

## Syria: US 'to arm rebels' - latest

Barack Obama's White House has announced the US plans to supply military support to Syria's rebels after confirming evidence of chemical weapons, as Assad forces launch assault on Aleppo - follow latest updates.



A Syrian army soldier aims his weapon during a battle against opposition fighters in the city of Qusayr, Photo: AFP/GETTY

By Barney Henderson, Chris Irvine

8:30PM BST 14 Jun 2013

- **US 'considers no-fly zone plan'**
- US confirms Assad used chemical weapons, crossing 'red line'
- Analysis: Obama can't see where he's going
- Obama's options?
- Heaviest fighting in months reported in Aleppo

### ***Latest***

**20.30** With events slowing somewhat this evening, we are going to leave it there. I'll leave you with our main news story tonight on what has been a frantic day of diplomacy as well as rapidly unfolding events on the ground - particularly Aleppo. The final word from Peter Foster, our US editor:





*The sudden intensification of conflict on the ground, which saw the rebels lose the strategic city of Qusayr a week ago, sets up a renewed diplomatic confrontation between Russia and the West at next week's G8 summit in Northern Ireland.*

*Added urgency was provided by the disclosure from David Cameron that rebel groups affiliated to al-Qaeda "have attempted to acquire" chemical weapons for use in Syria, citing briefings from British intelligence.*

*The US announcement that it would be sending military aid to the rebels, including communications equipment, logistical support and – according to some officials – light weapons and ammunition, has sharply upped the ante on Syria.*

**20.05** Tomorrow's Telegraph View says that the proposed talks in Geneva remain the only realistic opportunity for producing a solution to the Syrian civil war.



*We should be clear. Even if the American offer of military support to the opposition is limited in scope, the imposition of a no-fly zone or the shipment of arms to rebel forces could prove a slippery slope towards the one eventuality that public opinion in the West shows no sign of tolerating – boots on the ground. Moreover, it remains uncertain how it will help the Syrian people if, by creating an equality of arms, the Russians are merely encouraged to send more weapons to Assad, thereby prolonging the war. A level playing field thereby becomes an even bloodier killing field.*

*We are entitled to know a great deal more about the consequences of intervention – especially in view of the Islamist inclinations of several of the dozen or so rebel groups – before supporting an intensification of British involvement. Above all, what is needed most is not precipitate action that might be regretted, but a concerted international effort to bring about a political settlement. The proposed talks in Geneva, under joint American and Russian auspices, remain the only realistic opportunity for producing a solution.*

*Next week's G8 summit in Northern Ireland will bring together the leaders of the major international powers, including Mr Obama and Vladimir Putin. These talks must explore the possibility of a peace process before either side embarks on an arms race that risks turning the Syrian disaster into an international crisis.*

**19.42** Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, has told John Kerry that more US military support for

forces opposed to Assad could stoke violence in the Middle East.

During a telephone conversation, Mr Lavrov "stressed that such a step (military support) risks escalating (violence) in the region, while accusations against Damascus of the use of chemical weapons by the United States are not backed up by verified facts," according to a US official.

**19.40** Damien McElroy has more on the fighting in Aleppo.



*The fight for Aleppo, a city of three million that was once a bastion of support for Bashar al-Assad, is critical for both the regime and the opposition. Its fall would give the opposition a major strategic victory with a stronghold in the north near the Turkish border. A rebel defeat would buy Mr Assad more time, at the very least. It could also turn the tide of the civil war against the rebels.*

**19.35** The most likely location for a safe haven for Syrian rebels is neighbouring Jordan, which has a 300 mile border along Syria's southern flank.

**Colin Freeman** says if the king of Jordan were to host a "game changing" operation such as a no fly zone, he could invite serious retaliation.



