



Military forces in Syria and the rise of the jihadis

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The tempo of the violence in Syria continues to quicken as increasing amounts of weaponry are entering the country.

Sunni fundamentalist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusrah are increasingly important, boosted by support, much of it from the Gulf. Some analysts think that *jihadi* groups such as this are now more significant than the mainstream Free Syrian Army.

The Syrian government is receiving substantial support from Iran, often in collaboration with the Lebanese Hizballah militia, and continues to take delivery of weapons from Russia. As the rebellion becomes stronger and better-armed, the government is likely to make even more use of its air power and stock of missiles.

It is not clear yet to what extent, if any, chemical weapons have been used, despite competing claims from both sides. However, there is growing concern in Western capitals that they may have already been used.

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1 Introduction

Hard information about the nature of fighting groups within Syria is hard to get. There has been a lot of comment about the growing influence of foreign jihadist groups and funding for such groups from individuals in Gulf countries, but some of it is speculation. Overall, the number of foreign fighters is small compared with the number of Syrians in the conflict. One estimate from June 2012 suggested that only one in 50 among rebel forces came from outside.¹ Since then, the number of outsiders in the conflict has increased.

Many rebel groups, both fundamentalist and secular, are local in nature and do not coordinate with national rebel forces. It is difficult to know exactly who belongs to these groups and what they believe.

Nevertheless, the rebels are growing stronger. At the same time the government side is getting increasing support, particularly from Iran, and could make more aggressive use of its air power, not to mention chemical weapons.

In these circumstances, further escalation of the conflict is likely.

2 Rebels

2.1 Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army is thought to be composed mainly of deserters from the regular Syrian armed forces and volunteer civilian Syrians. There are some reports that foreign fighters have joined the FSA, but the FSA is broadly secular and pro-democracy, while most of the foreign fighters that have joined the war are thought to have a more radical Islamist ideology. Some Islamist groups, such as Suqour al-Sham, do pledge allegiance to the Free Syrian Army. Suqour al-Sham is a largely Syrian group and wants sharia law in Syria, but says that it will not impose it.

In December 2012, the Free Syrian Army selected a new Chief of Staff, Brigadier General Selim Idriss, in an attempt to deal with the disunity that has plagued the force since its inception. As well as being disunited, the FSA is accused of looting

According to some reports, the Free Syrian Army is declining in influence and Sunni *jihadi* groups are now more important in the north and east of the country, possibly in the entire insurgency.²

2.2 Foreign fighters

There is an increasing flow of non-Syrians joining the fight against the government in Syria. Many of these fighters have crossed the Turkish border and the Turkish authorities have reportedly made no effort to halt that flow.³ The Iraqi border, much of which is scarcely controlled, is also seeing an influx of **fighters from Iraq**, coinciding with an upsurge in violence in the Sunni areas of Iraq itself, on the other side of the border from Syria.

As well as Iraqis, there are reports that many **Lebanese Sunnis** have joined the fight against the Assad government. The Syrian conflict has special relevance to Lebanon, where the confessional conflict between Sunni, Shia and Christian and between Hizballah and the

¹ Aaron Zelin, "Foreign fighters trickle into the Syrian rebellion," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 11 June, 2012.

² IHS Jane's online briefing: Syrian Civil War: The dynamics of an evolving insurgent landscape, 14 March 2013

³ 'Nusra Front members in Syria have never masked al Qaida ties', *McClatchy*, 10 April 2013

Lebanese state's security forces has never been fully resolved. Many Lebanese Sunnis are eager for the Assad government to fall, which in turn would weaken the Shiite Hizballah and boost the Sunnis' own position in Lebanon. There are training camps in the Beka'a valley in Lebanon where Lebanese men have been preparing since 2008 to fight against Assad. They are said to have been significant in the battle for Homs in February 2012.⁴ Other foreign fighters in the conflict come from **Tunisia, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Libya** and the **UK**, although many of these will not share al-Qaeda's global violent *jihadi* ideology,⁵ particularly those who have entered the conflict because of tribal and family connections.

One Libyan/Irish fighter heads the Umma Brigade, a group that has achieved some publicity. Mahdi al-Harati says that his brigade now numbers about 3,000 and is particularly strong on communications, logistics and heavy weaponry. The brigade is made up mainly of Syrians, with the Libyans in command and training roles.

