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The End of the CIA Program in Syria

Washington Cedes the Field

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On July 19, The Washington Post reported that the CIA was ending its covert support for rebels [1] fighting the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The program, which started four years ago, had backed forces affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) that the U.S. government considered politically moderate [2]—that is, non-Islamist. It had benefited roughly 20,000 fighters, including such groups as Division 13 and the Hamza Battalion in Syria's northwest and south and the Eastern Lions in its southwest. But despite the program's cost, which ran into the hundreds of millions of dollars per year, its effects on the rebels' ability to fight and bring down the government were limited [3]. The end of the program thus represents both a pragmatic concession to military reality and a decision by the United States to abandon Syria to Russia. The most important consequence, however, is the loss of Washington's credibility to its proxies in Middle East.

ISOLATED AND INEFFECTIVE

The CIA program began officially in June 2013, although the United States had been secretly providing support to Syrian rebels since 2012. The goal of the program was to empower the FSA against Islamist factions, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al Qaeda [4] that is now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Both U.S. President Barack Obama and congressional leaders were convinced to fund the CIA program after the publication of several reports demonstrating the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons [5]. Under its terms, the United States provided approved rebel groups with light weapons, military training, salaries, and sometimes TOW anti-tank missiles. Washington, however, always refused to provide them with heavier weapons such as surface-to-air missiles, lest they fall into the hands of groups such as HTS. (The moderates of the FSA often fought together with HTS and other radical groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, and the Islamists did not hesitate to buy or seize weapons from the FSA.)

Originally, the CIA program supported rebels fighting the Assad regime on the civil war's northern front (including Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia, and Hama provinces), central front (Homs) and southern front (Damascus, Quneitra, Sweida, and Deraa provinces). But developments in the last few years of the war, primarily the defection of Jordan and Turkey from the anti-Assad alliance, have rendered these rebels more and more isolated and ineffective.

On the southern front—one of the main theaters for U.S.-backed rebels because of a weak Islamist presence there—the rebels' attempts to take Damascus failed, as did their more modest attempts to seize the cities of Deraa and Sweida. The fighting on that front has been frozen since the beginning of Russia's intervention in September 2015, when Russia, Jordan, and the Assad government agreed on a ceasefire in Deraa province. Jordan closed its border to reinforcements for the rebels and gave them orders to stop confronting the Syrian army. If they want to receive salaries, weapons, and protection against Islamists, the fighters have to obey. Then U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was officially happy about the Jordanian–Russian cooperation, but in reality he didn't have a choice—King Abdullah II of Jordan wanted to prevent the Russians from carpet-bombing rebel-held areas of Deraa province on the Jordanian–Syrian border, which would have caused a massive influx of refugees into his country [6]. Amman also feared that chaos in southern Syria would empower radicals and make Jordan vulnerable to terrorist strikes. As a result of the agreement, moderate rebels in the south have been limited to fighting the Islamic State (or ISIS) and HTS.

Turkey, too—originally an ally in the fight against Assad—has since its August 2016 rapprochement with Russia [7] shifted its goals from overthrowing the Syrian regime to preventing the Kurds of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) from establishing control over Syrian territory from Afrin, in northwest Syria, to the Tigris River, an area that includes nearly 500 miles of the Turkish–Syrian border. In exchange for Russian permission to intervene in the al-Bab area in Syria's northeast, thereby blocking Kurdish territorial contiguity, Turkey withdrew its support for the rebel groups fighting in eastern Aleppo in late-2016, accelerating their defeat at the hands of the Syrian army. Today, Turkey is supporting Russia and Iran's ceasefire proposals in the so-called Astana process. Turkish-backed rebels, such as Ahrar al-Sham, are encouraged to confront HTS in Idlib Province, but they are no longer fighting Assad. Ankara has decided it needs a stable, or at least centralized, Syrian state to limit the influence of the PYD on its southern border.

The only front on which the U.S.-backed rebels are still active is the one in al-Tanf, in southeastern Syria. The groups there, known as the Eastern Lions and the Revolutionary Commando Army (formerly the New Syrian Army), have been well positioned to threaten both Damascus and the strategically important area of Qalamoun, in the mountains near the Lebanese–Syrian border. In the spring of this year, they took advantage of ISIS' withdrawal from the southern Syrian Desert between Jordan and Palmyra to seize vast areas between Al-Tanf and Qalamoun. But a counteroffensive launched by the Syrian army and Iraqi Shiite militias quickly enclosed the groups in al-Tanf , where they are protected by U.S. Special Forces but pose no further threat to the regime. The United States now wants to transfer them to northeastern Syria to fight ISIS, but most of them have refused. They are not very motivated to fight.

