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Concern that Assad may have passed some chemical weapons to Hizballah

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Chemical weapons

There is growing concern that some of the chemical weapons the Assad regime has been pushing out of the Damascus area in the last few days were sent across the border to Hizballah strongholds in the Lebanese Beqaa Valley to keep them out of rebel hands. Syrian army officers who recently defected report that containers were last week removed from Syrian bases at Jabal Kalamon and loaded on vehicles camouflaged as commercial trucks. On the

Lebanese side, the consignment is thought to have been split up and hidden at different Hizballah bases to make them harder to attack.

Israel's US Ambassador Michael Oren, asked by a FOX TV interviewer Saturday Dec. 8, if he could confirm this, said he could not, but warned that any evidence of chemical weapons being passed from the Assad regime to extremist groups like Hizballah would be a "game-changer," and a "red line" for Israel. "We have a very clear red line about those chemical weapons passing into the wrong hands. Can you imagine if Hizballah and its 70,000 rockets would get its hands on chemical weapons? That could kill thousands of people."

Deputy Prime Minister Moshe Yaalon on the other hand saw no indication Sunday that Syria was planning to use chemical weapons against Israel. He refrained from going into any of the three possible perils presented by the regime in Damascus as it finds itself in a knife-edge situation:

1. Syria's chemical weapons are deployed in at least five air force bases, with evidence of preparations to use them, as confirmed by British Foreign Secretary William Hague Saturday, Dec. 8.

US military sources explained early Monday, Dec. 10, that the nerve gas sarin is effective up to 60 days after its precursor chemicals are mixed. Placing the weaponized material in close proximity to warplanes indicates an intention within that timeline to drop the poison gas bombs from the air. After that, sarin must be destroyed in controlled conditions lest its poisons escape into the environment. No one knows if the Syrians have the necessary scientific manpower to take responsibility for this process.

2. The battle around Al Safira, site of Syria's biggest chemical weapons store and Scud D missiles fitted with chemical warheads, is fierce and fluid: the base changes hands every few hours in heavy fighting between Syria army and rebel forces.

Saturday, the base's capture by the rebels triggered a warning from the Assad regime against throwing chemical weapons into the battle. Sunday, Al Safira was recaptured, but the rebels are sweeping through the surrounding villages and closing in on three sides. For now, Syrian forces control the road connecting Al Safira to Aleppo, but the rebels have seized parts of Sheikh Suleiman, the biggest air base near that city, and are getting close to that highway. Its fall would snap shut the rebel siege on Al Safira.

Control of Al Safira would place the big chemical weapons stores in the hands of rebel forces in that sector, many of whom belong to Jabhat al-Nusra, the roof organization of the al Qaeda

elements fighting in Syria against the Assad regime.

3. In the estimate of Western and Israeli intelligence agencies, Assad has already directed his troops fighting in and around Damascus to use chemical weapons if the rebels get near to seizing any part of Damascus international airport.

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