How Russia Still Abets Mideast Terror

by **John Hannah (/experts/john-hannah)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

John Hannah (/experts/john-hannah)
John Hannah is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

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After the landmark agreements between Israel, the Palestinians and Jordan, all eyes turn toward Syria. Will President Hafez Assad also make Israel a peace offer it can't refuse? Or will he continue his double game of negotiating with one hand while supporting terror with the other?

Consider this curious -- and troubling -- incident: On Aug. 8, Russian transport planes touched down in Damascus to unload a deadly cargo: components for Scud-C ballistic missiles capable of carrying chemical weapons and reaching targets deep inside Israel.

In a bizarre twist, the missile parts were not even of Russian origin; rather, they came from North Korea. The Russians, adopting a novel post-Cold War role for themselves, were merely acting as delivery men.

Moscow's readiness to grease the military pipeline running between North Korea's Stalinists and Syria's dictator troubles U.S. policy makers for any number of reasons. Both North Korea and Syria remain charter members of the State Department's rogues' gallery, prominently mentioned on its list of major state sponsors of international terrorism. Worse yet, if history is any guide, part of the Scud-C consignment has since almost certainly found its way to Iran, terrorism's global headquarters.

Russia's actions fly in the face of major U.S. diplomatic initiatives under way at the time:

With North Korea, to stop its efforts to develop nuclear weapons and market its ballistic missiles to the world's hot spots, especially the Middle East; With Syria, to broker a breakthrough in peace talks with Israel. (The shipment arrived just two days after U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher had left Damascus at the end of a week of intense efforts to resurrect Arab-Israeli negotiations.) Also troubling is the fact that the delivery was made amid a flurry of new Russian promises to abide by the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), a multinational effort to restrict ballistic-missile proliferation. Indeed, Russia's Prime Minister dutifully made such promises again during his recent trip to Washington, winning lucrative pledges of U.S. space co-operation in return.

The MTCR clearly rules out the transfer of Scud-Cs. While a case might be made that simply transporting, as opposed to actually supplying, missile components does not violate the letter of the pact, it makes a mockery of its spirit.

The Russian role certainly makes sense. Twice before, North Korea sought with great trouble to use its own surface ships to deliver Scud-Cs to Syria and Iran. On the first occasion, in late 1991, a freighter was forced to retreat when Israel threatened to sink it. Then, in the spring of 1992, a ship succeeded, despite the threat of interception by the U.S. Navy, when it unexpectedly diverted from Syria to an Iranian port; from there, Iranian planes flew some of the

missiles to Damascus.

Using Russia as an intermediary offers several advantages. Logistically, its massive aerial-transport capabilities dramatically speed delivery time, while reducing opportunities for detection and sabotage. From a political standpoint, Russian involvement provides foolproof security -- it is impossible to imagine the United States or Israel blowing a Russian plane out of the sky, much less one belonging to Boris Yeltsin's "democratic" Russia.

Apologists for Mr. Yeltsin's regime are quick to explain away such incidents; they suggest that rogue elements in Russia's military-industrial complex are acting without his knowledge.

Perhaps. But if true, this raises its own set of deeply disturbing questions about command and control in a country still aiming thousands of nuclear warheads at North American cities.

And if Mr. Yeltsin truly was unaware of the operation at first, why didn't he stop it when he was finally informed? Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said that Mr. Christopher told him about the Scud shipment at least 48 hours beforehand. So, Washington must have been in touch with Moscow by then in an effort to halt it. Did Mr. Yeltsin try to do so and fail, or did he reject the U.S. request?

Either way, the implications for Western interests are dire for at least two reasons. First, there's the Middle East peace process. Two years ago, the demise of Syria's Soviet patron forced President Assad to talk peace with Israel. Getting him to follow in the footsteps of Yasser Arafat and actually make peace with the Jewish state means ensuring that his military option in the Kremlin is not now resurrected.

Second, there is the broader issue of U.S.-Russian relations. Russia's role as matchmaker for North Korea and Syria is just the latest indication that there is trouble ahead. Others include Moscow's contrarian diplomacy on Bosnia, its growing penchant for bullying its newly independent neighbours, its attempt in June to ship rocket-fuel ingredients to Libya, and its readiness this month to initial economic agreements with Iraq.

These developments all suggest that Moscow's foreign-policy muse is not just different from Washington's but working at cross purposes to it, once again.

Mr. Hannah became deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy this year after leaving the U.S. State Department's policy-planning staff. ❖

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