The integration of Free Syrian Army Syrians and foreign fighters is, however, an exception. Generally, Syrian fighters say that they do not need more men but more weapons. Syrian groups are generally less radical than the foreign fighters and do not want to lose control of the revolution. They also fear al-Assad's spies.

2.3 Sunni fundamentalist groups

Although some of Islamist groups in Syria have been linked to al-Qaeda, any suggestion that all fundamentalist Sunnis share al-Qaeda's transnational ideology is wrong. Most Syrian fighters are aiming to overthrow the Assads and take control of the Syrian state. Al-Qaeda does not believe in states; it believes in the global caliphate. While the Islamic fundamentalist black flag has been flown by *jihadis* in Syria, that has often been alongside Syrian national emblems such as the Syrian flag as it was from 1932-1958, before the creation of the United Arab Republic with Egypt.

Sunni fundamentalist *jihadi* groups tend to operate alongside the Free Syrian Army rather than within it. The FSA has said that it does not approve of the *jihadi* groups and that after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, they will be thrown out of Syria. At present, however, the effectiveness of the *jihadi* groups, who have a reputation for fearlessness to add to their superior weaponry, means that the Free Syrian Army has little option but to co-operate with them.

Jabhat al-Nusra

The most important of these Sunni fundamentalist groups is Jabhat al-Nusra, which has increasingly gained a reputation for some of the most effective and well-organised fighters in the rebellion. The group is reported by one *ex-jihadi* to have about 5,000 to 10,000 core fighters and thousands more affiliate fighters who have not yet formally joined the organisation.

As well as having effective fighters, Jabhat al-Nusra has gained a reputation for honesty in dealings with ordinary Syrians, something which eludes the FSA. The FSA is often accused of looting and unjustifiably confiscating property. Jabhat al-Nusra has set up sharia courts and other social services. These are used by Syrians to resolve disputes in the often chaotic areas not held by the government.⁶

⁴ Elizabeth O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, Institute of War, September 2012

⁵ Elizabeth O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, Institute of War, September 2012, p20

⁶ 'Syria: Islamist Nusra Front gives BBC exclusive interview', *BBC News Online*, 17 December 2013

Jabhat al-Nusra is expanding its range of tactics and its area of operation,⁷ and tends to operate as something like Special Forces units. Although it has been responsible for a number of bombings targeting civilians, it may be holding back from perpetrating mass-casualty attacks in recent weeks. Jabhat al-Nusra includes some fighters from theatres such as Iraq and Afghanistan, but many Syrians to whom the group's ideology appeals have also joined up.

The Islamist group led the forces that took control of the rebels' first provincial capital, al-Raqqa, in the east of the country on the River Euphrates, while the FSA was marginal to this major rebel advance.⁸ Jabhat al-Nusra is a strongly sectarian organisation that declares *takfir* on non-Sunnis: it classifies them as apostates who are no longer Muslim because they do not follow Sunni doctrines. This most commonly applies to Alawites and Shiites.

In December 2012 the US Administration designated Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organisation, describing it as an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq. This was widely condemned in Syria where it was seen as an unhelpful and unwarranted intervention. Thousands of demonstrators chanted "we are all Jabhat al-Nusra" and that the only terrorism in Syria came from the Assad government.⁹ The US designation probably backfired and increased support for al-Nusra, while the Free Syrian Army is widely seen as being beholden to foreign influence.

Despite the condemnations, the connection between al-Nusra and al-Qaeda is not disputed. In April 2013, a spokesman for Islamic State of Iraq, another name for al-Qaeda in Iraq, said that the organisation would now be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (that is, including Syria). The head of al-Nusra, Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, pledged allegiance to the overall head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, but said that it was not interested in a merger with al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The public declaration of allegiance to al-Qaeda is a sign that al-Nusra is increasingly confident of its independent strength and appeal and no longer feels the need to appeal to more moderate forces in the country in order to broaden its base of support. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the civilian umbrella organisation for the opposition, said it was "deeply concerned" by the news and warned against sectarianism:

The Syrian coalition urges Jabhat al-Nusra to stay within the ranks of nationalistic Syrians, to continue its efforts in fighting the Assad regime, and in supporting and protecting the freedom of all Syrian sects.¹⁰

According to Israeli intelligence sources, Jabhat al-Nusra has started to forge links with Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, a force based in the Egyptian Sinai desert that focuses on attacks on Israel.¹¹

UK policy on Jabhat al-Nusra

Baroness Warsi made clear, on behalf of the government, that the UK shares the US view of the organisation:

