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Diplomats predict Assad will soon launch campaign to retake Aleppo

By Sheera Frenkel

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Diplomatic observers in Jordan say they believe Syria is preparing to launch a military offensive to recapture the city of Aleppo, perhaps by as soon as this weekend.

The observers, who agreed to discuss their view of Syrian military actions on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the topic, said the Syrian army has made steady advances in both the country's north and south, and it appeared to be setting the stage for what one Western diplomat formerly based in Syria called Operation Northern Storm to seize Aleppo, Syria's largest city and once the country's economic center.

"The last players are getting into place as we speak. In another few days the stage will be set for them to retake the city," the diplomat said. "They saw their success in Qusayr and feel they now have the momentum behind them."

A half-dozen other officials and experts interviewed by McClatchy made similar predictions, saying forces loyal to President Bashar Assad stood a good chance of recapturing at least major parts of the portions of the city that rebels now hold.

"It won't be an easy fight and the rebel groups in Aleppo will fight every street. Assad, however, has the support he needs and the weapons he needs to smoke them out," said the diplomat. "If he takes the countryside around Aleppo, it is only a matter of time."

The rebels currently control roughly half the city of Aleppo and much of the countryside to the north, toward the border with Turkey. The rebels first launched an offensive into Aleppo in July 2012 and fought pro-Assad troops street by street, gaining steadily until September, when the battle became a stalemate.

According to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Syrian army already is clashing with rebel fighters near the villages of Zahra and Nibbul, on the outskirts of Aleppo, in a campaign to cut rebel supply lines to the city.

Observers say they expect the government offensive will include thousands of members of the Lebanese militia Hezbollah, whose presence many consider critical to the pro-Assad victory at Qusayr. Iranian troops also may play a part.

"We have seen Iranian officers or advisers assisting the Syrian army in the past, but now we are seeing significant numbers engaged in combat," said an Israeli official, who added that "several thousand" Iranian soldiers had entered Syria in the last month. "Whether through Hezbollah or through its own fighters, Iran has thrown its whole might into the Syrian civil war to ensure that it retains control there."

The expectation of a Syrian government offensive in Aleppo comes as the Obama administration is reported to be discussing whether it should begin sending arms directly to rebel forces to help stave off Syrian military advances.

But regional experts said that even if the United States were to agree to send arms, a step that is hardly certain, the weapons would not arrive fast enough to aid rebels in their battle for Aleppo.

"If the U.S. were to take action, even serious action, now, most of the assessments think that will be too little too late," said one European diplomat based in Amman.

Even as Russia provides Assad with weapons, the Russian ambassador to Jordan said the West's sending arms to the rebels would be "inappropriate" and a "violation."

"The more weapons that are there, the less the chance there is for a political solution," Ambassador Alexander Kalugin said. "What the U.S. or Europe is doing by talking about arming the rebels is the same as bringing liquid fuel to an already burning fire."

He said Russia still favored a peace conference that Washington and Moscow agreed to call but which has been postponed until July, at the earliest.

Western diplomats here say they see little prospect of a serious effort at peace on the part of the Syrian government.

"Assad has become emboldened by his success and now has what he thinks is a winning combination to take back large swaths of his country," said another Western diplomat based in Amman. "We have, along with many others, re-evaluated our outlook, which previously saw him not holding onto power."