*For King Abdullah, the perils of direct involvement in the Syrian conflict must be weighed against the equal risks of simply letting the conflict drag on. Already, his country is a temporary home for up to half a million Syrian refugees, and a semi-permanent home for between 50,000 and half a million Iraqi refugees (precise figures are disputed). On top of that are nearly two million Palestinian refugees who have fled there since the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. The recent arrivals have put a heavy added strain on Jordan, which is already struggling with high unemployment and huge water shortages, not to mention demands for an Arab Spring of its own to end King Abdullah's monarchy.*

**19.21** Channel 4 news has broadcast footage following Ibrahim al-Mazwagi, the first British fighter to die in Syria. He was killed in February, aged 21.

He says during the interview:



*I remember I called my mother once. I told her I am going on an operation tomorrow.*

*She said: 'Make sure you're not at the back. Go to the front'... I don't think my mother loves me that much. No, I'm joking. She must love me for her to say that. Hamdullah (thank God), she understands.*

**19.05** Alex Spillius, our Diplomatic Correspondent, asks: What are Barack Obama's options? Well for a start they're all problematic. The only thing ruled out are boots on the ground.



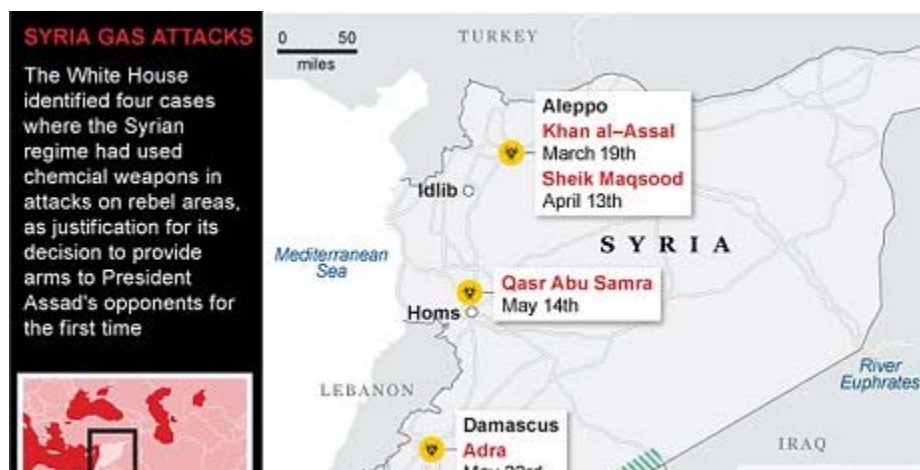
*The most radical option at this stage is the imposition of a no-fly zone. Some US officials and European diplomats are mooting this as a possibility, but Ben Rhodes, Mr Obama's deputy national security adviser, was adamant there has been no decision.*

*"There's not even a clear guarantee that it would dramatically improve the situation on the ground," he told reporters in Washington.*

*Some in Mr Obama's inner circle have long wanted to go further – bombing airfields and Syrian army weapons systems. With the conflict likely to escalate, as conflicts generally do when new arms are injected, the interventionists may yet get their wish.*

**18.46** A Turkish news agency reports that 73 Syrian military officers, including seven generals and 20 colonels, have crossed the border with their families "seeking refuge". It did not say when the crossing happened.

**18.35** The White House has identified four cases where the Assad regime had used chemical weapons as justification for its change in strategy. Our graphics department has provided us with a map of those areas.





**18.30** In Cairo, the Egyptian capital, meanwhile, thousands of Islamists rallied in support of calls by Sunni Muslim clerics for a holy war against Assad's regime.

The demonstration took place outside a Cairo mosque where Saudi preacher Mohammed al-Oreifi called in a sermon for a "jihad in the cause of Allah in Syria."

Oreifi urged worshippers to "unite against their enemy."

Saudi Arabia, like Egypt, is an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country, and Sunnis are the backbone of the revolt against Assad, whose Alawite sect is an offshoot of Shia Islam.

**18.19** The White House has said it wants the Syrian opposition to be as strong as possible, but declined to go into detail about the US assistance.

It reiterated that the US does not foresee a scenario where Bashar al-Assad can remain in power.