⁷ IHS Jane's online briefing: Syrian Civil War: The dynamics of an evolving insurgent landscape, 14 March 2013

⁸ 'Western meddling in Syria will only fuel the Sunni insurgency', *Independent on Sunday*, 17 March 2013

⁹ 'Syrian rebels defy US and pledge their allegiance to jihadi group', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 December 2012

¹⁰ 'Jordan clears path to arm Syrian rebels', *Guardian*, 15 April 2013

¹¹ 'Iran and Hezbollah 'have built 50,000-strong force to help Syrian regime', *Guardian*, 14 March 2013

Our assessment is that the al-Nusra Front is a violent Islamist organisation. We are concerned about such terrorist groups gaining a foothold in Syria, which is one of the reasons why we are working with Syria's opposition national coalition to ensure a strong and representative moderate voice capable of meeting the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.¹²

A terrorist designation for Jabhat al-Nusra by the EU or the UK does not appear to be imminent; however, it may come in due course if the EU authorities conclude that this would not be counterproductive; the dangers were demonstrated by the hostile reaction to Jabhat al-Nusra's designation in the US.

Islamic Syrian Front

This is a grouping of 11 organisations whose common aim is to overthrow the Assad government and establish an Islamic state:

- Ahrar Al-Sham Brigades: probably the leading group.
- Al-Haqq Brigade in Homs
- The Islamic Al-Fajr movement in the Aleppo province
- Jama'at Al-Tali'a Al-Islamiyya in the rural areas of Idlib
- Ansar Al-Sham Brigades in the Latakia
- the Mus'ab bin 'Umayr Brigade in the rural areas of Aleppo
- Jaysh Al-Tawhid in Deir Al-Zor
- the Suqour Al-Islam Brigade
- the Al-Iman Fighting Brigades
- the Special Operations Brigades
- the Hamza bin 'Abd Al-Mutalib Brigade in the Damascus province.¹³

In a statement on its foundation, the organisation said:

[The front] aspires to topple Assad's regime and establish a civilized Islamic society governed by religious Muslim law, in which Muslims and non-Muslims alike will benefit from the justice of Islam.¹⁴

The Islamic Syrian Front also said that it aimed to set up a political wing, foster ties with outside countries, avoid sectarian and ethnic conflict and provide social services to the population.

¹² [HL Deb 29 January 2013, c324WA](#)

¹³ ['Islamic Forces In Syria Announce Establishment Of Joint Front Aimed At Toppling Assad, Founding Islamic State'](#), Middle East Media Research Institute, 26 December 2013

¹⁴ ['Islamic Forces In Syria Announce Establishment Of Joint Front Aimed At Toppling Assad, Founding Islamic State'](#), Middle East Media Research Institute, 26 December 2013

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islami

Ahrar al-Sham is strongest in the north of Syria and, like other Islamist groups, focuses strongly on social responsibility, distributing food and other resources to the Syrian public. The group was instrumental in seizing the Aleppo airbase in February 2013.

2.4 Kurdish areas

Kurdish fighters are also growing in influence. The Kurds have managed to gain control of much of the small Kurdish-populated area in the northeast of the country but Arab rebel groups, keen to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria, have clashed with Kurdish fighters. Some Kurds have alleged that the FSA takes money from Turkey to attack the autonomous Kurdish forces.¹⁵

The Kurdish area is both fertile agricultural land and home to most of Syria's oil reserves, so disputes over control of the area are likely to persist.

Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG)

A group supported by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), Syrian Kurdish affiliate of the PKK, the Kurdish Workers' Party that has been battling the Turkish state for many years. The PYD is the dominant force in the Kurdish area.

3 Pro-government forces

The army has borne the brunt of the fight against the rebels and it remains significantly better-equipped than the forces ranged against it. The IISS estimated in October 2012 that it had lost about half of its original 220,000 strength due to desertions, defections and casualties.¹⁶ At the core of the government's forces are the Special Forces, the Republican Guard and the 3rd and 4th Divisions, all strongly influenced by officers from the Assads' own Alawite sect. These forces amount to about 50,000 in total. The Syrian government has a powerful arsenal of largely Russian-supplied warplanes, helicopters, tanks and artillery. It also has a navy, but this has not so far been involved in the conflict.

