IF ENDING DOD'S TRAIN AND ASSIST PROGRAM IS ABOUT RETURNING TO COVERT STATUS, WILL CONGRESS GET DETAILS?

When Mike Lee, Joe Manchin, Chris Murphy, and Tom Udall wrote the Administration calling for an end to the Syria Train and Equip Program last week, they addressed it to CIA Director John Brennan, along with Defense Secretary Ash Carter (its primary addressee, given the clear reference to details about DOD's T&E mission) and Secretary of State John Kerry.

It appears the Senators got the result they desired. As a number of outlets are reporting, Carter has decided to end DOD's T&E program, which has done little except arm al Qaeda affiliates in Syria. But it's not that we're going to end our involvement in Syria. The stories provide different descriptions of what we intend to continue doing. The NYT, which pretended not to know about the CIA covert program, described a shift of training to Turkey, while discussing armed Sunnis in eastern Syria.

> A senior Defense Department official, who was not authorized to speak publicly and who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that there would no longer be any more recruiting of so-called moderate Syrian rebels to go through training programs in Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. Instead, a much smaller training center would be set up in Turkey, where a small group of "enablers" — mostly leaders of opposition groups — would be taught

> operational maneuvers like how to call in airstrikes.
>
> [snip]
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> The official said the training was “to be suspended, with the option to restart if conditions dictate, opportunities arise.” The official also said that support to Sunni Arab fighters in eastern Syria was an example of focusing on groups already fighting the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, “rather than using training to try to manufacture new brigades.”

The LAT to its credit did acknowledge the parallel CIA program in a piece vaguely describing our “new” approach of working with a wide range of groups on the Turkish border.

> Under the new approach, the administration will continue to work with a range of groups to capitalize on the successes that Kurdish, Arab and Turkmen groups have had over the last several months driving the Islamic State forces out of much of the Turkey-Syria border region.
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> [snip]
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> The decision to end the Pentagon training program does not appear to immediately affect a separate program run by the CIA.

While Ash Carter’s public remarks associated with this discussion make it clear Russia’s actions in the same region remain a concern, the reporting I’ve seen thus far hasn’t tied the decision to end the DOD program to the need to respond to Russia in any way.

Which raises the question: is this just an attempt to shift our existing T&E efforts entirely under a covert structure again? There are many reasons why you’d want to do that, not

least because it would make it a lot easier to hide that not only aren't your "rebels" "moderate," but they're al Qaeda affiliates (as David Petraeus and others were floating we should do). Given Qatari and Saudi efforts to flood more weapons into Syria in response to Russia's involvement, you'd think the US would want to play along too.

But especially since Tom Udall is the guy who — a year ago — raised the crazy notion that Congress should know some details about the (at that point) two year long effort by CIA to support "moderate" forces …

> Everybody's well aware there's been a covert operation, operating in the region to train forces, moderate forces, to go into Syria and to be out there, that we've been doing this the last two years. And probably the most true measure of the effectiveness of moderate forces would be, what has been the effectiveness over that last two years of this covert operation, of training 2,000 to 3,000 of these moderates? Are they a growing force? Have they gained ground? How effective are they? What can you tell us about this effort that's gone on, and has it been a part of the success that you see that you're presenting this new plan on?

… I wonder whether Congress has ever gotten fully briefed on that program — and whether they would going forward.

After all, none of the men who signed this letter would be privy to how a covert effort to train rebels was going under normal guidelines unless Udall or Murphy were getting details on the Appropriations Committee.

So while it may be — and I think it likely this is — just an effort to make it easier to partner with al Qaeda to defeat Bashar al-Assad and Putin (teaming with al Qaeda to fight Russia!

just like old times!) – I also wonder whether this is an effort to avoid telling most of Congress just how problematic (even if effective from an anti-Assad perspective) both the DOD and CIA effort are.