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# U.S. Pins Hope on Syrian Rebels With Loyalties All Over the Map

By BEN HUBBARD, ERIC SCHMITT and MARK MAZZETTI SEPT. 11, 2014

BEIRUT, Lebanon — President Obama’s determination to train Syrian rebels to serve as ground troops against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria leaves the United States dependent on a diverse group riven by infighting, with no shared leadership and with hard-line Islamists as its most effective fighters.

After more than three years of civil war, there are hundreds of militias fighting President Bashar al-Assad — and one another. Among them, even the more secular forces have turned to Islamists for support and weapons over the years, and the remaining moderate rebels often fight alongside extremists like the Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria.

“You are not going to find this neat, clean, secular rebel group that respects human rights and that is waiting and ready because they don’t exist,” said Aron Lund, a Syria analyst who edits the Syria in Crisis blog for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “It is a very dirty war and you have to deal with what is on offer.”

Analysts who track the rebel movement say that the concept of the Free Syrian Army as a unified force with an effective command structure is a myth.

Whatever force the United States can muster, it will face a jihadist army that has surged in size. Todd Ebitz, a spokesman for the Central Intelligence Agency, said Thursday that the agency now believes ISIS has between

20,000 and 31,500 fighters in Iraq and Syria, an increase from a previous assessment of more than 10,000 fighters.

“This new total reflects an increase in members because of stronger recruitment since June following battlefield successes and the declaration of a caliphate,” said Mr. Ebitz.

The Syrian rebels are a scattered archipelago of mostly local forces with ideologies that range from nationalist to jihadist. Their rank-and-file fighters are largely from the rural underclass, with few having clear political visions beyond a general interest in greater rights or the dream of an Islamic state.

Most have no effective links to the exile Syrian National Coalition, meaning they have no political body to represent their cause. And the coalition’s Supreme Military Council, which was intended to unite the moderate rebel forces, has all but collapsed.

“There’s a lot of skepticism about this piece of the president’s strategy,” said Representative Adam B. Schiff, Democrat of California, a member of the House Intelligence Committee. “The so-called moderate rebels have often been very immoderate and ineffective.”

Even as they line up to support Mr. Obama’s strategy against ISIS, some European allies remain skeptical about the efficacy of arming the Syrian rebels. Germany, for instance, has been arming and training Kurdish pesh merga forces in Iraq, but has resisted doing the same for any groups in Syria — partly out of fear that the weapons could end up in the hands of ISIS or other radical groups.

“We can’t really control the final destination of these arms,” said Peter Wittig, the German ambassador to the United States.

The approach — training and arming local fighters — has also not been effective in other arenas, whether Iraq, where the military melted away when ISIS attacked, or in Mali, where forces trained in counterterrorism switched sides to join Islamist fighters.

The Obama administration’s plans to arm Syrian rebels have been troubled by false starts since April 2013, when Mr. Obama first authorized

the C.I.A. to begin a secret training mission in Jordan.

Months after the authorization, the White House still had not delivered details to Congress about the C.I.A.'s plans, and it was not until September 2013 that the first American-trained rebels returned to Syria from Jordan.

To date, the C.I.A. mission in Jordan has trained 2,000 to 3,000 Syrian rebels, according to American and Arab officials.

To expand the training, Mr. Obama announced a plan in June to spend up to \$500 million for scores of American Special Forces troops to train up to 3,000 rebels over the next year. But the proposal languished on Capitol Hill as lawmakers complained that the plans lacked specific details. A revised plan now calls for as many as twice that number of fighters, analysts said.

Even if Congress approves the Pentagon plan, as now appears likely after Mr. Obama's speech on Wednesday, military planners said it would be months before the fighters, to be trained at a base in Saudi Arabia, would be battle-ready.

Fatigue from three years of war has left most of those forces exhausted and short of resources. Since pushing ISIS from parts of northern Syria early this year, Syria's rebels have few military advances to point to and in many areas have lost ground, to Mr. Assad's forces and to ISIS. But in many places they remain busy fighting Mr. Assad and are not eager to redirect their energies to ISIS — even while many say they hate the group.

“The priority is the regime,” Ziad Obeid, who heads a small rebel faction in Aleppo, said through Skype. “But it is ISIS that is preventing any progress on the ground, so we have to get rid of it, too.”

Still, he added, he would not pull fighters from battles with the government to fight ISIS. “People on the fronts with the regime can't leave to fight ISIS,” he said. “That won't work.”

American involvement with the rebels so far has largely been through so-called operations rooms in Jordan and Turkey staffed by intelligence officials from the United States and other countries that have provided arms to limited numbers of vetted rebels. So far, the support provided has

included light arms, ammunition and antitank missiles, which have helped the groups destroy government armor but have not resulted in major rebel advances or helped control the spread of ISIS.

“The United States can probably work with them to some extent, but they haven’t been hugely effective so far, which is why the Islamic State is there in the first place,” said Mr. Lund, the Syria analyst.

The support so far has been limited, leaving many rebels feeling that the aid is prolonging the war, not helping them win. And the fluidity of battlefield alliances in Syria means that even mainline rebels often end up fighting alongside the Nusra Front, whose suicide bombers are relied on by other groups to soften up government targets.

“Even the groups that the U.S. has trained tend to show up in the same trenches as the Nusra Front eventually, because they need them and they are fighting the same battles,” Mr. Lund said.

The operations rooms — known as the Military Operations Command — also have had their influence sapped by the spread of extremists.

Ahmed Naimeh, the top Syrian official in the operations room in Jordan, was captured by rebels during a visit to Syria this year, ironically while trying to unify local rebel groups. He has not been heard from since, and many suspect that the Nusra Front killed him.

An operations room in Turkey has provided support to a number of moderate groups in northern Syria, shifting the balance of power away from the Islamists, according to a report published this week by the International Crisis Group. But this, in addition to a decline in direct support from Persian Gulf states, has not strengthened the rebels, instead causing “a weakening of overall rebel capacity to halt regime gains in Aleppo and hold ISIS at bay to the east,” the report said.

Current and former American officials acknowledge the government’s lack of deep knowledge about the rebels. “We need to do everything we can to figure out who the non-ISIS opposition is,” said Ryan C. Crocker, a former United States ambassador to Iraq and Syria. “Frankly, we don’t have a clue.”

The operations rooms, which require beneficiaries to provide

information on their members, may have helped identify fighters and groups that the United States will channel greater aid through in the future.

Some rebels appear ready to join the fight against ISIS. A video posted online this week showed Jamal Maarouf, a rebel commander in northern Syria, addressing a gathering of hundreds of fighters. “God willing, we will fight two states: the state of Bashar al-Assad, the unjust tyrant, and the state of Baghdadi, the aggressor tyrant,” he said, referring to the head of ISIS, **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**.

Ben Hubbard reported from Beirut, and Eric Schmitt and Mark Mazzetti from Washington. Anne Barnard contributed reporting from Beirut.

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