Al-Assad has been prepared to take advantage of his superior firepower. The government has been using its air power against the rebellion since July 2012, according to US NGO Human Rights Watch. After visiting sites in Syria the organisation said that there had been both indiscriminate attacks and deliberate attacks on civilians which appear to be systematic and constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law.¹⁷ HRW has also documented what appeared to be the use by the government of ballistic missiles on civilian areas in and around Aleppo in February 2013.¹⁸ As the relative strength of the rebellion increases, the government may be provoked to make even more drastic use of air and missile power.

3.1 Hizballah

Hizballah, the powerful Lebanese Shiite militia, supports the Alawite government in Syria, partly because Syria is a conduit for Iranian support for Hizballah, and partly because the Alawites are an offshoot of Shia Islam and both the Alawites and the Shiites are opposed to militant Sunni Islam.

¹⁵ ["Third point in the revolution': Syrian Kurds carve out an enclave between the Assad regime and the rebels'](#), *National Post*, 13 February 2013

¹⁶ *The Military Balance 2013*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013

¹⁷ [Death from the Skies](#), Human Rights Watch report, 11 April 2013

¹⁸ ['Syria: Unlawful Missile Attacks Kill More Than 140'](#), Human Rights Watch press release, 26 February 2013

Since 2012 the stories have proliferated that Hizballah was becoming involved in the Syrian conflict. In September 2012, the US government decided to impose sanctions on the Hizballah leadership in Lebanon because of support for the Assad regime and for other terrorist activities. According to the US, Hizballah is paying back the support that al-Assad has provided in the past by supplying training, advice, and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria.¹⁹ In January 2013 the Israeli air force carried out a strike on a Hizballah military convoy transporting Russian SA-17 anti-aircraft missiles out of Syria into Lebanon. The air strike also damaged a Syrian chemical and biological weapons facility.

According to the US Treasury, Hizballah has:

- directly trained Syrian government personnel within Syria
- cooperated with the Iranian Quds Force in giving Syrians training within Syria
- played a substantial role in expelling rebel forces from certain areas of Syria
- coordinated its support to the Syrian government with the Iranian Quds Force.²⁰

US Ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, told the Security Council's monthly meeting on the Middle East in October 2012 that Hizballah was stepping up its support:

Hezbollah's active and growing support for Assad's war exposes Hassan Nasrallah's claims of promoting Lebanon's national interest as nothing more than a deadly form of deception. 'The group's leaders may try to change the subject by invoking hollow rhetoric about so-called resistance, but the truth is plain to see: Nasrallah's fighters are now part of Assad's killing machine and Hezbollah's leaders continue to plot with Iran new measures to prop up a murderous and desperate dictator.'²¹

Hasan Nasrallah says that the Syrian conflict is not one that the party as a whole is fighting but that Hizballah members resident across the border in villages in Syria have had to defend their land and homes.²²

According to some commentators, there is a move to strengthen the connection between traditional Alawite heartlands in parts of Syria just to the north of Lebanon with areas of Lebanon controlled by Hizballah. Hizballah members are 'expelling rebel forces from these areas' for the US, or 'defending their homes' according to Hizballah. Some have suggested that, should the Assad government lose control of Syria, it may retreat to the coastal mountains to defend this Alawite heartland close to Lebanon.²³

The Free Syrian Army has threatened to attack Hizballah bases in Lebanon in retaliation for the militia's alleged interventions in Syria.

¹⁹ 'Treasury Designates Hizballah Leadership', US Department of the Treasury press release, 13 September 2012

²⁰ 'Treasury Designates Hizballah Leadership', US Department of the Treasury press release, 13 September 2012

²¹ 'Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the Security Council Open Debate on the Middle East, October 15, 2012', Statement, US mission to the United Nations, 15 October 2012

²² 'Nasrallah Sends Message on Syria', Al-Monitor, 28 February 2013

²³ For more detail on the Alawites, see the Library research paper *Syria: no end in sight?*, August 2012

3.2 Iran and the IRGC

The Iranian government makes no secret of its strategic interest in supporting the Assad government. In February 2013, an adviser to the Supreme Leader said in a speech that Syria is a province of Iran:

Syria is [Iran's] 35th province, and it is a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to take Syria or Khuzestan [the most Arab of the Iranian provinces], our top priority will be to preserve Syria. By preserving Syria, we will be able to retake Khuzestan – but if we lose Syria, we will not be able to preserve Tehran...

