

John McCain slips into Syria to meet rebels

John McCain slipped into Syria to meet with rebel leaders and listen to their calls for US airstrikes against the Assad regime and its Hizbollah allies.



John McCain, right, meets with Syrian rebels. (Picture: Elizabeth O'Bagy / Syrian Emergency Task Force)

By Raf Sanchez, Washington

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The 76-year-old Republican senator has been a staunch critic of the White House's policy of non-intervention in Syria and his visit is likely to add to growing pressure for the US to step up support of the rebels.

The one-day visit, first reported by *The Daily Beast*, saw Mr McCain meeting with opposition leaders in Turkey before crossing briefly to the Syrian side of the border at Bab al-Salameh.

The meetings brought together 20 different commanders from rebel brigades across Syria under the auspices of the Free Syrian Army's Supreme Military Council.

General Salem Idris, the head of the council, told the Daily Beast that the rebels had lobbied for American strikes against both Syrian government troops and fighters from Hizbollah, the Lebanese militia that has come to the aid of Bashar al-Assad.

Hizbollah units are deeply involved in the fighting around the strategic city of Qusayr and dozens of its fighters are believed to have been killed there.

Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's leader, this week committed his group to the battle in Syria, where its fellow Shias are struggling to contain a Sunni-majority opposition.

Rebel commanders also called for a no-fly zone above Syria and for the US to be supplying them with heavy weaponry.

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

While the US has so far refrained from providing arms to the rebels, the Obama administration in recent weeks indicated it is rethinking the policy.

Mr McCain's secret trip is in character for a senator whose 2008 presidential bid centred around his claim to be "a maverick" who refused to live by Washington's rules.

Elizabeth O'Bagy, political director of the Syrian Emergency Task Force, helped coordinate Mr McCain's trip and said there were only eight people in his travelling party as well four drivers.

"It was a very small group and I was a bit surprised that there weren't more security people involved," she said, adding that the visit was first discussed several weeks ago during a briefing on Capitol Hill.

Ms O'Bagy told *The Daily Telegraph* that the State Department helped coordinate meetings in Turkey but was concerned about the Syria visit and prevented Mr McCain's party from travelling deeper into the country.

The meetings took place in small groups just over the border to give the rebel commanders a chance to press their concerns to Mr McCain.

The opposition leaders reportedly told the senator, the highest-ranking US official to visit the country, that they felt "abandoned" by the international community.

Mr McCain in turn pressed for reassurances that if the US did arm the rebels the weapons would not end up in the hands of extremists, Ms O'Bagy said.

"He really feels the need to see things for himself. He said: 'If I'm going to be advocating for arming the opposition then I need to meet the people we're going to be arming,'" she said.

A spokesman for the senator confirmed the trip happened but would not give any further details.

Mr McCain often invokes his personal hero Teddy Roosevelt, who went on a safari in Africa and on a perilous expedition through Brazil after finishing his presidential term in office in 1909.

He has strongly criticised the president for not engaging in Syria, and dismissed Mr Obama's warning that use of chemical weapons would be "a red line" for the US.

"Unfortunately, the red line that the president of the United States has written was apparently written in disappearing ink," Mr McCain said, responding to growing reports that the Assad regime was using chemical weapons on a small scale.

He has called for US airstrikes in support of the rebels but stopped short of advocating sending in American ground troops.



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