**18.02** Richard Spencer asks if Barack Obama could have acted any differently. He says that if you want to lead from behind, as Mr Obama wants to do, you sometimes cannot see where you are going.



*As the behaviour of the jihadist and Sunni sectarian elements of the opposition has worsened, so Russia and Iran can portray Washington as taking sides in an internecine war within the Muslim world. With Mr Assad's Shia allies in the minority, they can even portray themselves as the underdogs.*

*If that is the case, there is still a chance, as Mr Obama hopes, of some sort of peace deal, with the mess and blame being spread around.*

*So slow has Mr Obama been to act, however, that there is a worse danger: that Russia and Iran will be quite happy to see America sink to its neck, humiliated by ever closer association with the jihadists who are supposed to be its sworn enemy. This is the nature of asymmetrical warfare.*

*Could Mr Obama have acted any differently? Perhaps the world was still not ready after the George W. Bush years for America to take the lead in the Middle East. The terrible option can still be better than all the others.*

**17.52** The White House says that Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin will discuss Syria on the sidelines of the G8 meeting next week. Mr Obama and Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, will also discuss Syria next week.

"They clearly have a very broad agenda to discuss," said Ben Rhodes, Mr Obama's deputy national security adviser, regarding Vladimir Putin.

**17.38** The secretary general of the United Nations, **Ban Ki-moon**, has said that arming either side in the Syria conflict "would not be helpful".

Mr Ban said he has been "consistently clear that providing arms to either side would not address this current situation. There is no such military solution".

**17.07** Hizbollah's leader says the Lebanese militant group will keep fighting in Syria "wherever needed".

Sheik Hassan Nasrallah says he has made a "calculated" decision to defend Syria and is ready to bear all consequences.



A Free Syrian Army fighter wearing a gas mask, carries his weapons as he walks past a damaged tank, after seizing a government military camp used by forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, near Idlib

**16.33** An aide to **Vladimir Putin** has confirmed that the Russian president will hold a bilateral meeting

with Barack Obama at the G8 summit in Northern Ireland on Monday.

Mr Putin and Mr Obama will meet on the sidelines of the G8 summit at the Lough Erne resort on Monday and will also kickstart a Syria session at the summit at the request of host Britain.

Yury Ushakov, Mr Putin's foreign policy aide said:

“ *The British chair proposed that Barack Obama and Vladimir Vladimirovich (Putin) present the main reports, be the first to start the discussion because the main topic in the air is the holding of the second Geneva conference.*

**16.11** Britain, the US and France are reportedly holding **emergency talks** over how and when to arm Syria's rebels.

**16.02** Prime Minister **David Cameron** states that tests carried out in the UK confirm that President Assad's forces have used chemical weapons, but also warns that rebels linked to al-Qaeda are trying to obtain them:

**15.18** Further thoughts from **Richard Spencer** on the US change in policy:



*The decision by the United States to involve itself more deeply in the rebel cause brings into focus an unexpected twist in British foreign policy.*

*Until this month, conventional wisdom had it that Britain and France were leading the charge on Syria, having difficulty in persuading a reluctant President Obama to declare his chemical weapons red line had been crossed and send in arms. They themselves, with William Hague at the forefront, forced the EU to drop its arms embargo to enable them to do the same.*

*Now the positions may be embarrassingly reversed. For since then, a large part of the parliamentary Conservative Party has expressed doubts, adding to the reluctance of the Labour Party to authorise arms. The Cabinet is said to be split, with Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg representing doubters who also include Tory ministers.*

*The government has now promised a vote - one which if the 'nays' decide to contest, it could easily lose.*

**15.06** **Germany** said it had noted "with respect" the United States' promise of military aid to the Syrian

opposition but restated it would not deliver weapons to the conflict-ridden country itself. A foreign ministry spokesman said:



A still from a video showing the men prior to their execution by Al-Nusra rebels in Syria

**14.39 Jon Swaine**, New York correspondent, reports on John McCain's latest Syria comments:



*Senator John McCain said on Friday that the increased US support to the Syrian opposition was woefully inadequate, accusing President Barack Obama of "insane" and "disgraceful" inaction amid the massacre of 93,000 people and the destabilisation of the surrounding region.*