Syria has an army, but it cannot wage the war within Syria's cities. This is why Iran proposed establishing a Basij force, to conduct the fighting in the cities. [So] the 60,000-strong 'Syrian Basij' was established; it has taken over the fighting in the streets from the army...²⁴

US officials have said that Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security has provided technical assistance in finding opponents who have criticised the Assad government on the internet.²⁵ There are advisers from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' overseas Quds Force in Syria as well as Lebanon, but they have been there since the civil war began. The Iranians are also said to have provided transport aircraft to the Syrian government. US officials cite reports that Iraqi Shiite fighters have gone to Syria to help the government and these are gaining in influence.

The capture in 2012 of 48 Iranians by rebels indicated the level of the relationship between Damascus and Tehran. The Iranian government claimed that the group was on a Shiite pilgrimage but it seems likely that the rebels' version, that they were members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, is closer to the truth. The release of the prisoners was secured in a prisoner swap, with the Syrian government releasing 2,130 prisoners in exchange for the 48.²⁶

The Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps has been the main tool in Iranian efforts to advise and train and arm Syrian government forces. There is plenty of evidence of a significant Quds Force presence in Syria: in February 2012, the Syrian opposition claimed that Kassam Salimani, a commander of the Quds Force, was coordinating the Syrian effort inside Syria.²⁷ Quds Force commander Brigadier General Hassan Shateri was assassinated in Syria in February 2013.

In March 2013, the Israeli Military Intelligence chief Aviv Kochavi confirmed that Iran, in cooperation with Hizballah, has built a 50,000-strong militia and intends to double its size:

Most recently, they are establishing a 'people's army' trained by Hezbollah and financed by Iran, currently consisting of 50,000 men, with plans to increase to 100,000. Iran and Hezbollah are also preparing for the day after Assad's fall, when they will use this army to protect their assets and interests in Syria.²⁸

The comments were a stark reminder that instability in Syria is likely to last for a long time, even if the Assad regime falls.

²⁴ 'Iranian Official: The Loss Of Syria Will Lead To The Loss Of Tehran Itself', Middle East Media Research Institute, 11 March 2013

²⁵ "Iran assisting Syrian surveillance of rebels", *Washington Post*, 10 October 2012

²⁶ 'Syrian rebels free 48 Iranians in prisoner swap', *Los Angeles Times*, 9 January 2013

²⁷ 'Report: Top Iran military official aiding Assad's crackdown on Syria opposition', *Haaretz*, 6 February 2012

²⁸ 'Iran and Hezbollah 'have built 50,000-strong force to help Syrian regime', *Guardian*, 14 March 2013

4 Weapons

Regional actors are increasing their support for the groups they support in Syria. This has led some in the West to suggest that the arms embargo should be lifted so that Western countries can boost the importance of the more secular forces that they would like to see dominate the rebellion. However, it remains difficult to know exactly who believes what. There are reports that, on hearing that Qatari and other Gulf support was principally going to fundamentalists, fighters have grown long, Salafi-style beards, hoping to receive more support. Other Syrians have grown beards simply as an anti-regime statement; in the past a beard could have been a reason to be arrested and interrogated.

In any case, the rapid proliferation of arms in Syria means that it will be difficult for any new government to re-establish a monopoly on armed force. This problem has been amply illustrated in Libya, where there is a multitude of armed militias, often fighting against each other, that the state does not have the power to disarm.

4.1 The rebels

There are increasing indications that weapons funded by Saudi, Qatari and UAE money are finding their way into the hands of rebel groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as resources from Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish sources,²⁹ and it is this support which has led to the *jihadi* groups' higher profile in the last six months or so. There has reportedly been a sharp increase in arms shipments to the rebels in recent months. This has taken place with the support of neighbouring countries and of CIA. According to air traffic records seen by journalists, towards the end of last year, more than 160 military cargo planes owned by Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar landed, mainly in Turkey but also in Jordanian airports, carrying arms for the rebels. This was a sharp increase on the rate shown earlier in 2012.³⁰

Anti-tank missiles and shoulder-mounted surface to air missiles launchers (MANPADS) are available to the rebel forces. Chinese-made anti-aircraft missiles are also appearing in Syria, as are large amounts of armament from the former Yugoslavia, reportedly funded by Saudis.

