

US Prepares Military Assault on Syria

By [Barry Grey](#)

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US officials have outlined a series of options that are being considered for a direct assault by American and allied military forces against Syria, using Wednesday's alleged chemical weapons attack as the pretext. The stepped-up military preparations make clear that the events on Wednesday are part of a provocation to justify yet another neo-colonial war in the Middle East.

The growing threat of direct US intervention in the war for regime-change against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was also underscored Friday by President Obama, who used an interview on CNN to indicate he was seeking to marshal international support and some form of legal cover for a US-led attack.

The *New York Times* reported in a front-page article Friday that senior officials from the Pentagon, the State Department and the intelligence agencies met with White House officials for three-and-a-half hours Thursday to outline possible military measures. The article cited unnamed officials, who said no decision was reached amid internal differences over whether to launch direct US military action in the coming days.

According to the *Times*, the military options discussed ranged from cruise missile strikes launched from US ships currently deployed in the Mediterranean Sea to a full-scale air war targeting civilian as well as military sites. The newspaper wrote: "The targets could include missile or artillery batteries that launch chemical munitions or nerve gas, as well as communications and support facilities. Symbols of the Assad government's power—headquarters and government offices—also could be among the proposed targets, officials said."

The *Wall Street Journal*, also in a front-page article, reported that the Pentagon on Thursday was "updating target lists for possible air strikes on a range of Syrian government and military installations... as part of contingency planning should President Barack Obama decide to act."

The newspaper continued: "US military options include potential strikes on 'regime targets,' including Syrian government functions crucial to its war effort. In addition, options include strikes on Syrian military 'delivery capabilities and systems' that are either used directly in attacks with poison gas or to facilitate them, from command-and-control facilities to front-line artillery batteries, officials said."

Other options being drawn up reportedly include "standoff" attacks that would not require sending US planes into Syrian air space, such as the missile attacks launched this year by Israel against Syrian targets.

“These options are being fine-tuned by military officials,” the *Journal* reported, “so that Mr. Obama can act in short order if a determination is made that Mr. Assad’s forces carried out chemical attacks and if Mr. Obama chooses to respond with force.”

The preparations for direct US military action come amidst a propaganda barrage by the government and the media using still unsubstantiated reports of a chemical weapons attack on towns to the east of Damascus to accuse the Syrian regime of war crimes and justify an escalation of the imperialist-led sectarian war that has already devastated the country.

Estimates of fatalities in the attack, all coming from opposition militias and officials or groups that support them, vary wildly from 130 to 2,000, and no evidence has been produced to implicate the Syrian government, which denies having played any role.

Nor has any US, French or British official or media commentator explained what the Syrian regime would have to gain from carrying out such an attack at this time. The government has in recent weeks been dealing major military blows to the US-backed and US-armed opposition militias, including the Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front, and this week launched an offensive to retake the Damascus suburbs, which are currently under the control of Al Nusra.

Moreover, the alleged chemical attack occurred just days after the arrival of a United Nations inspection team, invited by Syria to investigate previous alleged chemical attacks. Why would the regime carry out a chemical attack only a few miles from the capital, where the UN inspections team is based?

The so-called “rebels,” on the other hand, would have ample reason to carry out a provocation, under conditions where they face being driven from their sanctuaries near the capital and are locked in a bitter fight with local Kurdish militias. The Al Qaeda cutthroats of Al Nusra are eminently capable of killing scores or even hundreds of civilians to promote their reactionary agenda.

Opposition militias have boasted of possessing chemical weapons and being prepared to use them, and last May Turkish media reported the arrest of Syrian “rebels” holding sarin nerve gas. Also in May, UN official Carla Del Ponte reported that there was “strong, concrete” evidence that sarin had been used by Western-backed forces.

Obama simply ignored these facts and in June announced, without providing any proof, that the US had concluded the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons. This was used as the pretext to announcing the direct US arming of the so-called “rebels.”

For the US, a major escalation in Syria could, it is argued, salvage its flagging war to topple the Assad regime, the only Arab ally of Iran, and install a puppet regime that would sign onto a US-led war against Tehran. Washington considers the Iranian regime an obstacle to its drive to establish unchallenged US hegemony in the oil-rich Middle East.

