

U.S.-Favored Syrian Rebels Weakening

BEIRUT (AP) — The Syrian rebels that the U.S. now wants to support are in poor shape, on the retreat from the radical al-Qaida breakaway group that has swept over large parts of Iraq and Syria, with some rebels giving up the fight. It is not clear whether the new U.S. promise to arm them will make a difference.

Some, more hard-line Syrian fighters are bending to the winds and joining the radicals.

The Obama administration is seeking \$500 million to train and arm what it calls "moderate" factions among the rebels, a far larger project than a quiet CIA-led effort in Jordan that has been training a few hundred fighters a month. But U.S. officials say it will take year to get the new program fully underway. The U.S. also faces the difficult task of what constitutes a "moderate" rebel in a movement dominated by Islamist ideologies.

Opposition activists complain that after long hesitating to arm the rebellion to topple Syrian President Bashar Assad — their main goal — the United States is now enlisting them against the Islamic State out of its own interests. They have long argued that the group, which aims to create a radical Islamic enclave bridging Syria and Iraq, was only able to gain such power in Syria because more moderate forces were not given international support.

"This decision is a year and a half too late," said Ahmad Ramadan, a senior member of the Western-backed Syrian National Coalition opposition group. "Had it not been for Obama's hesitation all along, this wouldn't be happening in Iraq today nor would there be this proliferation of extremist factions in Syria," he added.

Thousands Of Girls Divorced In Nigeria

KADUNA, Nigeria (AP) — By the time she ran away, she bore the scars of an abused woman anywhere — a swollen face, a starved body, and, barely a year after her wedding, a divorce. But for Maimuna Abdullahi, it all happened by the time she was 14.

Maimuna is one of thousands of divorced girls in Nigeria, who were forced into marriage and have since run away or been thrown out by their husbands. They are victims of a belief that girls should get wed rather than educated, which led Boko Haram terrorists to abduct more than 200 schoolgirls two months ago and threaten to marry them off.

"I'm too scared to go back home," Maimuna whispers, as she fiddles nervously with her hands. "I know they will force me to go back to my husband."

Her former husband, Mahammadu Saidu, 28, does not deny beating her, and blames her few years of school for her disobedience.

"She had too much ABCD," he says. "Too much ABCD."

Democrats Fear Contentious Sen. Votes

WASHINGTON (AP) — A fear of voting has gripped Democratic leaders in the Senate, slowing the chamber's modest productivity this election season to a near halt.

With control of the Senate at risk in November, leaders are going to remarkable lengths to protect endangered Democrats from casting tough votes and to deny Republicans legislative victories in the midst of the campaign. The phobia means even bipartisan legislation to boost energy efficiency, manufacturing, sportsmen's rights and more could be scuttled.

The Senate's masters of process are finding a variety of ways to shut down debate.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., now is requiring an elusive 60-vote supermajority to deal with amendments to spending bills, instead of the usual simple majority, a step that makes it much more difficult to put politically sensitive matters into contention. This was a flip from his approach to Obama administration nominees, when he decided most could be moved ahead with a straight majority instead of the 60 votes needed before.

Reid's principal aim in setting the supermajority rule for spending amendments was to deny archrival Sen. Mitch McConnell a win on protecting his home state coal industry from new regulations limiting carbon emissions from existing power plants. McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, faces a tough re-election in Kentucky.

Launch Of New Russian Rocket Aborted

MOSCOW (AP) — The first launch of Russia's new space rocket after two decades of development was aborted Friday moments before its blastoff, as President Vladimir Putin was watching via live feed.

The botched attempt to launch the Angara booster rocket was the latest mishap to dog Russia's troubled space industries, whose Soviet-era glory has faded in a series of launch failures.

Angara is built to replace the Soyuz, a workhorse of the Soviet and then Russian space program, designed more than four decades ago. Following the retirement of the U.S. space shuttles, Soyuz currently serves as the only way to deliver crews to the International Space Station.

Angara has been developed in several versions with various payloads of up to 35 metric tons. Its development has dragged on since 1994. Its first launch had been planned for 2005, but has been continuously pushed back.

Space officials said that an automatic safety system aborted the rocket's blastoff from the Plesetsk launch pad in northwestern Russia for an unspecified reason.

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Iraq's Top Cleric Urges Quick Deal On PM

BY RYAN LUCAS AND
SAMEER N. YACOUB
Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraq's top Shi'ite cleric ratcheted up the pressure Friday on lawmakers to agree on a prime minister before the newly elected parliament meets next week, trying to avert months of wrangling in the face of a Sunni insurgent blitz over huge tracts in the country's north and west.

The United States, meanwhile, started flying armed drones over Baghdad to protect American civilians and newly deployed U.S. military forces in the capital.

Less than three years after the last American troops left Iraq, Washington has found itself being pulled back in by the stunning offensive spearheaded by the al-Qaida breakaway group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The onslaught has triggered the worst crisis in Iraq since the U.S. withdrawal and sapped public — and international — confidence in Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Many of al-Maliki's former allies, and even key patron Iran, have begun exploring alternatives to replace him. But al-Maliki, who has governed the country since 2006, has proven to be a savvy and hard-nosed politician, and so far he has shown no



MICHAEL PROTHERO/MCT

Kurdish Peshmerga fighters along a frontline position protect the main highway between Kurdish occupied Kirkuk and the capital of the Kurdish Regional Government in Irbil.

willingness to step aside.