*"The Russians are providing sophisticated weapons, Hezbollah has sent thousands of fighters, the Iranians have boots on the ground and are supplying weapons, so it's a totally unfair and unbalanced fight," Mr McCain told Fox News.*

*"And now the rebels, the freedom fighters, the Syrian national army, are being beaten every place around Syria because of the overwhelming fire power and air power, which is the deciding factor.*

*"So you've got to take [the regime's] air power out, you've got to have a safe zone where they can train and equip, and you've got to turn this thing around. Frankly anything less than that will just be countered with increased Russian assistance, Iranian assistance, and more Hizbollah fighters.*

**14.10** Here is video footage of **John McCain** urging President Obama to increase support for rebel fighters in Syria last night:



### 13.51 Peter Foster, the Telegraph's US editor, on what is actually meant by "arming the rebels":



*Already the White House is getting into a difficult game of managing expectations – of the rebels, the public, of its allies and its adversaries in the shape of Iran, Russia and the Assad regime.*

*The key to expectations turns on what is meant by “arming the rebels” – something which the White House was deliberately vague about when announcing its change of heart.*

*Much of what actually happens – as opposed to what is talked about - will depend on how Russia and Iran react to the new US posture, and how far and how quickly the US is prepared to go if the rebels look like they are about to lose the war.*

*Just to be clear when we talk about ‘arming the rebels’ there are six tiers of ‘assistance’ available:*

1. **Non-lethal aid** – i.e. Food and medicines. Status: already being supplied to units of the Free Syrian Army)
2. **Non-lethal military aid** – i.e. flak jackets, night vision goggles, sat-phones. FSA sources say the paperwork is complete on these, and supply was expected to flow by August. Unclear if this will now be expedited.
3. **Lethal military aid** – i.e. small arms and ammo. Status: as yet unsupplied by US, though plenty of from other sources. Now being promised by White House officials cited by ABC News, New York Times and others.
4. **Game-changing military aid** – i.e wire-guided anti-tank missiles, surface-to-air missiles. Status: not provided. White House officials not willing to specify.
5. **Partial Military intervention:** i.e. partial/full no-fly zone. Status: some officials and diplomats mooting this as a possibility. White House says “no decision” .
6. **Boots on the ground:** explicitly ruled out by Barack Obama

**13.28** This Washington Post piece on the historical origins of the Syrian civil war is being widely shared on Twitter today:



*It is rarely a good idea to draw maps in a hurry. But that is what colonial cartographers did in*

*the Arab world after the First World War, and the borders they painted were superimposed on old tribal and religious attachments that long predated the new states.*

*Today, the folly of those lines is made clear, as Syria's war threatens not just its territorial unity but that of its neighbors as well.*

**13.05** France announces that establishing a **no-fly zone** in Syria was unlikely for now because of opposition from some members of the United Nations Security Council.

French foreign ministry spokesman Philippe Lalliot said:

“ *The problem with this type of measure is that it can only be put in place with approval from the international community.*

*A decision from the United Nations Security Council is needed, and not just any decision.*

**12.37** In March, the footage below emerged of an alleged **chemical attack** on Khan al-Assad village in northern Aleppo province.

