

Holding Civil Society Workshops While Syria Burns

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Inside the State Department's Very Nonlethal Aid to the Syrian Opposition

Syria's bloody civil war is threatening to turn into a regional conflict. For six days in a row as of Oct. 8, Turkey has lobbed artillery into northern Syria in response to shells from President Bashar al-Assad's military landing on its territory.

Even as the conflict escalates, however, the United States still appears fixated on the peaceful activists who dominated the early days of what is now a 19-month revolt. U.S. policy remains geared to providing only nonlethal support to the Syrian opposition, which rebels and activists deride as useless to those fighting the insurgency. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are moving in to fill the vacuum left by the United States by supplying the rebels with lethal aid, bolstering their influence among the rebels.

The United States has consistently said Assad must relinquish power, but it has been hesitant to become heavily involved in Syria's insurgency. The U.S. financial commitment in Syria has been limited: At a meeting of the "Friends of Syria," a group of 70 countries supporting the opposition, the United States increased the funds it allotted to the Syrian opposition to \$45 million. The amount allotted for humanitarian aid currently stands at \$130 million.

The most overt form of assistance provided by the United States to the Syrian opposition is the State Department's Office of Syrian Opposition Support (OSOS), an organization established to aid opposition activists trying to bring down the Assad regime and located in the trendy Cihangir neighborhood on the European side of Istanbul.

State Department strategic planner Maria Stephan, a prominent theorist of nonviolent resistance, was dispatched to oversee the training that OSOS provides to activists. Stephan, a State Department veteran whose foreign postings include Afghanistan and Libya, is the co-author of *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. She is also the former director of policy and research at the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.

Stephan had already been meeting with activists in Istanbul for months before the OSOS trainings began in August, according to multiple activists who met with her during this time. She organizes and observes the training on civil resistance, media production, promoting anti-sectarian thought, and avoiding communications monitoring, according to a Syria-based activist who traveled to Istanbul for the OSOS trainings. Activists from other Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, conduct the workshops.

A British consultant also works with OSOS as an advisor, but he said he was not cleared by the State Department to speak about its activities. The State Department refused requests to interview Stephan.

The United States is relying on OSOS as one of its central points of contact with the Syrian opposition. During Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's August visit to Istanbul, she snubbed the Syrian National Council, which has failed to coalesce into a unified opposition body, and instead met with activists being trained by OSOS.

OSOS pays for activists' trip to Istanbul, as well as their stay in an upscale hotel if they can manage the perilous journey to Turkey. At the end of the training they are given a satellite phone and computer and are expected to return to Syria -- though not all do, according to activists familiar with OSOS.

"Most of them stayed outside of Syria. We were 34; only six of us came back," said an activist in Syria who attended one of the trainings. "I don't know about the equipment; I know those who are in Syria now with it."

OSOS also sends communications-related equipment into Syria through other avenues, though the amount is unclear. Activists have complained that the State Department's pledges of assistance have gone undelivered. "There is no kind of relief coming inside Syria. Where is the program you promised?" said one activist who attended OSOS training.

U.S. efforts to organize Syria's opposition also appear to be receiving help from the British. A Washington-based Syria analyst told *Foreign Policy* that OSOS was set up with funding from the State Department with the assistance of a Beirut-based consultancy firm called Pursue Ltd. Alistair Harris, Pursue's director, is a former British diplomat known for his work canvassing extremist groups in Palestinian camps in Beirut, the analyst said. Harris has also written a policy paper on al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

An article in the British newspaper the *Daily Telegraph* initially described Harris as "a British political consultant overseeing the [nonlethal aid] programme." It was later edited to omit his name.

Via email, Harris denied that Pursue is "undertaking any activities relating to the Syrian opposition on behalf of the U.S. or any other project partner." However, he admitted his personal involvement in the program, writing that he is "involved in US assistance programming, but not through Pursue."

A second office, run by a company called Access Research Knowledge (ARK), has been opened a short walk from OSOS. There, another British consultant oversees a number of employees of various Western and Arab nationalities. When *Foreign Policy* visited the ARK office, at least two employees knew Harris by name.

At least one employee is involved with Pursue, and activists said it is acting as an advisor and intermediary for funding from "Friends of Syria" countries to the Syrian opposition.

ARK also provides funds and consulting to a new opposition media outlet founded by a group of liberal-minded Syrian activists called BasmaSyria.

A State Department spokesperson described ARK as "an implementing partner" of the U.S. nonlethal-aid program.

"ARK is currently undertaking activities to support the nonviolent Syrian opposition and Syrian civil society," the spokesperson said. "Project activities involving hundreds of beneficiaries have taken place in Syria and neighboring states since the onset of the Syrian crisis. It shares the inclusive vision of a future Syria for all Syrians where the rule of law is applied equally and the people of Syria are represented by a legitimate, responsive, and democratically elected government."

The activists themselves see the projects as a way to get their message out to the world more effectively.

"They are just helping us. We didn't study media; we didn't study photography," said an activist who works for BasmaSyria, which has distributed videos via YouTube, Facebook, and the Saudi-owned news channel Al Arabiya since August. The videos -- which are shot, written, and produced by the activists -- mainly target a Syrian audience and promote the idea that the uprising in Syria is not sectarian in nature. The small number of activists working for the group are from different religious backgrounds, including Alawites, and range from 21 to 55 years old.

