

CIA-BACKED SYRIAN REBELS UNDER RUSSIAN BLITZ

WASHINGTON: CIA-backed rebels in Syria, who had begun to put serious pressure on President Bashar Al-Assad's forces, are now under Russian bombardment with little prospect of rescue by their American patrons, US officials say. Over the past week, Russia

has directed parts of its air campaign against US-funded groups and other moderate opposition in a concerted effort to weaken them, the officials say. The Obama administration has few options to defend those it had secretly armed and trained.

The Russians "know their targets, and they have a sophisticated capacity to understand the battlefield situation," said Rep Mike Pompeo, who serves on the House Intelligence Committee and was careful not to confirm a classified program. "They are bombing in locations that are not connected to the Islamic State" group. Other US officials interviewed spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

The CIA began a covert operation in 2013 to arm, fund and train a moderate opposition to Assad. Over that time, the CIA has trained an estimated 10,000 fighters, although its current size isn't clear. The effort was separate from the one run by the military, which trained militants willing to promise to take on IS exclusively. That program was widely considered a failure, and on Friday, the Defense Department announced it was abandoning the goal of a US-trained Syrian force, instead opting to equip established groups to fight IS.

For years, the CIA effort had floundered - so much so that over the summer, some in Congress proposed cutting its budget. Some CIA-supported rebels had been captured; others had defected to extremist groups. The secret CIA program is the only way the US is taking on Assad militarily. In public, the United States has focused its efforts on fighting IS and urging Assad to leave office voluntarily. "Probably 60 to 80 percent of the arms that America shoveled in have gone to Al-Qaeda and its affiliates," said Joshua Landis, a

Syria expert at the University of Oklahoma.

But in recent months, CIA-backed groups, fighting alongside more extremist factions, began to make progress in Syria's south and northwest, American officials say. In July and August, US-supported rebels seized territory on the Al-Ghab plain, in northwest Syria's Idlib and Hama governorates. The plain is a natural barrier between areas controlled by Sunni Muslims and the Alawite sect to which Assad and his loyalists belong. The capture of the Al-Ghab plain was seen as a breakthrough toward weakening the Alawites. Those and other gains put Damascus, the capital, at risk, officials say.

But in recent days, Russian airstrikes have hit groups in the area, according to the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington think tank that closely tracks the situation. Russian bombs and missiles have hit specific buildings associated with the moderate Syrian opposition, according to a US official briefed on the intelligence. Russian officials have insisted they are bombing Islamic State militants and other terrorists. US intelligence officials see many factors motivating Russia's intervention: Moscow's reasserting its primacy as a great power, propping up Assad and wanting to deal a blow to the United States, which has insisted that Assad must go to end Syria's civil war.

Russia is also interested in containing IS, an organization that includes thousands of Chechen fighters who may pose a threat to Russia, officials say. But in the short term, "my

conclusion is that the timing of their intervention was driven by Assad really going critical," said Rep Jim Himes, also a House Intelligence Committee member.

The administration is scrambling to come up with a response to Russia's moves, but few believe the US can protect its secret rebel allies. The administration has all but ruled out providing CIA-backed groups with surface-to-air missiles that can down aircraft, fearing such weapons would end up in the wrong hands, officials say. Rep Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the committee, says the US should consider establishing a no-fly zone that allows rebels a safe place from which to operate, and shooting down Syrian helicopters that are bombing civilians. He said the US should also provide arms to the Ukrainian government fighting Russian-backed separatists.

A no-fly zone would require the US military to be ready to engage in air battles with the Syrian government, something it is not prepared to do. The administration "is debating the merits of taking further action or whether they are better off letting Putin hang himself," he said, referring to Russian President Vladimir Putin. "Our options are much narrower than they were two weeks ago," said Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, who serves on the Intelligence and Armed Services committees. "I don't think there is any simple answer... Further air involvement has become very problematic because of the Russian engagement." —AP



MOREK, Syria: In this photo taken on Oct 7, 2015, Syrian army rocket launchers fire near this village. —AP

EGYPT, FRANCE SIGN WARSHIPS DEAL AS PM STARTS ARAB TOUR

VALLS SAYS BOTH COUNTRIES HAVE COMMON ENEMY IN IS

CAIRO: Egypt signed a deal with France yesterday to buy two Mistral warships originally ordered by Russia as French Prime Minister Manuel Valls began an Arab tour. Valls arrived in Cairo at the start of visits to three Arab nations aimed at boosting economic ties and holding talks on regional conflicts, and met with President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. He told a press conference: "Egypt is a central partner for dealing with all the crises affecting the region - Syria, the peace process between Israel and Palestine, tensions in Libya or in Yemen." He added that France believes that the world needs a "strong and stable Egypt", concluding that "we all have a common enemy - Daesh", an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State group.