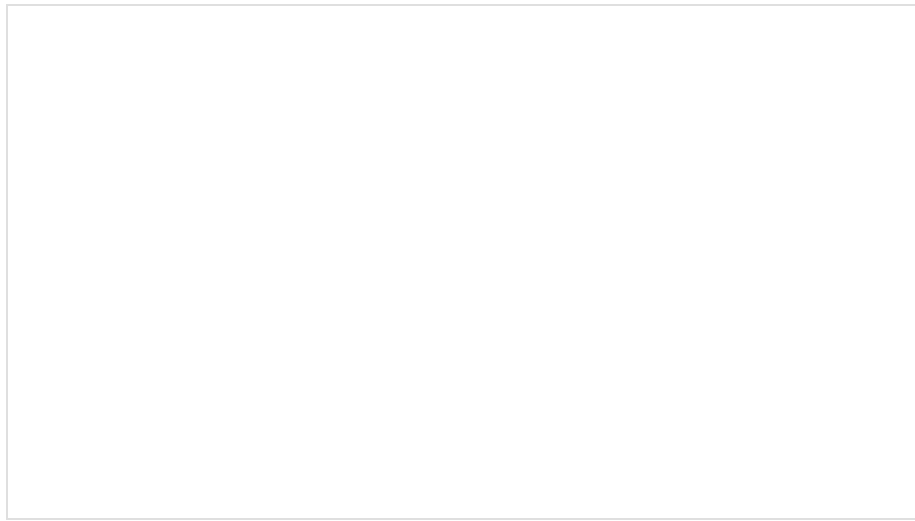
The footage was broadcast by the Syrian government and accused rebels of firing a chemical weapon

But a spokesman for Syria's rebel command said the regime had fired Scud missile equipped with a chemical warhead on the area.

Syria has one of the world's largest stockpiles of chemical weapons and both sides have made claim and counter-claim about use of the weapons.

**12.11** Syria's foreign ministry accuses US of "lies" and "fabrications" over **chemical weapons** evidence, and says the US decision to arm rebels a "flagrant double standard" in its dealings with terrorism. The White House statement was apparently a "caravan of lies".

**12.06** President Barack Obama's change in policy on Syria will place the US and Russia on opposite sides of a Middle Eastern regional war, says **Damien McElroy**, the Telegraph's Foreign Affairs Correspondent:



**11.57** The European Union has said US allegations about the use of chemical weapons reinforced the need for UN inspectors to be deployed to Syria, and for increased efforts to find a political solution to the conflict. A spokesman for EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said:

“ *This assessment and others also circulated makes it even more important that a UN verification mission be deployed to Syria.*

*We have to make the peace process top priority.*

*It is urgent to advance the peace process, including Geneva 2. The EU will contribute in every way possible.*

**Bruno Waterfield** in Brussels reports:



*EU diplomats have noted that the public and official US statement was "carefully worded" and "didn't come up with concrete suggestions".*

*"Any action (such as a no-flyzone) is usually done on basis of a UN resolution," said Lady Ashton's spokesman.*

*European diplomats told the Telegraph that the key debate would at the G8 with Russia in a bid to unblock the UN, leading to a resolution to clear the way for a no-fly zone and arming the rebels.*

**11.51** The Telegraph's **Alex Spillius** has put together this Q & A on the current status of the Syria crisis:





*Over the past two months, Assad has made notable territorial gains and is said to be poised to launch major offensive on Aleppo, the commercial centre. Several attacks using nerve gas were reported.*

*The rebels have received some weapons from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but are struggling to hold their own.*

*France and Britain led the way on humanitarian assistance, but have long been arguing for more assistance to moderate rebels.*

*The recent gains by the regime seem to have tipped opinion in the Obama administration.*

*The UN has put the death toll at a staggering 93,000.*



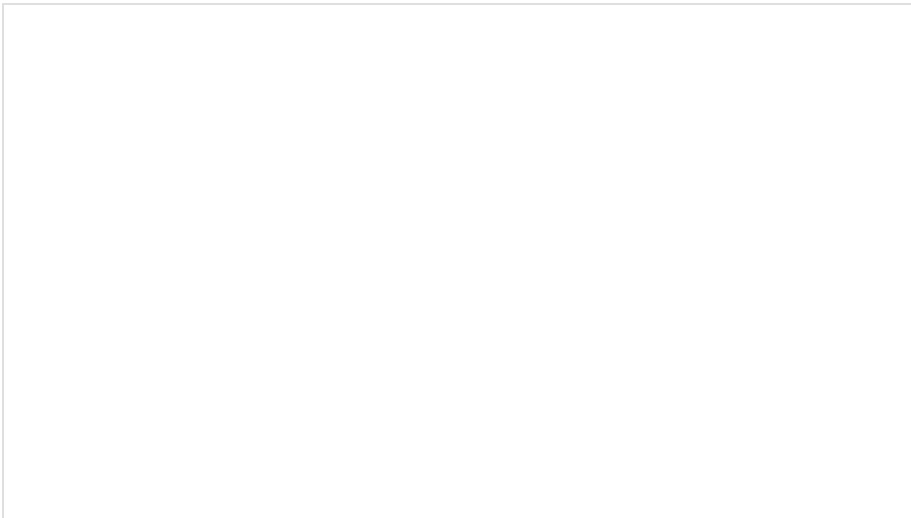
A Free Syrian Army fighter takes position by pointing an artillery weapon towards the sky

