

Islamist-rebel infighting calls Syrian aid into question

By: Brendan Bordelon – July 15, 2013

Islamist militants with links to al-Qaida attacked Free Syrian Army supply depots in northwestern Syria over the weekend in a bid to seize weapons and equipment, underscoring a growing divide between moderate and jihadist rebel forces in their shared struggle to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The increasing tension calls into question President Barack Obama's decision to send money and weapons to Syrian opposition groups, which are now openly fighting one another as well as Assad's regime.

"This ought to underscore the danger to Obama administration officials of going down that path and providing aid to the insurgency," Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior foreign policy fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, told The Daily Caller News Foundation.

The clashes came two days after fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant gunned down Kamal Hamami, a top rebel commander and one of thirty leaders on the Western-backed Supreme Military Council. On Thursday, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) vowed swift retaliation.

"We will not let them get away with it because they want to target us," an anonymous senior FSA commander told Reuters. "We are going to wipe the floor with them." Confrontations between secular rebel forces and Islamist elements have proliferated in recent weeks. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights told The Daily Mail that last Friday militants from the same jihadist group "killed an FSA rebel in Idlib province and cut his head off." And on Saturday, moderate fighters battled with Islamist gunmen for control of a checkpoint in Aleppo, Syria's largest city and an epicenter of the rebellion.

"It's always been a very fragile and rather murky coalition," Carpenter said of Syrian rebel forces. "You have some decent elements in it politically and you have some really unsavory elements, and the tensions between those factions are acute."

Although the Obama administration pledged to provide heavy weapons to the Syrian opposition after reports that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons, congressional committees have delayed that assistance over fears that the arms may be seized by al-Qaida and its affiliates.

Moderate rebels say this delay allowed Islamist elements, which continue to receive weapons and financial support from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, to gain the upper hand.

But as the rebel coalition becomes dangerously frayed, some experts contend that postponing, or even revoking, America's promise of aid may be in order.

"The idea is that they're going to somehow adequately vet the different groups and only give aid to the folks who we might have a ghost of a chance of them being positive

towards us when it's all done," said Steven Bucci, director of foreign policy studies at the conservative Heritage Foundation, in an interview with TheDC News Foundation. "That's not going to be the easiest thing in the world to do."

Carpenter agreed: "I've always been extremely skeptical about the Obama administration's view that we can somehow vet who gets the aid, that we can give the money and weapons to the 'good guys' but keep the aid out of the hands of these extremist elements," he said.

Both also worried that American weapons could be captured by jihadists should a full-scale conflict break out between the two sides.

"I don't want to see them get Stinger missiles and advanced anti-tank weapons and that sort of thing, which is what they're looking for," said Bucci. "At this point, the most effective fighting forces and the ones most likely to win are, unfortunately, the most radical elements."

Bucci and Carpenter think the Obama administration will continue to advocate sending arms to secular Syrian forces, although it may do so with increasing caution.

"I would hope they will continue the vetting process and give it that much more scrutiny now that they've got some pretty stark evidence that there's already some internecine fighting going on," said Bucci.

Carpenter, however, believes it's time to cut the rebels off from American assistance altogether.

"If we provide more aid, we are getting involved deeper and deeper into an extremely complicated, murky conflict," he warned. "That is unwise in terms of America's best interest."