Such are the real calculations behind the hypocritical blather about human rights and protecting civilians. Another advantage of an escalation in Syria is the potential to distract public attention from the ongoing and undeniable mass killing being carried out by the US-backed military junta in Egypt. No US official or media outlet is demanding US military action to protect civilian protesters being murdered in Egypt, which only demonstrates the double-standard employed by US imperialism when it comes to “human rights.” Such things apply only to regimes the US wants to remove, not to those it backs.

The *New York Times* on Friday joined the media campaign for stepped-up war in Syria, writing in an editorial that “the United States and other major powers will almost certainly have to respond much more aggressively than they have so far” if the deaths outside of Damascus “prove to be the work” of the Assad regime.

In his CNN interview, conducted Thursday and broadcast Friday morning, Obama called the alleged chemical attack a “big event of grave concern.” He stressed Washington’s demand, which has been taken up by US allies Britain and France and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, that the Syrian government allow the UN inspection team immediate access to the area where the attack reportedly occurred.

This demand, which ignores the fact that the East Ghouta area is still controlled by Al Nusra, appears to be designed to create a pretext for military escalation. “We don’t expect cooperation,” Obama said of the Assad regime, “given their past history.”

It remains to be seen whether Damascus will agree to this demand, which has been seconded by its main international ally, Russia. Assad has good reason to fear a trap and frame-up, given the role of the UN in sanctioning and participating in every imperialist war of aggression from Afghanistan to Iraq to Libya.

While arguing for a degree of caution, Obama proceeded to outline a case for direct US military intervention, stating, “Then that starts getting to some core national interests that the United States has, both in terms of making sure that weapons of mass destruction are not proliferating as well as needing to protect our allies, our bases in the region.”

He further indicated a desire to rally the support of Washington’s allies in Europe and the Middle East behind a US-led attack on Syria as well as concern over providing a legal fig leaf for such a move. “If the US goes in and attacks another country without a UN mandate and without clear evidence that can be presented,” he said, “then there are questions in terms of whether international law supports it, do we have the coalition to make it work...”

Meanwhile, the drumbeat for war was stepped up Friday by both American and British officials. Obama administration officials said that US intelligence had detected activity at Syrian chemical weapons sites before Wednesday’s alleged attack. The unnamed officials said US intelligence agencies were “now leaning to the conclusion that Syria did use chemical weapons.”

British Foreign Secretary William Hague in a statement on television said the chances the Syrian opposition was responsible for the attack were “vanishingly small.” He continued, “We do believe this is a chemical attack by the Assad regime on a large scale,” and added that “we don’t rule out any option for the future.”

Russian officials continued to call the alleged chemical attack a provocation carried out by the opposition. The Russian ambassador to Lebanon, Alexander Zasyarkin, was quoted by the official Syrian news agency, SANA, as saying, “I’d like to remind that the issue of chemical weapons should not be exploited for serving other goals as was the case in Iraq.”

The Russia Foreign Ministry declared, “More new evidence is starting to emerge that this criminal act was clearly provocative... On the internet, in particular, reports are circulating that news of the incident carrying accusations against government troops was published several hours before the so-called attack. So, this was a pre-planned action.”

Even in advance of any open US military attack, US involvement in the fighting in Syria is increasing. *Euronews.com* on Thursday cited separate French and Israeli reports that Jordanian, Israeli and American commandos are heading up hundreds of Syrian rebels they have trained in a drive on Damascus. "The reports claim a force of some 300 men crossed into Syria from Jordan on August 17, with a second group crossing on the 19th" the web site reported.

It continued: "Analysts say this is stage one of the US strategy, training and leading in the field handpicked members of the Free Syrian Army to carve out a southern buffer zone along the Jordanian and Israeli border within which rebel forces can be trained and based."

The US-instigated and backed sectarian civil war in Syria continues to stoke up sectarian conflicts across the entire region. On Friday, two car bombs exploded in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, killing 42 people and wounding hundreds more. The bombs targeted the Sunni population and follow a series of bomb attacks against the Lebanese Shiite-dominated Hezbollah movement.

In addition, Israeli warplanes on Friday struck a so-called "terror site" between Beirut and Sidon. It was the first Israeli air raid on the area since the 2006 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon.

The mounting provocations and war preparations against the Assad regime threaten to unleash a far wider and more bloody war across the Middle East—one that could bring the US into direct conflict with Russia and China.

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