

Obama Escalation on Syria Would Be an ‘Act of War’

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Aug. 24—A senior U.S. intelligence source has provided an assessment of the ongoing controversy over allegations of use of chemical weapons in Syria. The source indicated that there are two key questions that must be settled quickly. The first is whether chemical weapons were in fact used, and he acknowledged that the evidence was questionable. He said there was a 50:50 chance that something actually happened near Damascus.

The second question is: If there were some form of CW attack, who did it? The source noted that if it turns out, after the UN investigation, that there was an attack, and it was carried out by Syrian rebels, that will be a decisive factor in favor of Gen. Martin Dempsey and others who have adamantly opposed any U.S. involvement in the Syrian mess. Dempsey’s recent letter to Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), along with other actions that the Joint Chiefs Chairman has taken, in strong opposition to any U.S. military role, have had a significant impact, and have, for now, pushed back against those promoting “humanitarian intervention” by the United States.

According to the source, the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) lobby is pushing hard for some limited U.S. military action if there is any “proof” that the Syrian Army did use chemical weapons. While the R2Pers accept the fact that Dempsey and the other “realists” in the Pentagon and elsewhere have made it all but impossible to push for a no-fly zone and a sustained bombing

campaign, the advocates of a limited U.S. military action argue that President Obama’s credibility is on the line, since he did publicly declare the use of CW to be a “red line.” Dempsey has strongly responded: A single U.S. cruise missile fired into Syria would be an “act of war,” and there would be no pulling back from broader conflict.

The source noted that there are other complicating factors at play. The Netanyahu government in Israel is now advocating full U.S. military intervention to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. Netanyahu believes that EU and American officials will carry out their threats that “Assad must go,” and he knows that the current situation is impossible from the standpoint of Israeli security. Not only does Netanyahu worry about Hezbollah in Lebanon, but there are now al-Qaeda elements operating inside both Syria and Lebanon, and the recent rocket fire into northern Israel was carried out by al-Qaeda-linked jihadists.

The source further explained that both National Security Advisor Susan Rice and UN Ambassador Samantha Power have refrained, so far, from pushing for U.S. military action against Syria based on the chemical weapons controversy. Both Rice and Power are part of the Obama inner circle, which also includes Valerie Jarrett, Michelle Obama, and David Axelrod, all of whom are fixated on Nerobama’s “legacy.” Dempsey has convincingly warned that if the U.S. is drawn into Syria, there will still be U.S. involvement when



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The actions of Gen. Martin Dempsey and others, opposing any U.S. involvement in Syria, have, for now, forestalled the drive for so-called “humanitarian intervention.”

Obama’s term expires. Obama will have the legacy of another extended and costly war in another Arab country. Dempsey and his allies point to Iraq and Libya as cases where massive amounts of American blood and treasure were expended to overthrow regimes, only to produce a period of continuing chaos and bloodshed.

For now, there is a consensus, the source concluded, that the UN inspectors must be given time to conduct an investigation before any decisions are made or action taken. Against this background, Obama was extremely cautious about military intervention in Syria in a CNN interview with Chris Cuomo which aired Aug. 23. In the interview, Obama acknowledged that any direct U.S. military engagement could lead to unforeseen consequences and possibly, long-term engagement.

Conflicting Reports

There are wildly conflicting reports about what happened in the Damascus suburb of al-Ghouta on Aug. 21. Rebel propaganda channels claimed that Syrian Army forces used chemical weapons on local citizens and rebels, killing more than 1,000 people. However, Russian and Syrian officials quickly produced evidence contradicting the allegations, including at least one YouTube video of the alleged attack that was posted *prior* to the day the al-Ghouta CW attack purportedly took place. Other reports indicate that Russian experts

on the ground have provided UN weapons inspectors with shells of CW that were fired from rebel strongholds nearby.

The most dramatic counter-account, however, came from Dr. Yossef Bodansky, an Israeli-American terrorism specialist with long-standing ties to the GOP. He wrote on Aug. 22 that the CW attack, if it occurred, was conducted by rebels, targeting recent defectors who had gone back to supporting the Assad government, on the grounds that rebel units were dominated by al-Qaeda and other foreign jihadist fighters.

Bodansky and others pointed out that UN chemical weapons inspectors arrived on the ground with the permission of the Syrian government on Aug. 19, and that it would be an act of sheer stupidity and political suicide to allow any kind of CW attack to take place at that time.

Despite all of the conflicting accounts, President Obama convened a national security meeting on Aug. 24 to hear a detailed options briefing from JCS chief Dempsey. According to comments made afterwards by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, as he was en route to Asia, Dempsey presented all of the military options, but continued to express grave doubts about their viability, and to warn that the U.S. could be dragged into a prolonged conflict with no real national security stake. Hagel told reporters that he fully concurred with Dempsey’s assessment.

Nevertheless, according to CBS News, the U.S. Navy was positioning four guided missile destroyers off the Syrian coast in the eastern Mediterranean, pending a decision by President Obama on what, if any, action would be taken. For the moment, according to a joint statement on Aug. 23 by Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, all actions are on hold, pending the investigation by the team of UN chemical weapons experts now in Syria. Other top UN weapons inspectors flew into Syria today to bolster the effort and make sure that both the Syrian government and the rebels were prepared to allow the team safe passage to al-Ghouta.

This latest escalation of the Syria crisis has put the entire region and the world on a hair-trigger for a war that can rapidly spin out of control, leading to a much larger conflict, drawing in the United States, Russia, and other world powers.