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Eyeing Syria, White House woos regional rulers



When President Barack Obama meets over the next month with leaders from Mideast and other regional nations, he will have a timely opportunity to try to rally the Syrian opposition's main backers around a unified strategy to oust Syrian President Bashar Assad. Jordan, Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates - whose Sunni Muslim leaders will meet separately with Obama starting April 16- are all believed to be arming or training rebel forces seeking to overthrow Assad's regime. But disparate political, geographic and religious considerations have led to conflicting approaches to which rebel factions to back and what kind of support to provide. Infighting among mostly Sunni opposition groups and their failure to agree on a power structure to take over if Assad falls has been an important factor aiding the Alawite president as he clings to power two years into a civil war that has left at least 70,000 dead. Alawites are an offshoot of Shiite Islam, and the civil war has largely broken down along sectarian lines. As resolute as Obama and most U.S. allies are that Assad must go, officials are increasingly worried about what Syria will look like if the regime falls before opposition groups can agree on a governing structure. That has resulted in extra U.S. pressure on regional allies to convince the opposition to unite. White House spokesman Jay Carney said the high-level visits by leaders from the four nations reflect Obama's "deep personal interest" in the region and his commitment to the policies the U.S. is advocating. "He will use these opportunities to discuss the complex developments in the broader Middle East," Carney said. "Not just Syria, but including Syria." He pointed to other developments related to the Arab Spring and Obama's visit in March to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories as other topics the president would likely discuss with the Arab leaders. Secretary of State John Kerry also is returning to the Middle East on Saturday for meetings on Syria and Israeli-Palestinian peace. Additionally, senior Obama administration leaders at the White House, State Department and Pentagon held a high-level meeting Friday that focused on Syria among its top national security priorities, according to two officials familiar with the discussion who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to disclose the talks to the media. Senior U.S. officials have been meeting regularly to discuss a range of options on U.S. involvement in Syria, including whether to arm the rebels. The global community's response to Syria will also be high on the agenda next Thursday, when Obama meets with U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in the Oval Office. Washington has resisted arming the rebels, in part for fear that some weapons could fall into the hands of jihadi groups that are designated as terrorist fronts linked to al-Qaida. But the U.S. has helped train some of the opposition fighters - mostly former Syrian regime soldiers who have defected - in Jordan and tacitly endorsed shipments of arms to the opposition from Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, Kerry said last month that the U.S. will not stop Western nations seeking to open the possibility of arming the rebels, including Great Britain and France. But the bulk of the aid to rebels has come from Sunni-led governments in Turkey and the Mideast - as several Shiite leaders in the regions have spirited weapons, fighters and aid to Assad's forces. Turkey and Qatar, along with Saudi Arabia, are widely believed to have been providing rebels with tanks and surface-to-air missiles to fight regime soldiers. Salman Shaikh, a Mideast expert who specializes in Gulf politics, said those countries have strongly backed the opposition Syrian National Council and its allied fighters - which include elements of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists, as well as secular groups. The United Arab Emirates, by contrast, has been unenthusiastic about aiding Islamist elements of the opposition. Shaikh said the Emirates is believed to be sending limited weapons, like small firearms and ammunition, to secular fighters but mostly have focused on supplying the opposition with humanitarian aid. Syria's protracted civil war has been particularly taxing for Jordan, a close U.S. ally that shared its northern border with