



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 28, 2013

McCain Visits Rebel Army in Syria

John McCain (shown) has put “boots on the ground” in Syria after all — his own.

The senior senator from Arizona and ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee became the highest-ranking U.S. official to enter Syria since the beginning of the two-year-old civil war that has killed an estimated 70,000, the Daily Beast [reported](#). McCain made the unannounced visit Monday, when he crossed the border into Syria from Turkey, accompanied by Gen. Salim Idris, leader of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army. McCain’s has been the most persistent voice in the Senate calling for aid to the rebel army — criticizing the Obama administration for not supplying weapons and air support. He has stressed, however, that he is not calling for American “boots on the ground” to assist the forces fighting to overthrow the regime of Syrian Bashar Hafez al-Assad.



President Obama has called on al-Assad to step down, but has limited direct U.S. assistance to the rebels to non-lethal “humanitarian” aid, such as protective armor and communications equipment. The United States has facilitated shipment of deadly weapons to the rebels from third-party vendors, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

McCain’s visit came less than a week after the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted 15-3 to begin shipment of U.S. lethal weapons to “vetted” rebel units they hope will not be dominated by militant, anti-Western Islamists. It is not certain if or when the Syrian Transaction Support Act, sponsored by committee chairman Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) and ranking Republican Robert Corker of Tennessee, will come before the full Senate for a vote.

“What we want from the U.S. government is to take the decision to support the Syrian revolution with weapons and ammunition, anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft weapons,” Gen. Idris told the Daily Beast. “Of course we want a no-fly zone and we ask for strategic strikes against Hezbollah both inside Lebanon and inside Syria.”

McCain, the Republican nominee for president in 2008, has long been an enthusiastic supporter of an interventionist foreign policy, often calling for “regime change” in nations viewed as threats to neighboring countries or as violators of human rights. He was a leading advocate of U.S. “boots on the ground” in Kosovo in the early 1990s and a strong supporter of the invasion and occupation of Iraq to remove that country’s alleged “weapons of mass destruction.” He championed the “surge” of U.S. forces there that has been widely credited with preventing a victory by insurgents against the new government, backed by U.S. and coalition forces. The need for the United States and allies to act in



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Syria is urgent, he says.

"The U.S. does not have to act alone, put boots on the ground or destroy every Syrian air-defense system to make a difference," McCain wrote in a recent [essay](#) in Time magazine. He has called, however, for not only arming, but also training Syrian rebels, creating a "safe zone" for rebel forces at the Turkish border, bombing Syrian air bases, and enforcing a "no-fly" zone to thwart government air attacks. He also favors supporting the insurgents with U.S. Patriot missiles in Turkey. With arms flowing to al-Assad from Russia and Iran, McCain argues that the United States and other Western nations must come to the aid of the rebels before it is too late.

"Taking these steps would save innocent lives, give the moderate opposition a better chance to succeed and eventually provide security and responsible governance in Syria after Assad," he said in the Time article. "However, the longer we wait, the worse the situation gets."

Vetting the rebel units to be sure the weapons get into the "right hands" would be a tricky proposition, however, given the prominent role of militant, anti-U.S. forces in the Syrian opposition. Al Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate that fought against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq, is a key player among the Syrian rebels. The Syrian group, Ahrar al-Sham, is said to share al Nusra's extremist ideology. The New York Times last month quoted a rebel commander on the dominant role of the al Nusra fighters.

"They are the strongest military force in the area," [said](#) the commander of a rebel brigade in Hasaka. "We can't deny it."

A Reuters [report](#) in August of last year noted: "Recent news reports from the region have suggested that the influence and numbers of Islamist militants, some of them connected to al Qaeda or its affiliates, have been growing among Assad's opponents." The British Broadcasting Corporation at that time quoted a senior officer of the Free Syrian Army acknowledging that jihadists in the rebel ranks pose "a real threat after the Assad regime falls."

"Nowhere in rebel-controlled Syria is there a secular fighting force to speak of," the Times reported in April of this year.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, responded to the vote in favor of the Menendez-Corker bill by [warning](#) of unintended consequences. "This is an important moment," he warned his colleagues. "You will be funding today the allies of al Qaeda."

If weapons supplied by the United States end up turned against us, it won't be the first time. The United States provided military aid to Saddam Hussein during the 1980s, only to find itself at war with the "Butcher of Baghdad" in 1991 and again in 2003 in war that lasted in nearly a decade. The "freedom fighters" the United States armed against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan turned out to be the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces fighting U.S. occupation for the past 12 years. McCain was an early and enthusiastic backer of the air war that saved the rebel forces in Libya, most notably in Benghazi, where last September heavily armed militants attacked a U.S. diplomatic outpost, killing four Americans.

McCain, a Navy pilot captured and imprisoned in North Vietnam for five and half years, might recall that the U.S. role in Vietnam began with military advisors, arming and assisting the South Vietnamese Army. Before that war was over we had more than half a million Americans with "boots on the ground" in Vietnam and about 58,000 under the ground in cemeteries back home. The war took the innocent lives of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese.

If history is any guide, U.S intervention in Syria's civil war — in which no U.S. interests are at stake —



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might deliver the Syrian people from the tyranny of Bashar al-Assad into a different kind of lethal and destructive force: the tyranny of good intentions.



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