In April, Jordan signalled a sharp change of strategy when it agreed to become the spearhead for Saudi efforts to hasten the end of the conflict. In the past, the Jordanian government has tried to avoid taking sides in the conflict for fear of retaliation. It was reported in April that £650 million of Saudi money had arrived in the Jordanian capital.³¹

4.2 The government

Despite the increase of Gulf-funded weaponry entering the conflict, a US official said in February that the flow of Iranian-supplied weapons to the Syrian government was still greater.³²

Western intelligence officials told the press in March that significant shipments of arms were reaching Syria from **Iran** in civilian flights. According to an intelligence report, two Iranian airlines are carrying arms:

The equipment being transferred by both companies (Iran and Mahan Air) ... ranges from communications equipment to light arms and advanced strategic weapons, some

²⁹ 'Al Qaeda in Syria', *New York Times*, 11 December 2012

³⁰ 'Arms airlift to Syrian rebels expands, with aid from CIA', *New York Times*, 24 March 2013

³¹ 'Jordan clears path to arm Syrian rebels', *Guardian*, 15 April 2013

³² 'Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria With Croatian Arms', *New York Times*, 25 February 2013

of which are being used devastatingly by Hezbollah and the Syrian regime against the Syrian people.

The more sophisticated gear includes parts for various hardware such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), shore-to-sea missiles and surface-to-surface ballistic missiles (SSMs). Other weapons are being used by Syrian security forces, pro-Assad shabbiha militiamen, and Lebanese Hezbollah.³³

According to the reports, about 5 tons of arms are being transported per flight, about once a week. Iraqi airspace was said to be used by the Iranian government for the flights, which drew criticism from the US administration and a denial from the Iraqi government.

The delivery from **Russia** of a consignment of refurbished attack helicopters in 2012 caused controversy. Russia has indicated that it will continue to supply arms to the Syrian government. Current orders include light attack jets, other light weapons and air defence systems, although not the advanced Iskander missiles that the government wanted. It was reported in December that Russians were involved in the deployment of the Syrian air defence system, a factor which might complicate any outside intervention. The head of Rosoboronexport, the state-owned arms export organisation, said in February that Syria was the "13th or 14th in terms of volume" on the list of countries importing Russian arms.

4.3 Chemical weapons

Syria has the largest collection of chemical weapons in the Middle East and its stockpiles include mustard gas, a blistering agent, and sarin, a nerve agent. It is also reported to have developed VX, a persistent and more powerful nerve agent, and cyanide gas.³⁴ Most of the allegations so far point to sarin.

Both the opposition and the government claim that the other side has used rockets armed with chemical warheads. On 19 March both the sides claimed nerve gas had been used at Khan al-Assal, near Aleppo. It is difficult to verify the accounts. According to one Israeli source, the Syrian government has prepared but not deployed the weapons.³⁵ With chemical weapons having the highest possible propaganda value, false stories about their use remain likely, especially since the US declared in August that the use or transfer of chemical weapons would constitute a clear 'red line'.

Nevertheless, the existence of chemical weapons in the country remains a serious worry. Syria is not a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention and so there have been no official inspections of the country's armoury, meaning that it would be impossible to track exactly what has happened to the stockpiles because there is no reliable information on how big they are. Some commentators have expressed the fear that al-Assad may pass chemical agents to Hizballah or simply lose control of them. There have been several mass-casualty attacks in the Syrian conflict and few would discount the possibility that chemical weapons could be used to devastating effect.

Newspaper reports suggested in April 2013 that MI6 had smuggled soil samples out of Syria and tested them at Porton Down, the government's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. According to reports, analysis of the samples revealed traces of "some kind of chemical weapon", although no official statement has been made about the tests.³⁶ The soil

³³ ['Exclusive: Iran steps up weapons lifeline to Syria's Assad – envoys'](#), *Reuters*, 14 March 2013

³⁴ 'Syria crisis highlights importance of Chemical Weapons Convention', IISS Strategic Comments, April 2013

³⁵ 'Iran and Hezbollah 'have built 50,000-strong force to help Syrian regime'', *Guardian*, 14 March 2013

³⁶ ['British scientists 'find evidence of Syrian chemical attack''](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 12 April 2013

sample analysed by the US administration was reportedly very small and contained traces of a chemical that could be related to sarin or to fertilisers.³⁷ Photographic evidence has also been studied, although pictures of victims foaming at the mouth conflict with accounts of the use of sarin; foaming at the mouth is not a symptom of nerve agents such as sarin.

