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## Turkey says chemical arms use would escalate Syria crisis



Turkey said on Friday any use of chemical weapons by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would “take the crisis to another level”, but remained cautious about any foreign military intervention in the conflict on its border. The White House said on Thursday Assad’s government had probably used chemical arms on a small scale, but that President Barack Obama needed proof before he would act. “We have been hearing allegations of the use of chemical weapons for quite some time now and these new findings take things to another level. They are very alarming,” Turkish foreign ministry spokesman Levent Gumrukcu said. “Since the very first reports of chemical weapons being used in Syria emerged we have been asking for a thorough investigation by the United Nations to substantiate these reports. However, the Syrian regime has not allowed this.” Syria, which has so far denied access to U.N. investigators because of a dispute over their remit, denies firing chemical weapons and accuses anti-Assad rebels of using them. “This has been done by organizations, including al-Qaeda, which threatened to use chemical weapons against Syria. They have carried out their threat near Aleppo. There were victims,” Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi said in Moscow. “The Syrian army does not have chemical weapons,” Interfax news agency quoted Zoubi as saying. A once-fervent advocate of foreign intervention in Syria, Turkey has grown increasingly frustrated with the fractured opposition to Assad and with international disunity. Asked whether Turkey would allow foreign military action in Syria from its soil, Gumrukcu said the facts about chemical weapons usage needed to be substantiated first.

### Red line

“Let’s not jump to that right now, let’s have a thorough investigation,” he said, adding any response if the claims were verified would need to be discussed among the “Friends of Syria” grouping of the opposition’s Western, Arab and other allies. The U.S. disclosure created a quandary for Obama, who has set the use of chemical weapons as a “red line” Assad must not cross. It triggered calls from some hawkish Washington lawmakers for a U.S. military response, which the president has resisted. Ankara had been pushing for a foreign-protected “safe zone” inside Syria that could serve as a refuge for civilians caught up in the chaos and ease the burden on refugee camps in Turkey, now housing more than a quarter of a million people. But it has been less vocal in recent months and officials were privately cautious about the latest U.S. disclosure. “[The] statements are very vague and they themselves do not seem to be very confident of their arguments,” one source close to the Turkish government said. “Turkey has been voicing some concerns to that end as well but without proof, I don’t think any further steps than the current level of involvement would be made,” the source said.

“Intervention is very risky.” The European Union also responded cautiously, saying it hoped the United Nations would be able to send its investigating mission to Syria to check for chemical weapons use. “We are still monitoring this along with our international partners to see what has really happened because it doesn’t seem entirely clear at this point in time,” said Michael Mann, a spokesman for EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton. “We’ve seen that the regime in Syria doesn’t seem to have much respect for human life, but we can’t be definitive on this until we see definitive evidence,” Mann said.