"We are like a mini-Syria," one BasmaSyria activist said. Each activist receives a modest salary, equipment, and media training. When a new group of activists comes to Istanbul for OSOS training, BasmaSyria activists are called in to give them a brief pep talk.

Foreign Policy visited the BasmaSyria office in early October and was shown several of the group's videos. The activists say that their aim is to counter the Assad regime's narrative that the Syrian revolt is a sectarian conflict. "It's regime propaganda, a pretext to say this revolution is an Islamic revolution and Sunni will kill Alawi," one activist said. Another activist, a Christian woman from the city of Homs, furiously said that even prominent Western journalists have been paid "a lot" by the Syrian regime to promote a sectarian agenda in Syria.

The editing and narration of BasmaSyria's videos are more professional than most of the Syrian opposition videos uploaded to YouTube. But with Syria's civil war escalating -- more than 30,000 people have reportedly been killed in the conflict -- even some activists fear that the nonlethal aid doesn't respond to the opposition's true needs.

"I am also not convinced that it will be useful," said one of the activists who attended OSOS training in August before returning to Syria. "Because it was not organized. They made this course training for activists. But we have the Free Syrian Army."

The activist met with Clinton during her August visit to Istanbul, but the encounter only heightened this person's impression of how far behind the United States is on Syria.

"She listened to us for 15 minutes. We talked about the projects [that the activists wanted to run inside Syria]," the activist said. "She said that America will help Syria to build their civil society, so if you have a project or program they would be happy to help us. She asked us to tell her if there are really effective people inside Syria that have a project, if there are people that they should give money or if they should not."

A State Department spokesperson in Washington did not respond to a request for further information about its Syria program. Discussions with activists, however, suggested that the resources available to OSOS remain limited.

"In truth, we are not talking about major expenditures here," said Ammar Abdulhamid, a prominent Syrian activist and fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington, cautioning that OSOS was too new to assess its effectiveness.

The United States appears to have given the nod for its allies to provide the armed opposition with a limited amount of lethal aid. A May *Washington Post* article reported that U.S. officials had "expanded contacts with opposition military forces" in order to vet them as possible recipients of military supplies delivered by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. An Oct. 6 *New York Times* article, however, found that the United States had "discouraged" both these countries from providing the rebels with heavier weaponry, such as anti-aircraft or anti-tank missiles.

Rather than providing military support now, much of the U.S. effort appears to be dedicated to planning for the period following the collapse of the Assad regime. The Pentagon has coordinated contingency plans with Turkey, Jordan, and Israel to handle the possible flood of refugees across Syria's borders and also to secure the regime's stockpiles of chemical weapons. In August, President Barack Obama warned that Assad's use of chemical weapons would cross a "red line" that could provoke Western military intervention.

These steps, however, fall far short of the Syrian opposition's expectations. After months of U.S. inaction, the mood among anti-Assad groups is turning perceptibly against the United States.

"The support the USA gives is just communication tools and training," said Mohammed Sarmini, a spokesperson for the Syrian National Council. "Just that. But I think the Syrian people want more than that. They want relief, medical, and food and supplies, like this. And we want, exactly, clearly, we want weapons."

These complaints, however, seem to have fallen on deaf ears in Washington. In addition to OSOS and BasmaSyria, the United States has also funded a workshop for Syrian women held in the Turkish border city of Gaziantep. The project was about having a "vision for Syria in 2020," said the Syrian activist who organized the workshop. Funding

was provided through the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations.

At the workshop, Syrian women developed ideas about what they want different aspects of their country -- the economy, health services, security, and civil society, for instance -- to look like in the future. "Syria didn't have institutions before," the activist said. "Any support for building institutions or building capacity is very welcome, and it is very effective.... The more the better."

Asked what participants did during the workshops, she said, "Basically, it was about explaining personal stories, talking about the past and the present as well and planning for the future."

An activist in Syria said that the State Department had also funded a project for Syrian lawyers and judges, but the organizers were not reachable for comment.

The State Department has said the effect of the OSOS training will best be seen after the regime falls. However, the relationship between the armed opposition -- which believes it is taking the greatest risk in fighting the regime -- and civil society activists is tense. "Some of [the armed opposition] think we are doing a useless job, and some of them think we are doing a good job," the organizer of the workshop for women said of the armed opposition. "At some point I think there will be some conflict."

The BasmaSyria activist based in Istanbul said the question is not if there will be more violence after the regime falls, but rather how much -- and what forces can mitigate it. "If the U.S. closes its eyes, it will open them and find it lost all its strategic power inside Syria, and find Syria like Afghanistan," she said.

Asked about OSOS, she said, "To me these nonviolence workshops are blah blah blah. I will never attend these workshops. I hate violence, but the workshops are a waste of time and money. We need rockets and anti-aircraft [weapons]."

Immediately after making the statement, she cooled. The activist said that the training had valuable aspects, such as helping her shoot and edit powerful videos to promote her view of Syria's revolution and to document human rights violations in a way that the material could be submitted as evidence to the International Criminal Court.

"We want a civil state. It is important to train activists about this.... So these people can rebuild Syria tomorrow," she said. "It's very important now -- not tomorrow, now. We had nothing, in 40 years, not one word, just clapping for the president. We have no idea about freedom."