



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on June 17, 2013

U.S. Troops, Missiles at Syrian Border

A task force of 300 U.S. Marines and a Patriot anti-aircraft missile system have been deployed along Syria's border with Jordan as the United States prepares to ship weapons to rebel forces in the two-year-old civil war in Syria that has so far taken an estimated 93,000 lives. The missile system and as many as eight F-16 fighter jets will likely remain in Jordan following [the multi-national military exercise](#) now underway in Jordan, military officials told NBC News. Meanwhile, speculation continues over the possible establishment of a no-fly zone over Syria to thwart aerial attacks on the rebels by the Bashar al-Assad regime. U.S. officials appeared to be downplaying that possibility, while at the same time not ruling it out.



"We have been clear that we are not excluding options, but at this stage no decision has been taken," Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and President Obama's incoming national security adviser, [told](#) the Reuters news service.

The United States and Great Britain imposed a no-fly zone against the air force of Saddam Hussein during the 12 years between the two Iraq wars, and a U.S. and NATO air defense of rebel factions in Libya helped topple the regime of Moammar Gadhafi in 2011. But Deputy National Security Adviser Benjamin Rhodes said Thursday that a similar effort in Syria would face greater obstacles, including "open-ended costs for the United States and the international community." "It's far more complex to undertake the type of effort, for instance, in Syria than it was in Libya," Rhodes said. U.S. planes over Syria would be up against sophisticated anti-aircraft systems from Russia, a major supplier of weapons to the Damascus government.

Russia condemned the decision to provide weapons to the rebels, along with the [military exercise](#), called Eager Lion, taking place within 75 miles of the Syrian border in northern Jordan. About 5,000 U.S. troops are among the 8,000 military personnel from Western and Arab nations taking part in the three-week exercise that began June 9. It will end with "a massive display of sea-land capabilities, June 18-20," the U.S. Army News Service announced.

"This is happening very close to Syria, where for more than two years the flames of a devastating conflict are burning that Russia and its American partners are trying to stop by proposing to hold an international peace conference as soon as possible," Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Aleksandr Lukashevich protested.

Obama administration officials said the decision to ship light arms and ammunitions to the Syrian rebels is the result of a White House determination that Syrian government forces have been using chemical weapons, including the poison gas sarin, that have killed an estimated 100 to 150 people. Obama said last August that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would cross a "red line" and result in



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significant consequences. Both sides have accused the other of using the weapons and in April, White House legal adviser Michael Rodriguez said the U.S. intelligence community had assessed “with varying degrees of confidence” that the Syrian government had recently used sarin against the insurgents. In a [letter](#) to Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), senior Republican on the Armed Services Committee, and Carl Levin (D-Mich.), the committee chairman, Rodriguez said the “chain of custody” of the weapons was not clear, “so we cannot confirm how the exposure occurred or under what conditions.” In what appears to have been a reference to erroneous intelligence assessments about chemical and nuclear weapons that led to a nine-year war with Iraq, Rodriguez said:

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

In early May, Carla Del Ponte, a member of a United Nations commission of inquiry into the chemical weapons allegations, said in an interview on Swiss-Italian television that while there was no “incontrovertible truth” that sarin had been used in the fighting, evidence from interviewing victims and doctors at field hospitals pointed toward its use.

“This was use on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities,” [said](#) Del Ponte, a former attorney general of Switzerland who served as prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunal judging war crimes in the former Yugoslavia.

In his [statement](#) announcing President Obama’s decision Thursday, Rhodes did not directly address the “chain of custody” question raised in the Rodriguez letter, but said: “We have no reliable, corroborated reporting to indicate that the opposition in Syria has acquired or used chemical weapons.” The refusal by the Damascus government to allow a UN fact-finding mission “immediate and unfettered access” to chemical weapons sites “has prevented a comprehensive investigation as called for by the international community,” Rhodes said. Laboratory analysis of blood samples taken from victims and intelligence reports of plans by the Syrian government to use chemical weapons led to the “high confidence” assessment that it is the government and not the rebel units that has been using the sarin, Rhodes said.

Obama administration policy had been to supply “non-lethal aid,” starting with food and medicine, to the rebels. By February of this year, the U.S. had spent \$117 million in that effort, but in April, Secretary of State John Kerry [announced](#) another \$123 million in aid, saying it might include armored vehicles, night-vision goggles, and advanced communications equipment. Meanwhile, the CIA, starting in early 2012, was [assisting the rebels](#) in arranging purchases of weapons from Turkey, Croatia, and Arab governments, delivered to rebel strongholds in Syria on military cargo flights from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.

The question of arming the rebels has become a contentious issue, with Obama’s domestic opponents arguing the move will draw us deeper into Middle East military conflicts, while critics both here and abroad point to growing reports of al-Qaeda affiliates becoming a dominant force among the rebel groups fighting the Assad regime. The al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda ally that fought American and coalition forces in Iraq, is playing a leading role in the fighting and has become the “group of choice for foreign groups pouring into Syria,” the *New York Times* reported. While the units are reportedly “vetted” by the CIA to assure the weapons do not end up in “the wrong hands,” there remain grounds for concern that the arms supplied to rebels in Syria today may be turned on Americans tomorrow.



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“There are fake Free Syrian Army brigades claiming to be revolutionaries,” rebel commander Hassan Aboud [told](#) the *Times*, “and when they get the weapons they sell them in trade.”

Photo of U.S. Marine training in Middle East



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