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## Military action over Syria's suspected use of chemical weapons could backfire

Hugh Naylor

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Military action in response to Syria's suspected use of chemical weapons would be "very, very complex", the Israeli ambassador to the United States said yesterday.

Michael Oren said air strikes on chemical weapons bases pose a risk of collateral damage to civilians if the agents are dispersed, and under international law the attacker would be at fault.

"That's why Israel is not making, urging any action by the United States in Syria, because we understand the complexity of it and we share the concerns of the United States and our neighbours," Mr Oren told a US television news show.

His words of caution came as Amir Peretz, Israel's environment minister, yesterday became the latest Israeli official to say the US should intervene in Syria over reports of the use of chemical weapons.

Barack Obama, the US president, has called the use of such weapons in Syria civil war a "red line" and a "game changer", although he has not spelt out the consequences of crossing the lines.

Mr Peretz said action should have been taken long ago due to the civilian death toll, estimated by the United Nations to be at least 70,000.

"We expect whoever defines red lines will also do what is needed, first and foremost the US and of course the entire international community," he said. His remarks did not reflect Israeli policy.

On Friday, the deputy foreign minister, Zev Elkin, warned the credibility of the US administration was at stake over the issue.

"There is a question here of when you set a red line, do you stand behind it?" Mr Elkin said in an interview on Israel's Army Radio, adding that the "Iranians are watching, the whole world is watching too".

Mr Oren said the US was in high-level talks with Israel and other Middle East countries about the situation.

"While we can't discuss details we are working out ways we can address this threat," Mr Oren said in Washington.

He added that removing the threat posed by Syria's chemical weapons stockpile by military force "is very, very complex".

"Even under international law, if you strike a chemical weapons base and there is collateral damage to civilians, it is as if you, the attacker, used chemical weapons," he said. "And hence we are having this very close high-level dialogue with the United States."

On Thursday, the White House said "with varying degrees of confidence" that government forces used chemical weapons during attacks last month in Aleppo and Damascus.

Israel's military on Tuesday said it had evidence of such weapons being used, citing photographs of victims and "direct" findings.

Both sides of the civil war already accuse each other of using the chemical weapons.

US politicians warned yesterday that Syria's stockpile could be a greater threat after that nation's president leaves power and could end up targeting Americans at home.

Representative Jan Schakowsky, a Democrat, said that when president Bashar Al Assad leaves power, his opponents could have access to those weapons or they could fall into the hands of US enemies.

"The day after Assad is the day that these chemical weapons could be at risk ... [and] we could be in bigger, even bigger trouble," she said.

One of Mr Obama's chief antagonists on Syria, Senator John McCain, the Republican he defeated in the 2008 presidential election, said the US should go to Syria as part of an international force to safeguard the chemical weapons. But Mr McCain added that he is not advocating sending ground troops.

In Syria, rebels seeking to topple Mr Al Assad fought intense battles yesterday with his troops to try to seize control of three military airbases in the country's north and curtail the regime's use of its punishing air power, activists said.

Rebels, who have been trying to capture the air fields for months, broke into the sprawling Abu Zuhour airbase in north-western Idlib province and Kweiras base in the Aleppo province on Saturday.

Fighting raged inside the two facilities yesterday.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least seven fighters were killed in the fighting in Abu Zuhour, in addition to an unknown number of soldiers. The group relies on reports from a network of activists on the ground.