

Iran forming a militia in Syria, Leon Panetta warns

Iran is working to form a pro-regime militia in Syria, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said Tuesday, warning that Tehran's growing presence could only aggravate the situation on the ground.



A Free Syrian Army fighter fires an AK-47 rifle from a house in Aleppo. Photo: REUTERS/Goran Tomasevic

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He also talked down suggestions the US was considering enforcing a no-fly zone in Syria, saying it was not a "front-burner" issue.

"It is obvious that Iran has been playing a larger role in Syria in many ways," Mr Panetta said at a press conference with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey.

There is now evidence that Iran's Revolutionary Guards are "trying to develop, trying to train a militia within Syria to be able to fight on behalf of the regime," Mr Panetta said.

"So we are seeing a growing presence by Iran and that is of deep concern to us. We do not think that Iran ought to play that role at this moment in time, that's dangerous... it's adding to the killing that's going on in Syria."

Mr Panetta also called on Tehran to stay out of the conflict, saying: "Our hope is that Iran thinks better about how much they do want to get involved."

"The Syrian people ought to determine their future, not Iran," he added.

Most of the members of the apparent militia are Shiite, and some are Alawites like Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Gen Dempsey said, comparing the force to the Mahdi Army of anti-US Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in Iraq.

Syria has a Sunni majority but is led by an Alawite minority, a branch of Shiite Islam.

"The Syrian army has been fighting now for about 18 months or so. And any army would be taxed with that kind of pace," Gen Dempsey said, noting he expected that the Syrian military was experiencing resupply and morale problems.

"That's why Iran is stepping in to form this militia, to take some of the pressure off of the Syrian military."

"With regards to the no-fly zone, that is not a front-burner issue for us," Mr Panetta added.

Mr Panetta also said he was "very concerned" about the rise in "insider attacks" on US and Nato troops if Afghanistan.

In the latest "green-on-blue" attack, an Afghan policeman shot and wounded two troops from the Nato-led mission on Monday in the eastern province of Nangarhar, where Americans troops make up the bulk of the force.

The attacks - which left seven dead last week - have raised questions about the viability of US and Nato efforts to train Afghan security forces so they will be ready to take charge once foreign forces leave in 2014.

"Our enemies have attempted to undermine the trust between the coalition and the Afghan forces and in particular they have tried to take credit for a number of so-called green-on-blue or insider attacks that are taking place this fighting season," Mr Panetta told the press conference.