One problem is being sure of the 'chain of custody' of samples tested. Soil samples, in particular, could be relatively easy to tamper with. To be more confident about whether chemical weapons have been used, it is necessary to take samples in controlled circumstances, and the United Nations has initiated an investigation in collaboration with the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), but the mission has had problems with access to the country, which must be granted by the Syrian government.

In April 2013, the matter of Syria's chemical arsenal was brought up at the meeting of the G8. Reporting to Parliament afterwards, the Foreign Secretary said that there was some evidence of their use:

The UK is increasingly concerned that there is evidence of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. These allegations must be fully and urgently investigated. We welcome the UN Secretary-General's announcement of an investigation into the allegations, and call again on the Syrian regime to co-operate fully and allow the investigation unfettered access to all areas.³⁸

Since President Obama said that the use of chemical weapons would be a 'red line' which would change the administration's thinking about Syria, some have responded to the possibility that they have been used by calling for more decisive action from the US and Western countries. If they have been used, however, it is in very small quantities, with only dozens rather than hundreds or thousands of victims. They may have been used by mistake, or the Syrian government may be testing the Obama administration to find out exactly where the 'red line' is.

Obama's first mention referred to Syria's use or transfer of a "whole bunch" of chemical weapons. Other mentions by the White House have talked about *the use of chemicals* rather than *any use*. It seems likely that this was intentional, move to give the administration some flexibility. Other questions about the red line remain unanswered: does use by the rebels constitute a red line development? Does use by a renegade commander supporting the government? What would happen if the administration decides that the red line has been crossed? On that one, analysts generally agree that immediate military intervention is highly unlikely. A renewed (and possibly doomed) attempt to get a resolution passed by the UN Security Council

4.4 Arms embargo

At present EU and US sanctions include an arms embargo on all but non-lethal equipment. After Chinese and Russian opposition on the Security Council, however, there are no United Nations sanctions, which means that Russia has continued to supply arms to the Syrian government and this is entirely legal.

The new leader of the Free Syrian Army has called for the West's arms embargo on Syria to be lifted. Brigadier General Selim Idriss visited the European Parliament in Brussels in March

³⁷ 'Syria chemical weapons – Q&A', *Guardian*, 27 April 2013

³⁸ [HC Deb 15 March 2013, c37](#)

2013 and told MEPs that the Assad government could be defeated within a month if the West would supply the rebels with weapons.³⁹

There remains substantial opposition to lifting the EU arms embargo, however, despite British and French suggestions to that effect. The US Secretary of State John Kerry, in London for a meeting with rebel leaders in March, said that his government would be stepping up non-lethal aid. But there was no commitment to any more fundamental change in the US position.⁴⁰

On 15 April, the UK government announced a gift of various pieces of non-lethal equipment to the Syrian opposition's National Coalition assistance coordination unit. The gift included:

Five 4x4 vehicles with ballistic protection and 20 sets of body armour to the Syrian opposition National Coalition's assistance co-ordination unit; three 25-tonne trucks, one 20-tonne truck, four 12-tonne trucks, six 4x4 SUVs, five pick-ups, one recovery vehicle and four forklifts to ensure that the assistance co-ordination unit has the means to deliver assistance in the quantities necessary to have an impact on the suffering in Syria; and three advanced civil resilience kits for regional hubs and 22 basic civil resilience kits for other local councils; 107 generators; 130 solar powered batteries; hundreds of radios, water purification kits and rubbish collection kits; as well as basic administrative equipment—laptops, VSATs [small satellite communication ground stations] and printers. This equipment will support local administrative councils, through the National Coalition, to extricate the injured from the rubble in the aftermath of a mortar attack and to provide clean water and refuse management equipment to prevent the spread of disease.

Making the gift was a matter of special urgency because of the appalling and deteriorating situation on the ground and the urgent need to help the Syrian opposition deliver support to civilians. Owing to the Easter recess, this gift was notified to the Committee of Public Accounts to consider on Parliament's behalf. I also wrote to the Chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Defence Committee and Committee on Arms Export Controls to inform them of this process. As no objections were received, we have now proceeded with the arrangements to make these gifts.⁴¹

³⁹ For more on the arms embargo see the Library Standard Note [Syria: is it legal to arm the opposition?](#), March 2013

⁴⁰ 'US expected to increase aid to Syrian rebels', *Associated Press*, 10 April 2013

⁴¹ [HC Deb 15 April 2013, c17WS](#)