On Sept 23, French President Francois Hollande announced he had agreed the sale of the warships with Sisi. After Valls and Sisi met, a member of the French premier's delegation told AFP the deal had now been

signed. France originally built the Mistral for Russia before scrapping their sale over the Ukraine crisis. The vessels, which can each carry 16 helicopters, four landing craft and 13 tanks, were ordered by Russia in 2011 in a €1.2-billion (\$1.4 billion) deal.

However, France found itself in an awkward situation in 2014 as ties between Russia and the West deteriorated over Moscow's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine. Paris decided to cancel the delivery in an expensive decision, as it had to foot a bill of more than one billion euros for the ships' upkeep and the cost of training 400 Russian sailors to crew them. After months of intense talks, Paris and Moscow agreed on the reimbursement of the original deal in August, with Paris returning 949.7 million euros that Russia had already paid.

According to French government sources, Egypt is to pay €950 million for the warships, with "significant" financing from Saudi Arabia.

In February, Egypt became the first foreign buyer of France's Rafale fighters, in a 5.2-billion-euro deal for 24 of the multi-role combat jets and a frigate.

'Egypt's Essential Role'

The Mistral will be delivered in early March, and the contract provides for four months training in France for some 400 Egyptian sailors, the defence ministry in Paris said in September. The contract illustrates the rapprochement Paris has had with the regime of former army chief Sisi, who ousted elected Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013 and has since cracked down on his supporters and on all opposition. Hollande has invoked what he called Cairo's essential role in the fight against extremism in the Middle East, particularly against the Islamic State group, whose local branch has staged many deadly attacks in Egypt since 2013.

Apart from arms deals, Egypt has also expressed interest in extending the Cairo metro, which was largely built by French companies, and in satellite communications deals. The conflict in Syria and Russia's dramatic military intervention, as well as escalating Israeli-Palestinian violence, are also set to figure high in Valls' talks in Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Today, the French premier is due to meet Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayeb, the grand imam of Cairo's Al-Azhar University, the most prestigious institution in Sunni Islam.

Travelling to Jordan, where France has deployed fighter bombers used to strike IS targets in Iraq and Syria, Valls will meet Iraqi Christian refugees in the country, which has taken in 650,000 Syrians fleeing war. Accompanied by Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and a high-ranking business delegation, he flies to Saudi Arabia late tomorrow. On Tuesday he is due to have talks with King Salman, in a meeting during which Valls' office said he will request "a gesture of pardon, humanity and clemency" for a young Shiite, Ali Al-Nimr, sentenced to death for taking part in 2012 demonstrations. He will also attend a Franco-Saudi business forum in Riyadh in which 200 companies are taking part. —AFP



CAIRO: French Prime Minister Manuel Valls (left) gestures next to Egyptian president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi during a ceremony to sign military contracts at the presidential palace yesterday in the Egyptian capital. —AFP

2 KILLED AS IRAQI KURD PROTESTS TURN VIOLENT

SULAIMANIYAH, Iraq: Four people have been killed in two days of demonstrations in Iraqi Kurdistan, where discontent over unpaid salaries grew into protests demanding the regional president's ouster. Guards shot dead two demonstrators in Kalar yesterday as protesters tried to storm the local headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), a hospital official said. "Two protesters have died of bullet wounds. One was 19 and the other 40," the official told AFP, adding that 19 people were wounded.

Witnesses and a security official said the protesters eventually set fire to the local KDP office in Kalar, a town in the southernmost part of Iraq's Kurdistan region. Thousands of people demonstrated in the main southern Kurdish city of Sulaimaniyah, in Kalar and in several other towns Saturday, demanding that acting regional president Massud Barzani step down. Two protesters were shot dead in similar circumstances on Friday in Qala Diza, further north.

The demonstrations were initially protests against the non-payment of salaries to civil servants by the Kurdish Regional Government, which faces a dire

budget crisis. They have evolved into a mobilisation against Barzani in areas of Iraqi Kurdistan where opposition to the KDP is traditionally strong. "Our demands are not only focused on corruption and salaries but they now include Barzani's removal," said Nazar Mohammed, a civil society activist and one of the organisers of the protest in Sulaimaniyah. The protests come against the tense backdrop of a political crisis that started in August, when Barzani's presiden-

tial mandate expired and no deal was reached for his succession.

Political Crisis

Mohammed argued that the political class's inability to solve the crisis showed disregard for regular citizens. "The main parties don't care about the people. All they worry about is the presidency, all this at the detriment of the people who are in a bad economic situation," he said. Some protesters tried to storm the Sulaimaniyah office of the Kurdish

TV station Rudaw, which is owned by the Barzani family. Minar Mohammed, the head of the local hospital, said 25 people were lightly injured in scuffles during the Sulaimaniyah protest. Security forces responded to stone-throwing from protesters by firing in the air, witnesses said. No such protests have yet taken place in northern and western regions traditionally more loyal to the KDP.

