi officials have told their American counterparts that they believe Riyadh can identify a small group of trusted rebel fighters and provide them with as few as 20 Manpads initially, reducing the risk that the weapons will fall into the hands of radical Islamists, a major U.S. and Israeli concern.