**11.40** A spokesman for David Cameron has stated that **Britain** has not yet taken a decision to arm Syria's rebels, despite the US decision to do so, Reuters reports, but added that "nothing was off the table" when asked about the no-fly zone option.

**11.30 David Cameron** has told the Guardian that he shares the "candid assessment" from the US over the use of chemical weapons.

“ *I welcome this candid assessment by the Americans. I think it, rightly, puts back centre stage the question, the very difficult question to answer but nonetheless one we have got to address: what are we going to do about the fact that in our world today there is a dictatorial and brutal leader who is using chemical weapons under our noses against his own people.*

**11.24** Here is the statement from **Ben Rhodes**, a senior aide to Barack Obama, on the change in US policy:



**11.16 William Hague**, the Foreign Secretary, says he agrees with US assessment of Assad's chemical weapon use and calls for co-ordinated response from the international community:

“ *The United Kingdom has presented evidence of the use of chemical weapons in Syria to the UN investigation, and we have been working with our allies to get more and better information about the situation on the ground. We condemn the deplorable failure of the Assad regime to cooperate with the investigative mission.*

*As I said in Washington on Wednesday, the crisis demands a strong, determined and coordinated response from the international community. We have to be prepared to do more to save lives, to pressure the Assad regime to negotiate seriously, to prevent the growth of extremism and terrorism, and to stop the regime using chemical weapons against its people.*

*We will be discussing that response urgently with the United States, France and other countries, including at the G8 this week.*





A Free Syrian Army fighter shooting at Syrian Army positions in Menag, Syria

**11.13** Washington's decision to provide military support for the Syrian rebels will hurt the chances of a new Russia-US peace initiative on the crisis, **Russia** says. Yury Ushakov, Vladimir Putin's top foreign policy aide said:

“ *Of course if the Americans truly decide and in reality provide more large-scale assistance to rebels, assistance to the opposition, it won't make the preparation of the international conference easier.*

**11.06** In August last year, **Barack Obama** warned Assad that the use of chemical or biological weapons in Syria would be a "red line" that should not be crossed:

**10.54** More from the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on the situation in **Aleppo**. The opposition's Aleppo Media Center said troops bombarded Sakhour with tank shells and rockets before sending in troops. The fighting lasted about four hours, and then warplanes raided rebel positions in Sakhour.

**10.44** The Telegraph's **Con Coughlin** writes that Obama's support for the Syrian rebels is far too little, far too late:



*If any issue has exposed the Obama administration's weakness on the world stage, it is the Syrian crisis. From the moment the first anti-government protestors took to the streets two years ago, President Barack Obama has appeared like a startled rabbit caught in the glare of a major international crisis.*

*Rather than seeing the explosion of political dissent in Syria as a golden opportunity to rid the world of a ruthless and brutal dictatorship that has been actively hostile to American interests in the region for more than four decades, Mr Obama was seized by a fit of inaction. According to his reasoning, supporting the rebels might draw the US into another costly war which would outweigh the benefit of removing the Assad gang.*





Members of the Free Syrian Army

**10.35** The commander of Syria's rebel army told the Telegraph's **Ruth Sherlock** two weeks ago that his fighters needed heavy weapons.

