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Lawmakers want a voice before action against Syria

By *Bryan Bender* and *Matt Viser*

WASHINGTON — As President Obama moved closer to taking military action against Syria, some leading members of Congress and foreign policy specialists called Tuesday for more debate of the options and their consequences to hold the Syrian regime accountable for its alleged use of chemical weapons.

A Republican member of the House Armed Services Committee who represents the largest concentration of active-duty military personnel in the nation was preparing a letter to Obama requesting a special session of Congress, currently in recess until Sept. 9, to debate the use of military force in Syria.

“My deep concern here is that President Obama and some of his predecessors have interpreted their authority more broadly than is called for in our Constitution,” Representative Scott Rigell of Virginia, whose district includes Naval Station Norfolk, said in an interview. “We have had a propensity to engage military forces sooner than we have to.”

As of Tuesday evening, Rigell had enlisted 35 other members, including several Democrats, to sign on to his letter to Obama, he said.

The pressure on Obama to recall Congress also could build as a result of the decision in Britain to recall Parliament. Prime Minister David Cameron announced Tuesday that he would cut short his vacation, and officials said Parliament would be called upon to return early from its summer recess to discuss Syrian options. Obama and Cameron consulted by phone Tuesday.

Obama said last year that he would be compelled to take action if Syria crossed what he called a “red line” by using chemical weapons. The administration said earlier this week that there was “undeniable” evidence that the line had been crossed, buttressed by video of hundreds of Syrians, including children, apparently killed by chemical attacks.

“There is no doubt who is responsible for this heinous use of chemical weapons attack in Syria: the Syrian regime,” Vice President Joe Biden said Tuesday in a

speech to the American Legion. “Those who use chemical weapons against defenseless men, women, and children should and must be held accountable.” Obama’s options are limited. He has all but ruled out sending troops to fight on the ground. Russia is likely to veto an effort at the United Nations to pass a resolution for military intervention. As a result, Obama has to decide whether to take action unilaterally or with a small coalition, and what type of action to take. Obama’s aides said they are considering strategic strikes, such as cruise missile attacks against chemical weapons sites, not a full-fledged aerial assault designed to remove Syrian President Bashar Assad.

White House press secretary Jay Carney said the administration was consulting with members of Congress, but he stopped short of saying whether they would be called back to take any vote authorizing action.

“I don’t want to engage in speculation about a course of action that has not been decided upon,” Carney said. “When the president has an announcement to make, he’ll make it.”

The situation is delicate for Obama because of some of his past statements. In 2007, when he was running for president, he responded to a Globe questionnaire that asked him to describe scenarios under which a president could bomb Iran without seeking a use-of-force authorization from Congress.

“The president does not have power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in a situation that does not involve stopping an actual or imminent threat to the nation,” Obama said in a written response.

If Obama does order the use of military force without congressional authorization, he would be following the same path he took in 2011 when US and NATO forces established a no-fly zone over Libya and provided air support for rebel forces seeking to overthrow the government of Moammar Khadafy.

Carney on Tuesday argued that if the United States allowed Syria to use chemical weapons “on a significant scale” without responding, it “would present a significant challenge to or threat to the United States’ national security interests.”

Carney also said that, while the United States wants Assad to be deposed, the military action that Obama is contemplating is not to remove him, but to punish Syria for using chemical weapons.

“I want to make clear that the options that we are considering are not about regime change,” Carney said. “They are about responding to a clear violation of an international standard that prohibits the use of chemical weapons.”

As Obama mulled the options, US officials conferred closely with longtime ally France, as well as Britain, about a possible military response.

Some leading members of Congress, meanwhile, said they wanted more discussion about action aside from a military strike, such as economic sanctions.

Senator Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat, cautioned that even a limited military campaign could escalate into a broader war involving the United States.

“This action will likely draw us into a much wider and much longer-term conflict that could mean an even greater loss of life within Syria,” Murphy, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, said in a statement, calling on the president to “exercise restraint, because absent an imminent threat to America’s national security, the US should not take military action without congressional authorization.”

Others expressed concern about the possibility of an escalating war.

“There is a risk that when this does not have dramatic effect that people will say, now that our credibility is on the line, we need to do more,” warned Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy at the CATO Institute, a leading libertarian think tank. “If I thought there was some magical military instrument that would bring an end to the civil war I would be sympathetic. But there is not.”

Some analysts said the administration’s pledge to hold Syria accountable does not necessarily have to require a military response — at least not until more scrutiny is given to the mounting evidence of chemical weapons use and the aims of any military intervention are more fully delineated.

“There is no urgency for anything to happen this week or before Congress gets back in session,” said Robert J. Naiman, policy director of Just Foreign Policy, a nonpartisan research organization that seeks what it calls “a foreign policy based on diplomacy, law, and cooperation.” “I worry this is a policy in search of a justification. It is like the decision has already been made.”

But the pressure also grew on Tuesday for Obama to act forcefully and quickly. Senator John McCain, a Republican of Arizona, continued his criticism of Obama for not arming anti-Assad rebels sooner and for not acting on previous reports of the more limited use of chemical weapons by the Syrian military.

Top US officials, meanwhile, appeared to be locking in support for a military response.

Secretary of Defense Chuck R. Hagel, traveling in Asia, made a round of calls to close US allies.

“Secretary Hagel conveyed that the United States is committed to working with the international community to respond to the outrageous chemical attacks that

have claimed the lives of innocent civilians in Syria,” said George Little, Hagel’s spokesman.

Israel, Syria’s neighbor and close US ally, was also preparing for the potential for a wider conflict in the coming days.

“The State of Israel is ready for any scenario,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday after meeting with his top security officials in Tel Aviv. “We are not part of the civil war in Syria, but if we identify any attempt whatsoever to harm us, we will respond, and we will respond in strength.”

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