Barzani yesterday morning appealed for calm across the region. The 69-year-old has headed the KDP, one of the two historical Iraqi Kurdish parties, since 1979 and been president of the autonomous region since 2005. His son is the Kurdistan region's intelligence chief and his nephew the prime minister. Barzani has been accused by critics of amassing huge wealth for his family instead of serving the population. He served two terms and the two-year extension Kurdish parties agreed to in 2013 expired on Aug 19, leaving the region in an institutional vacuum. Barzani wants to stay on, arguing that his leadership is required to steer the region as its peshmerga forces play a leading role in battling the Islamic State group. —AFP



SULAIMANIYAH, Iraq: Protesters gesture towards security forces during clashes in Iraq's Kurdistan region yesterday. —AFP



YELLOWKNIFE, Canada: Canada's Liberal leader Justin Trudeau poses for a picture with a supporter during a rally Friday in the Northwest Territories. —AP

CANADA PARTIES SPLIT ON SECURITY, ANTI-IS STRIKES

MONTREAL: Canada could curb its counterterrorism efforts, including airstrikes against the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq, if Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Tories are defeated in Oct 19 elections. The New Democrats said they would end the military mission, while the Liberals said they would withdraw Canadian war planes, but continue training forces in Iraq. The two parties also vowed to repeal or modify, respectively, a bitterly-opposed anti-terror law that dramatically expanded the powers and reach of Canada's spy agency, if elected. Both are neck and neck with the Tories with just over a week before voting.

The ballot is scheduled just days before the nation commemorates the deaths of two soldiers in the first terror attacks on Canadian soil a year ago, when a soldier was run over in rural Quebec and a gunman killed a ceremonial guard and stormed parliament. In the aftermath of the killings, the Conservatives rushed through new national security measures in the biggest overhaul of Canada's counterterrorism legislation since 2001 following the attacks in the United States.

Only Thomas Mulcair's New Democrats opposed the bill in the House. The Liberals, led by Justin Trudeau, voted for it, despite concerns that it lacked oversight and was overly broad. "The Conservative government brought a strong response to this threat," which a majority of Canadians support, said politics professor Justin Massie at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM). "It's unusual that foreign policies and national security would be election issues in Canada," he noted. But if they are now, it is because a vocal opposition viewed the government's response as heavy-handed and an unprecedented assault on civil rights.

'Politics of Fear'

Throughout the campaign, Harper has defended the measures, which criminalized the promotion of terrorism and made it easier for police to arrest and detain individuals without charge, while expanding the Canadian Security Intelligence Service's mandate from intelligence-collection to actively thwarting terror plots and spying outside Canada. For Mulcair, Bill C-51 is a "disaster," and has "more to do with the politics of fear and division than any-

thing to do with security." He vowed to repeal the act, saying it represents a "real threat to our rights and liberties." The Liberals, according to Jonathan Paquin, a professor at Laval University in Quebec, have "one foot in each camp."

Trudeau said during a recent leaders debate that "Canadians expect their government to do two things: protect our security and defend our rights and freedoms." He accused Harper of sowing fear, saying the Tory leader "wants us to be afraid that there is a terrorist hiding behind every leaf and rock... (so) he can say he is there to protect us." Trudeau vowed to increase oversight of Canada's spy agency to ensure the protection of civil liberties, but would not go as far as the New Democrats, while also blasting Harper for passing legislation in May to revoke to the citizenship of persons convicted of terrorism.

"A Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian," said Trudeau. "You devalue the citizenship of every Canadian... when you make it conditional for anyone," he said. "And we should be worried that any prime minister has the ability to revoke (the) citizenship of people. It's a slippery slope." Harper retorted that his country has long had a policy of revoking the citizenship of war criminals, why not also terrorists.

Responding to his political rivals' scorn over Canada's participation in the US-led coalition against the Islamic State group, the prime minister as he seeks a fourth mandate said he would continue the military mission until at least April 2016. His aim, he said, was to keep up pressure on IS to prevent them "using Iraq or Syria as a base to launch terrorist attacks in Canada."

Once again, the Liberals took a neutral or arguably "a more balanced" position on this file, said Jonathan Paquin by focusing on training others in Iraq and Syria to take on IS, while keeping Canadians off the battlefield and out of direct harm's way. Mulcair said Canada should focus on blocking the flow of funds and fighters to IS, while completely withdrawing its forces from the conflict zone. "At this point," Massie commented, "it's unrealistic to expect Canada will withdraw from the conflict because none of the parties are likely to form a majority government, and so whomever wins will have to compromise." —AFP