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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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From: Nuland, Victoria J
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Clinton seeks to broaden ties with Syrian opposition

By Anne Gearan
 Saturday, August 11, 9:12 AM
 The Washington Post

ISTANBUL — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton sought Saturday to broaden U.S. contacts with political opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad beyond a fragmented group of exiles with limited influence inside the country.

The top U.S. diplomat also pledged more military and intelligence cooperation with Turkey, a close U.S. ally now receiving a daily tide of refugees from the 17-month conflict.

“We have been closely coordinating over the course of this conflict, but now we need to get into the real details of such operational planning,” Clinton said during a day of meetings with Syrian opposition figures, refugees and top Turkish officials.

“Our intelligence services, our military have very important responsibilities and roles to play so we are going to be setting up a working group to do exactly that,” she said.

Clinton and Turkey’s Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said they are planning for the worst case scenario in Syria — all-out civil war, foreign terrorist infiltration and the possible use of Assad’s stockpile of chemical weapons.

“We have to brace for impact,” Davutoglu said.

Clinton came to Istanbul in part because it is a gathering place for Syrian opposition figures, including some who have recently arrived via a “corridor” of rebel-held territory south of the Turkish border.

The group she saw Saturday included Internet activists, student protesters and others whom her advisers hoped could provide greater clarity about the true nature of the political opposition in the country.

While reluctant to criticize the outside political figures directly, U.S. officials are increasingly concerned that the umbrella Syrian National Council and other outside groups have limited leverage and competing agendas.

Clinton described the concern of one young man who she said plans to return to Syria. The man told her he was worried about "the apparent lack of unity among the outside opposition" and hoped the "opposition would rise to the occasion," said Clinton, whose one-day stop here follows a 10-day trip to Africa.

A senior State Department official said the United States is seeking contacts with young people particularly, and with legal activists whose documentation of abuses could one day be used to hold Assad's regime accountable.

The United States wants to see the external groups coalesce and "strengthen their connections on the inside," the official said.

Reporters were excluded from Clinton's sessions with Syrian activists and refugees, but the State Department gave general descriptions of the participants.

One was described as a male member of the Syrian Center for Justice and Accountability, another a female "digital activist" affiliated with the Center of Civil Society and Democracy in Syria.

Haider Karzai
PA/PRS