Al-Maliki can claim to have a mandate. He personally won the most votes in April elections, and his State of Law bloc won the most seats by far. But he failed to gain the majority needed to govern alone, leaving him in need of allies to retain his post.

That has set the stage for what could be months of arduous coalition negotiations.

After 2010 elections, it took Iraqi politicians nine months to agree on a new prime minister. Now, unlike four years ago, the territorial cohesion of Iraq is at stake.

Seizing on the sense of urgency, Iraq's most powerful Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, called on the

country's politicians to agree on the next prime minister, parliament speaker and president by the time the new legislature meets on Tuesday, a cleric who represents him told worshippers in a sermon Friday in the holy city of Karbala.

Doing so would be a "prelude to the political solution that everyone seeks at the present," said the cleric, Abdul-Mahdi al-Karbaile.

The reclusive al-Sistani, the most revered figure among Iraqi Shiites, rarely appears or speaks in public, instead delivering messages through other clerics or, less frequently, issuing edicts.

In Washington, the Obama administration backed al-Sistani's call for Iraqi leaders to

agree on a new government "without delay."

"It's my understanding he was calling for a process that's in line with the constitution, just to do it very quickly," State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf told reporters. "Which we certainly agree with because we think the situation is so serious that they need to move with urgency."

Still, the probability that Iraq's deeply divided political class can mend its differences in the span of days is unlikely.

The United States and other world powers have pressed al-Maliki to reach out to the country's Sunni and Kurdish minorities and have called for a more inclusive government that can address longstanding grievances. Al-Maliki has widely been accused of monopolizing power and alienating Sunnis, and his failure to promote national reconciliation has been blamed for fueling Sunni anger.

The Islamic State has taken advantage of Sunni discontent to fuel its rise. The group's stunning gains also were made possible in part because Iraqi security forces melted away in the face of the onslaught.

The United States has already deployed 180 of 300 troops promised by President

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Ukraine Signs Historic EU Pact, Snubbing Russia

BY JOHN-THOR DAHLBURG
AND VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV
Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Over Russia's objections, Ukraine's new president on Friday signed a free-trade deal binding his country more closely to Western Europe, sealing the very agreement that triggered the bloodshed and political convulsions of the past seven months.

Russia, meanwhile, fended off for the time being a new, more crippling round of Western sanctions over its intervention in Ukraine, where a fragile cease-fire between government forces and pro-Moscow separatists in the east expired Friday night but was extended by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko for three more days.

"What a great day!" a beaming Poroshenko said in Brussels upon the signing of the economic agreement with the European Union. "Maybe the most important day for my country after independence."

Since it became independent in the 1991 Soviet collapse, Ukraine has been involved in a delicate balancing act between Russia and the West. The Kremlin wants to keep Ukraine, the birthplace of Russian statehood and Russian Orthodox Christianity, in its orbit.

In November, under pressure from Moscow, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych spiked the EU pact, triggering huge protests that drove him from power. Moscow responded by annexing the mainly Russian-speaking Crimean Peninsula in March, and pro-Russian separatists

soon rose up in Ukraine's eastern provinces.

While Friday's signing marked a defeat for Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has threatened to cancel trade preferences for Ukraine, the Kremlin made no immediate move to punish its neighbor or the two other former Soviet republics that joined the pact, Moldova and Georgia.

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia will take the necessary measures to protect its markets only when the agreement takes effect. That will take a few months.

Meanwhile, EU leaders decided not to immediately impose new sanctions on Russia for the uprising. But they warned that punitive measures have been drawn up and could be levied immediately if

that will take a few weeks.

Insurgent leader Alexander Borodai said earlier in the day that the rebels were ready to extend the cease-fire if

Poroshenko does so and would also soon release the European observers they have been holding for weeks.

Poroshenko warned, however, that the government

could terminate the cease-fire in areas where it has been violated by the rebels.

At the signing ceremony, Poroshenko reminded EU leaders of the bloodshed in his country.

Ukraine "paid the highest possible price to make her European dreams come true," he said, asking the EU to pledge that one day Ukraine can join the 28-nation bloc. Membership "would cost the European Union nothing," he said, "but would mean the world to my country."

In Kiev's Independence Square, the site of last winter's huge protests against Russian domination, balloons the color of the EU's blue flag were released over the crowd as a

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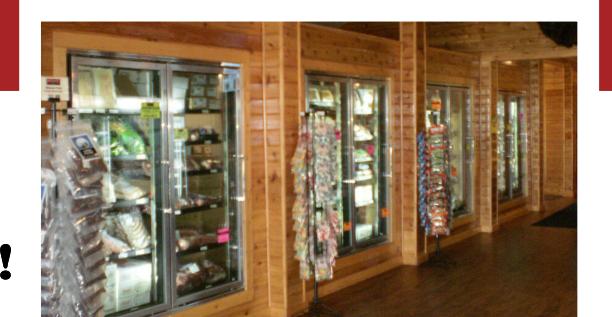


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