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Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.



Reuters

Free Syrian Army fighters inside a house in Aleppo last week. The United States has been helping Arab governments and Turkey send arms to the rebels.

By C. J. CHIVERS and ERIC SCHMITT
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With help from the C.I.A., Arab governments and Turkey have sharply increased their military aid to Syria's opposition fighters in recent months, expanding a secret airlift of arms and equipment for the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, according to air traffic data, interviews with officials in several countries and the accounts of rebel commanders.

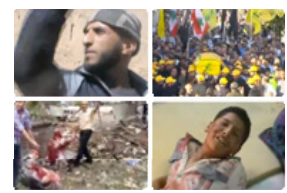
The airlift, which began on a small scale in early 2012 and continued intermittently through last fall, expanded into a steady and much heavier flow late last year, the data shows. It has grown to include more than 160 military cargo flights by Jordanian, Saudi and Qatari military-style cargo planes landing at Esenboga Airport near Ankara, and, to a lesser degree, at other Turkish and Jordanian airports.

As it evolved, the airlift correlated with shifts in the war within Syria, as rebels drove Syria's army from territory by the middle of last year. And even as the Obama administration has publicly refused to give more than "nonlethal" aid to the rebels, the involvement of the C.I.A. in the arms shipments — albeit mostly in a consultative role, American officials say — has shown that the United States is more willing to help its Arab allies support the

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Even with the weapons from abroad, rebels say they are hard pressed to fight the government.

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lethal side of the civil war.

From offices at secret locations, American intelligence officers have helped the Arab governments shop for weapons, including a large procurement from Croatia, and have vetted rebel commanders and groups to determine who should receive the weapons as they arrive, according to American officials speaking on the condition of anonymity. The C.I.A. declined to comment on the shipments or its role in them.

The shipments also highlight the competition for Syria's future between Sunni Muslim states and Iran, the Shiite theocracy that remains Mr. Assad's main ally. Secretary of State John Kerry pressed Iraq on Sunday to do more to halt Iranian arms shipments through its airspace; he did so even as the most recent military cargo flight from Qatar for the rebels landed at Esenboga early Sunday night.

Syrian opposition figures and some American lawmakers and officials have argued that Russian and Iranian arms shipments to support Mr. Assad's government have made arming the rebels more necessary.

Most of the cargo flights have occurred since November, after the presidential election in the United States and as the Turkish and Arab governments grew more frustrated by the rebels' slow progress against Mr. Assad's well-equipped military. The flights also became more frequent as the humanitarian crisis inside Syria deepened in the winter and cascades of refugees crossed into

neighboring countries.

The Turkish government has had oversight over much of the program, down to affixing transponders to trucks ferrying the military goods through Turkey so it might monitor shipments as they move by land into Syria, officials said. The scale of shipments was very large, according to officials familiar with the pipeline and to an arms-trafficking investigator who assembled data on the cargo planes involved.

"A conservative estimate of the payload of these flights would be 3,500 tons of military equipment," said Hugh Griffiths, of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, who monitors illicit arms transfers.

"The intensity and frequency of these flights," he added, are "suggestive of a well-planned and coordinated clandestine military logistics operation."

Although rebel commanders and the data indicate that Qatar and Saudi Arabia had been shipping military materials via Turkey to the opposition since early and late 2012, respectively, a major hurdle was removed late last fall after the Turkish government agreed to allow the pace of air shipments to accelerate, officials said.

Simultaneously, arms and equipment were being purchased by Saudi Arabia in Croatia and flown to Jordan on Jordanian cargo planes for rebels working in southern Syria and for retransfer to Turkey for rebels groups operating from there, several officials said.

These multiple logistics streams throughout the winter formed what one former American official who was briefed on the program called "a cataract of weaponry."

Reporting was contributed by Robert F. Worth from Washington and Istanbul; Dan Bilefsky from Paris; and Sebnem Arsu from Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey.

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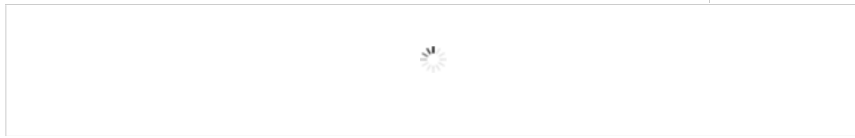


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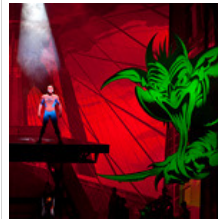
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