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Turkey says US agrees to provide air cover for anti-Assad “rebels” in Syria

By Niles Williamson

26 May 2015

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Monday that the US had agreed to provide air support for so-called “moderate rebels” being trained in Turkey, once they cross the border into Syria.

Cavusoglu told the *Daily Sabah* that there was “a principle agreement” between the two governments for Washington to provide air cover for the proxy forces being trained in a US-funded program aimed at toppling the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Asked if there would be cooperation with the US in providing air support for the “train-and-equip army,” the foreign minister replied, “Of course. They have to be supported via air. If you do not protect them or provide air support, what is the point?”

Cavusoglu refused to give any details when asked if the air support would include armed American drones flown from Incirlik Air Base in the southern Turkish city of Adana. “These are technical details,” he stated. “There is a principle agreement on providing air support. How it is going to be provided is in the responsibility of the army.”

As of Monday evening, the US government had not officially responded to Cavusoglu’s statement, neither affirming nor denying its accuracy. Such an agreement would, however, mark

a major escalation in the four-year-long US-instigated civil war that has devastated Syria, killing hundreds of thousands of people and turning millions more into refugees.

The Turkish claim comes at a point of mounting military successes against Syrian government forces by US-backed “rebels” in league with the Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front and by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The provision of air cover by the US for its proxy forces on the ground in Syria would follow the pattern of the 2011 US-NATO air war in Libya, which ended with the torture and assassination of deposed ruler Muammar Gaddafi and led in turn to the collapse of the country into bloody civil war between rival Islamist militias.

The US has been flying a fleet of four unarmed Predator surveillance drones over Syria and Iraq from Incirlik since 2011. Three additional Predator drones were deployed to the Turkish base in April.

While the drones reportedly remain unarmed, Turkish military officials agreed in principle last month to the deployment of armed drones at the air base, which is located approximately 360 miles north of the Syrian capital of Damascus and 250 miles northwest of the ISIS Syrian stronghold of Raqqa, well within the flight range of the Predator drones.

The US and Turkish governments are undertaking the military training operation as part of a \$500 million program approved by Congress in September 2014 that also involves the training of Syrian “rebels” at camps in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

According to the *Hurriyet Daily News*, approximately 123 US soldiers arrived in Turkey at the end of April to initiate the training and equipping program. Forty of these soldiers were deployed to the Hirfanli army base in central Turkey to train supposedly moderate anti-Assad forces. The remaining 83 were deployed to Incirlik to oversee the transfer of weapons to Syrian insurgent groups. Turkey has provided an equal number of soldiers to work alongside the US advisers.

According to *Hurriyet*, the fighters trained at Hirfanli will be transferred to Hatay province, where they will be armed with rifles, machine guns and anti-tank weapons before being sent back across the border into Syria.

The US has already initiated a similar program in Jordan, where some 400 soldiers from the US and 100 others from countries allied to the US have been training an initial group of approximately 100 Syrian fighters. Washington and its allies are planning to train 15,000 anti-regime Syrian fighters over the next three years.

While launched under the pretense of developing an effective force to fight ISIS, which has taken control of large swaths of Syria and Iraq, the training programs are aimed ultimately at the overthrow of Assad.

Cavusoglu made this clear in response to a question about his expectations for the operation, stating, “The opposition forces are fighting on both fronts. While the fight against ISIS is prioritized, the regime must be also stopped.”

US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter told the *New York Times* earlier this month that Washington would be obligated to assist the “rebels” they trained if they came into conflict with the Syrian military. “If they are contested by regime forces, we would have some responsibility to help them,” he stated, adding, “We have not yet decided in detail how we would exercise that responsibility.”

Since last summer, when ISIS moved across the border from Syria to Iraq, seizing control of large portions of that country, the US has been gradually building up direct military operations against the extremist group inside Syria.

ISIS developed out of the civil war stoked up by the US and its imperialist allies as part of its effort to overthrow Assad, a key ally of Iran and Russia. The CIA and the US military have funneled massive quantities of weapons and ammunition as well as thousands of foreign fighters into Syria since 2011.

On September 10, 2014, US President Barack Obama announced the beginning of a consistent campaign of air strikes against ISIS targets throughout Syria. Since then, the US and its allies have carried out several thousand air strikes against targets in Iraq and Syria at a cost of more than \$2.4 billion, or roughly \$8.9 million per day.

US Special Forces carried out a raid in eastern Syria on May 17, killing 32 reputed members of ISIS, including a reportedly high-level ISIS officer. American Special Forces carried out their first attack inside Syria last summer in an unsuccessful raid against an ISIS complex in Raqqa, ostensibly to rescue US hostages who were later killed.

The US-led military operation in Iraq and Syria continued on Sunday and into Monday with 10 air strikes in Syria and 25 in Iraq. US strikes in Iraq hit ISIS targets near Fallujah, Baiji, Bahghdadi and Ramadi.

Shiite militias are preparing for a counter-offensive to retake Ramadi, which fell to ISIS forces last week after the Iraqi military was routed. On Monday, Shiite militia forces fighting alongside local Sunni tribal fighters took over part of Al Tash, a rural village 12 miles south of Ramadi.

Sunni fighters loyal to the Iraqi government were reported to be laying landmines on Monday to reinforce the defense of Baghdadi, which was retaken from ISIS forces in March. The city, 63 miles northwest of Ramadi, is the site of the Al Asad air base, where several hundred US military advisers are currently stationed.

Since June 2014, more than 3,000 US soldiers have been deployed throughout Iraq as part of anti-ISIS military operations.