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Foreign nations' proxy war in Syria creates chaos



David Ignatius: October 2, 2014

The squabbling factions that make up the Syrian “moderate opposition” should get their act together. But so should the foreign nations — such as the United States, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Jordan — that have been funding the chaotic melange of fighters inside Syria. These foreign machinations helped open the door for the terrorist Islamic State group to threaten the region.

From the beginning of the revolt against President Bashar al-Assad in 2011, Syria has been the scene of a proxy war involving regional powers: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar all wanted to topple Assad, but they competed with each other as regional rivals, too. At various points, all three nations provided Sunni rebel groups with money and weapons that ended up in the hands of extremists.

Outside meddling in Syria worsened when the Shiite-ruled neighbors, Iran and Iraq, dispatched Hezbollah fighters and Iraqi militiamen to rescue Assad’s army. This Sunni-Shiite feud added an

extra burst of savagery. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been battling for regional supremacy — to the last Syrian.

The United States, Saudi Arabia and Jordan joined forces in 2013 to train and arm moderate rebels at a CIA-backed camp in Jordan. But this program was never strong enough to unify the nearly 1,000 brigades scattered across the country. The resulting disorganization helped discredit the rebel alliance known as the Free Syrian Army.

Syrian rebel commanders deserve some blame for this ragged structure. But the chaos was worsened by foreign powers that treated Syria as a playground for their intelligence services. This cynical intervention recalled similar meddling that helped ravage Lebanon, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq and Libya during their civil wars.

The United States has reduced the fratricide by organizing a broader coalition of nations to fight the Islamic State. But without strong U.S. leadership, and better partnership by such prickly nations as Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the coalition is likely to splinter and the fratricide will begin again.

The story of how Syria became a cockpit for rival intelligence services was explained to me by sources here and in Reyhanli, a rebel staging area on the Turkey-Syria border.

Outside efforts to arm and train the Syrian rebels began more than two years ago in Istanbul, where a “military operations center” was created, first in a hotel near the airport.

A leading figure was a Qatari operative who had helped arm the Libyan rebels who deposed Moammar Gaddafi. Working with the Qataris were senior figures representing Turkish and Saudi intelligence.

But unity within the Istanbul operations room frayed when the Turks and Qataris began to support Islamist fighters they thought would be more aggressive. These jihadists did emerge as braver, bolder fighters — and their success was a magnet for more support. The Turks and Qataris insist they didn’t intentionally support the extremist group Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State. But weapons and money sent to more moderate Islamist brigades made their way to these terrorist groups, and the Turks and Qataris turned a blind eye.

“The operations room was chaos,” recalls one Arab intelligence source. He says he warned a Qatari officer, who answered: “I will send weapons to al-Qaeda if it will help” topple Assad. This determination to remove Assad by any means necessary proved dangerous. “The Islamist groups got bigger and stronger, and the FSA day by day got weaker,” recalls the Arab intelligence source.

The Saudi effort was run until late 2013 by Prince Bandar bin Sultan, at that time head of Saudi intelligence. Bandar was enthusiastic but undisciplined, adding to the chaos. Pushed by the United States, the Saudis in February replaced Bandar and gave oversight of the Syria effort to Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef. The program was less chaotic but no more effective in checking the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State.

Hoping to gain greater control of the northern front, Turkey created a new military operations center in Ankara known as the “MOM,” based on its Turkish initials. Until now, the MOM has tried to coordinate rebel activities, but the command structure is weak.

“The Free Syrian Army is not ready yet to control the ground,” says the Arab intelligence source bluntly. But the FSA’s internal disarray reflects the larger disorganization of the outside powers

that have been funding the opposition. Until they are truly working together – funneling money and weapons to a single rebel army – the mess in Syria will continue.
