



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 29, 2013

GOP Senators Note Claims of Syria's Use of Chemical Weapon, Urge Action

Republican senators have been calling on President Obama to take action against the regime of Bashar al-Assad over its reported use of a chemical weapon against rebel forces in Syria's civil war. A White House official has acknowledged that intelligence agencies have reported "with varying degrees of confidence" the small-scale use by Assad of the chemical agent Sarin. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) was quick to remind the Obama administration of the president's previous warnings to the Assad regime that the use of chemical weapons would be crossing a "red line" that would trigger a U.S. response.



"The president clearly stated that it was a red line and that it couldn't be crossed without the United States taking vigorous action," McCain [told](#) Fox News April 25. The Arizona Republican called for the United States to help establish a no-fly zone and "safe zone" in Syria, as well as provide weapons to the "right people."

In a letter to McCain and Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.), Miguel Rodriguez, assistant to the president and director of the Office of Legislative Affairs, stressed the need to "build on these intelligence assessments as we seek to establish credible and corroborated facts. While the use of Sarin "probably originated with the Assad regime," Rodriguez wrote, "the chain of custody is not clear so we cannot confirm how the exposure occurred or under what conditions." In an apparent reference to the Iraq War, Rodriguez cautioned:

Given the stakes involved, and what we have learned from our own recent experience, intelligence assessments alone are not sufficient — only credible and corroborated facts that provide us with some degree of certainty will guide our decision-making and strengthen our leadership of the international community.

McCain dismissed that "caveat" as an excuse. "I worry that the president and the administration will use these caveats as an excuse not to act right away or act at all," he said in his Fox News interview.

The White House statement was in response to a letter to the president on Wednesday from McCain, Levin, and six other senators, posing the question: "Has the Assad regime, or Syrian elements associated with, or supported by, the Assad regime, used chemical weapons in Syria since the current conflict began in March 2011?" The letter also referred to findings of "the French, British and Israeli governments" and "the intelligence underlying their claims."

The British government said Thursday it had "limited but persuasive" evidence of the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government. Two days earlier, General Itay Brun, head of the Israeli military's Intelligence Analysis Division, charged that Assad's regime used "lethal chemical weapons" against



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both civilians and opposition forces. Hours later, Secretary of State John Kerry said that in a telephone discussion with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli leader had told him that he was unable to confirm Brun's statement.

Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) called on the United Nations to intervene. "I urge the United Nations Security Council — including Russia — to finally take strong and meaningful action to end this crisis in Syria," she declared, while Senate Republicans continued to focus on Obama and his "red line."

"The political reality is that he [Obama] put himself in that position that if the 'red line' is crossed — he made it very clear — it would change his behavior," McCain [told](#) the *New York Times*, adding that the intelligence assessments add up to "a compelling argument for the president to take the measures that a lot of us have been arguing for all along."

"I think the red line's been crossed and the question is, now what?" Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) said on Fox News. Tennessee Republican Bob Corker said the intelligence is "deeply troubling and, if correct, means that President Obama's red line has certainly been crossed."

But the president's red line is highly mobile. "A red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized," Obama said in August of last year. In December, the *New York Times* [noted](#), "the red line appears to have shifted," with the warning against weapons "moving around" yielding to talk of serious, but unspecified consequences if chemical weapons are used. But even the use of such weapons might not be the "game-changer," as the president called it in describing his "calculus" for intervening in another Middle East civil war. Writing at Antiwar.com, John Glaser [noted](#) that chemical weapons "hold a special place in the international psyche, but they are no more a threat to civilian life really than what has already been going on in Syria."

"Obama's words could reflect a humanitarian concern and a moral responsibility to prevent the further loss of life in Syria," [wrote](#) Bilal Y. Saab, executive director of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis." Yet the president has not reacted forcefully to the tens of thousands who have already perished without a single poison being used. Chemical weapons are considered weapons of mass destruction, and if used effectively, could kill in the thousands. But so can fighter jets, helicopters, tanks and artillery — and they already have."

Beneath all the talk of red lines and regime change in Washington, Glaser notes, there is a somber realization of the high cost to the United States of military intervention in Syria:

A no-fly zone is likely to put more civilians at risk, and bombing the chemical stockpiles would be about as bad as Assad unleashing them on his own targets. If the US were to move in with ground forces to secure the weapons, it would take at least 75,000 troops, and any limited mission to secure the weapons would lend itself to mission creep and eventually turn into regime change with no viable interim government, which would then turn into a long and bloody occupation costing hundreds of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars as it did in Iraq.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, who initially supported, then opposed, the Iraq War as a Republican senator from Iowa, [warned](#) the Senate Armed Services Committee earlier this month that "military intervention at this point could hinder humanitarian relief operations. It could embroil the United States in a significant, lengthy, and uncertain military commitment." It could, he said, have "the unintended consequence of bringing the United States into a broader regional conflict or proxy war." He stressed that "the best outcome for Syria — and the region — is a negotiated, political transition to a post-Assad



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Syria.”

In an interview with *The New Republic* in January, President Obama [described](#) the questions he must “wrestle with” regarding Syria:

Would a military intervention have an impact? How would it affect our ability to support troops who are still in Afghanistan? What would be the aftermath of our involvement on the ground? Could it trigger even worse violence or the use of chemical weapons? What offers the best prospect of a stable post-Assad regime? And how do I weigh tens of thousands who’ve been killed in Syria versus the tens of thousands who are currently being killed in the Congo?

Despite all the cautionary — even equivocating — language there is a clear commitment by the United States to determine, by one means or another, the outcome of the civil war in Syria. The same commitment to “regime change” that resulted in a near decade-long war in Iraq is now the overriding concern in Syria. When Hagel, Obama, and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey speak of a military option as a “last resort,” they are speaking not of defending the people or territory of the United States, but of doing whatever may be necessary to arrive at a “stable post-Assad regime” in Syria.

Questions Obama must “wrestle with” might include whether U.S. economic, diplomatic, and military efforts to effect regime change in Iraq, Egypt, and Libya have resulted in more stable regimes in the Middle East, and whether weighing the lives of people in one part of the world versus another or determining the political fate of other nations fit our Constitution’s job description for the president of the United States.



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