PULLING OUT

Without the cooperation of Jordan and Turkey, the CIA's support for the Syrian rebels has had little impact. The last major offensive of the U.S.-backed rebels was their assault on Damascus in summer 2013—four years ago. Since then, Islamist groups—ideologically self-confident, with more support

among the local population and backing from the Gulf States and Turkey—have overtaken the moderates as the most effective anti-regime forces. In northern Syria, HTS and ISIS have eliminated the U.S.-backed rebels. In the south, the moderates did not participate in the latest offensives launched by HTS to take Deraa. Around Damascus, only eastern Ghouta is still resisting, and it will likely fall in the coming months. Under such conditions, Washington's support for anti-regime groups was futile. Ending its funding program will not upset the balance of power in Syria. It will, however, help to weaken the morale of the rebellion, accelerating its collapse. Even the option of a low-intensity fight against the Syrian regime has now been abandoned.

The Syrian army can now turn its attention to the rebel groups still resisting it in western Syria—mostly Islamists such as HTS or the Saudi-backed Islam Army (Jaysh al-Islam). This is what is happening now in Deraa and eastern Ghouta. Both areas have been declared de-escalation zones under the Astana process, which should mean the Syrian army and the rebels groups must respect a ceasefire. In practice, the Syrian regime does not care. It is taking advantage of every opportunity to press its advantage, especially after the disastrous effect that the U.S. announcement has had on the rebels' morale. The rebels now feel weak and betrayed. Indeed, the effect of the announcement is quite similar to that of the fall of Aleppo late last year, which prompted many groups around Damascus to look for a deal with the Syrian regime. Some of them evacuated toward the rebel-held city of Idlib; others chose the amnesty offered by the regime and joined its security forces. A small portion of the rebels joined radical groups such as HTS, despite the fact that they do not share the group's ideology or willingness to fight.

A WIN FOR PUTIN

By cutting off support for the rebels fighting Assad, U.S. President Donald Trump has shown that regime change is no longer the United States' goal in Syria. Because the announcement came after a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G–20, it was interpreted by some within the United States as a major concession to Russia. It wasn't: Washington now relies on Russia to block Iranian influence in Syria, since it can no longer do so directly. From its perspective, it is better to have Russian troops in southern Syria than Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guard—a position shared by Israel. For both Washington and Tel Aviv, the deployment of Russian troops to enforce the ceasefire in this area is considered to be a lesser evil, albeit one that must be secured by concessions to Russia's interests.

Even if backing the rebels no longer makes strategic sense, however, abandoning them, with the memory of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq still fresh in partners' memories, sets another bad precedent for the United States' approach to its allies in the region. The Syrian regime can regain control of the province of Deir al-Zour in country's east (now held by ISIS) without fear of an attack by rebels elsewhere in the country. In allowing this to happen, the United States is abdicating control of the Iraqi–Syrian border and enabling the Iranians to form their long-sought land bridge from Tehran to the Mediterranean by way of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Pro-American Sunni Arab forces are too weak to prevent this outcome, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—the PYD-affiliated Kurdish group that Washington supports in the fight against ISIS [8] in Syria's northeast—have no desire to fight the regime nor to hold much territory beyond the Kurdish areas.

Finally, the SDF, whose main enemy is Turkey, now knows that U.S. backing is not guaranteed. SDF planners must be asking themselves what will happen when Raqqa falls and ISIS is eliminated there. Most likely, they will see U.S. support disappear as the SDF loses its usefulness and becomes a source of conflict with Turkey, whose cooperation Washington may need to check Iranian expansion in the

area. That would encourage the SDF to move closer to Russia, which has consistently supported its allies in the region and could protect the SDF from Turkey.

In effect, the United States is offering victory to Assad and his allies. The remainder of this year will be devoted to the Syrian army's return to eastern Syria, while 2018 will likely see the destruction of all remaining rebel pockets in the west—even those in so-called de-escalation areas. As for Raqqa, the SDF will have no choice but to abandon the city to Assad in exchange for informal autonomy for their cantons.

Putin appears as the great winner of the war in Syria [9]. He has restored Russian power abroad at relatively cheap financial and human cost, making his country once again a key player in the Middle East. The United States, meanwhile, will hope to see problems emerge within the Russian–Iranian alliance in Syria. It may be a long time in waiting. Russia, unlike Iran, has no desire to spoil its relations with Israel. Yet Moscow shares with Tehran an anti-Saudi interest. Putin wants to domesticate Riyadh, currently the world regulator of oil prices as well as the financial backer of Islamist groups that have checked Russian power in Chechnya, while Iran, for its part, is enough clever to remain patient now that it has achieved an advantage in the Middle East's long chess game. The winners will be those with a long-term and constant strategy and the ability to secure cooperation from local proxies and their regional partners. In this sense, the United States has taken a major step back.

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[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-ends-covert-cia-program-to-arm-anti-assad-rebels-in-syria-a-move-sought-by-moscow/2017/07/19/b6821a62-6beb-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc_story.html?utm_term=.575bb575c948

[2] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-03-14/evolution-insurgency

[3] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-01-19/assad-has-it-his-way

[4] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-08-28/rebranding-terror

[5] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-04-06/syria-policy-after-chemical-attacks

[6] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/jordan/2017-05-24/ammans-refugee-waiting-game

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[8] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-07-18/washingtons-dead-end-syria

[9] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-04-03/putins-game-syria