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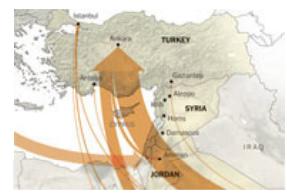
# Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.

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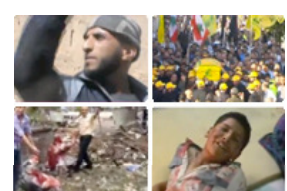
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American officials, rebel commanders and a Turkish opposition politician have described the Arab roles as an open secret, but have also said the program is freighted with risk, including the possibility of drawing Turkey or Jordan actively into the war and of provoking military action by Iran.

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An Arms Pipeline to the Syrian Rebels



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Still, rebel commanders have criticized the shipments as insufficient, saying the quantities of weapons they receive are too small and the types too light to fight Mr. Assad's military effectively. They also accused those distributing the weapons of being parsimonious or corrupt.

"The outside countries give us weapons and bullets little by little," said Abdel Rahman Ayachi, a commander in Soquor al-Sham, an Islamist fighting group in northern Syria.

He made a gesture as if switching on and off a tap. "They open and they close the way to the bullets like water," he said.

Two other commanders, Hassan Aboud of Soquor al-Sham and Abu Ayman of Ahrar al-Sham, another Islamist group, said that whoever was vetting which groups receive the weapons was doing an inadequate job.

"There are fake Free Syrian Army brigades claiming to be revolutionaries, and when they get the weapons they sell them in trade," Mr. Aboud said.

The former American official noted that the size of the shipments and the degree of distributions are voluminous.

"People hear the amounts flowing in, and it is huge," he said. "But they burn through a million rounds of ammo in two weeks."

### A Tentative Start

The airlift to Syrian rebels began slowly. On Jan. 3, 2012, months after the crackdown by the Alawite-led government against antigovernment demonstrators had morphed into a military campaign, a pair of Qatar Emiri Air Force C-130 transport aircraft touched down in

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Istanbul, according to air traffic data.

They were a vanguard.

Weeks later, the Syrian Army besieged Homs, Syria's third largest city. Artillery and tanks pounded neighborhoods. Ground forces moved in.

Across the country, the army and loyalist militias were trying to stamp out the rebellion with force — further infuriating Syria's Sunni Arab majority, which was severely outgunned. The rebels called for international help, and more weapons.

By late midspring the first stream of cargo flights from an Arab state began, according to air traffic data and information from plane spotters.

On a string of nights from April 26 through May 4, a Qatari Air Force C-17 — a huge American-made cargo plane — made six landings in Turkey, at Esenboga Airport. By Aug. 8 the Qataris had made 14 more cargo flights. All came from Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, a hub for American military logistics in the Middle East.

Qatar has denied providing any arms to the rebels. A Qatari official, who requested anonymity, said Qatar has shipped in only what he called nonlethal aid. He declined to answer further questions. It is not clear whether Qatar has purchased and supplied the arms alone or is also providing air transportation service for other donors. But American and other Western officials, and rebel commanders, have said Qatar has been an active arms supplier — so much so that the United States became concerned about some of the Islamist groups that Qatar has armed.

The Qatari flights aligned with the tide-turning military campaign by rebel forces in the northern province of Idlib, as their campaign of ambushes, roadside bombs and attacks on isolated outposts began driving Mr. Assad's military and supporting militias from parts of the countryside.

As flights continued into the summer, the rebels also opened an offensive in that city — a battle that soon bogged down.

The former American official said David H. Petraeus, the C.I.A. director until November, had been instrumental in helping to get this aviation network moving and had prodded various countries to work together on it. Mr. Petraeus did not return multiple e-mails asking for comment.

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*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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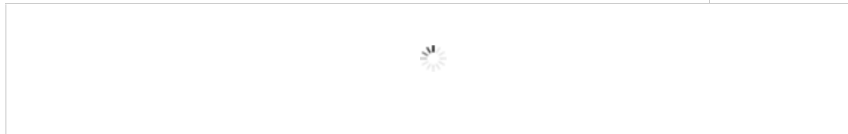
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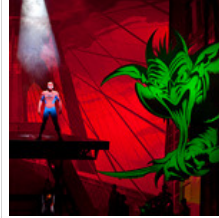
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