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Poised to Attack, US Moves Naval Forces near Syria

By Jason Ditz

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The US continues to move warships in the Mediterranean into the area around Syria, with indications that an attack could be imminent. Officials say that President Obama is still “considering options” on exactly how to attack.

But Pentagon officials discussing the situation yesterday say that they have cruise missiles ready to go, just waiting for the president’s say-so, and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel confirmed that the call to prepare the missiles came on orders from Obama.

Missile strikes would get the president out of having to put US warplanes at risk of being shot down by Syria’s air defenses, and with President Obama looking to sell his intervention plans as reluctant, are likely to be spun as a compromise “limited” action, even if they quickly escalate out of control.

Though officials continue to say President Obama is waiting to get a more clear account of what happened, there is little indication that it means waiting on actual proof of the Syrian government’s responsibility, as officials have already insisted they are “convinced” of that despite no real evidence to that effect.

The big question is whether clearer heads can still prevail in the face of another round of calls for attack from NATO members like France and Turkey, or more precisely whether Obama thinks

he can get enough international support to get away with launching such a war even though he'll clearly be doing it without UN authorization.

If an attack does happen, expect the US to attempt to keep it pretty limited at first, both for the sake of not fueling public opposition, and to avoid a quick regime change that puts the al-Qaeda-backed rebels in power, since this appears to be simultaneously the worst-case scenario and the one the US attack will be pushing the nation toward.