General Salim Idris, the chief of staff of the opposition Free Syrian Army, said his fighters desperately needed more powerful anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons.

While the US has not yet officially specified what military aid it would be providing to rebels, Senator John McCain has called for the Obama administration to send heavy weaponry:

“ *We need heavy weaponry. We need the kind that can counter tanks, and we need surface-to-air missiles.*

Walid Safur, the British representative of the opposition **Syrian National Coalition** told BBC Radio 4's Today programme this morning:

“ *We would like to see sophisticated weapons to bring down any aircraft and to deter this regime from bombarding the urban and civilian areas.*

*We would like to see anti-aircraft missiles and anti-tank missiles in order to deter the Syrian regime.*

*The Syrian regime is attacking any target, civilian targets, infrastructure targets, whatever. And now more than 50 per cent of the infrastructure of Syria has been turned into rubble.*





A photo released by the Syrian official news agency SANA - a Syrian man who suffered an alleged chemical attack at Khan al-Assal village is treated in hospital

**10.26** The Telegraph's Middle East correspondent, **Richard Spencer**, has this assessment of Thursday night's US announcement:



*By sending in Hizbollah to take the Syrian town of Qusayr and, it seems increasingly likely, its own troops, Iran threw down the gauntlet to America this month: is it in this war, or not?*

*The mercurial Russian president, Vladimir Putin, is a more difficult man to read. But by not calling off his Middle Eastern allies, despite the promise of an American-backed Geneva peace conference, he essentially did the same.*

*President Barack Obama has spent two years trying to avoid this choice.*

*Like many of his countrymen, and many Europeans, he likes neither side. He does not want to be seen to merely to be supporting the Sunni Muslim world in a sectarian battle with the Shia. But once the gauntlet had been thrown down, few of his strategic advisers would let it rest there.*

**10.09** Nato Secretary General **Anders Fogh Rasmussen** has welcomed a "clear" US statement accusing the Syrian regime of using chemical weapons and said Damascus must let the UN investigate the allegations.

**09.56** Activists report the heaviest fighting in months in the northern city of **Aleppo**.

The attack on rebel-held Sakhour comes a week after Syrian government forces backed by Hezbollah fighters captured the town of Qusair near the Lebanon border.

Building on its victory in Qusayr, the Syrian military is trying to try to clear rebel-held areas in the central provinces of Homs and Aleppo.







Syrian army soldiers drive a tank in the town of Qusayr

**09.45** Reuters, citing two senior Western diplomats in Turkey, is now reporting that the US is considering setting up a limited **no-fly zone** in Syria, possibly close to the southern border with Jordan. One of the diplomats reportedly said:

“ *Washington is considering a no-fly zone to help (President Bashar) al-Assad's opponents... (It would be limited) time-wise and area-wise.*

**09.39** A senior Russian MP, **Alexei Pushkov**, has called the US evidence of chemical weapons usage "fabricated":

“ *Information about the use by Assad of chemical weapons has been fabricated in the same place as the lies about (Saddam) Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.*

*Obama is taking the same path as George Bush.*

*Why would Assad use 'a small quantity' of sarin against the fighters? What would be the point?! In order to give a reason for outside intervention? There's no logic in that.*





Members of the free Syrian Army preparing their weapons, in the neighborhood of al-Amerieh in Aleppo, Syria

**09.30** The **Obama administration** announced on Thursday night that it had confirmed evidence of chemical weapons use by the Assad regime. The main developments are:

- White House says evidence that Assad troops used chemical weapons, such as sarin, has killed up to 150 people and that this crossed a 'red line'.
- US military proposals for arming Syrian rebels include a limited no-fly zone over rebel training camps, according to the Wall Street Journal
- 'Military support' will now be given to the rebels by the US - with some US officials reportedly stating this would include small arms and ammunition

**09.30 BST London (01.30 EST Washington, 11.30 EEST Damascus)** Good morning and welcome to our live updates of the Syria crisis.

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