

# Potential Iranian Responses to NATO's Missile Defense Shield

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



## Brief Analysis

The new "Strategic Concept" that NATO is expected to adopt at its Lisbon summit this weekend offers the advantage of an early initial capability to defend Europe against the emerging Iranian ballistic missile threat, even though -- in deference to Turkish sensibilities -- NATO is not expected to identify Iran as the source of the threat. For now, the Islamic Republic is unable to reach targets in Eastern Europe, but that could change as early as 2012 if Tehran decides to commence production of the medium-range Sajjil-2 missile. And because the NATO concept hinges first on the deployment of ship-based missile systems to the eastern Mediterranean, followed later by the deployment of land-based interceptors, it entails certain vulnerabilities that Iran could exploit in the near term.

## Elements of the NATO Missile Defense Architecture

NATO's plan for a "territorial" missile defense (combining the Obama administration's "Phased Adaptive Approach" to defending Europe with NATO's "Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence") depends initially on the one or two Aegis destroyers or cruisers that have been deployed to the eastern Mediterranean since 2009 (which might also be needed for contingencies involving Israel). These are expected to be supplemented by additional Aegis ships as they become available, as well as by a land-based X-band radar system in Bulgaria or Turkey in 2011 and land-based Standard SM-3 interceptors (a variant of the type aboard the Aegis ships) in Romania by 2015 and Poland by 2018. Because this missile defense architecture will reduce Iran's future ability to threaten Europe, Tehran might seek ways to degrade or defeat it -- perhaps with help from its allies, the Lebanese Hezbollah and Syria.

## Iran's Lebanese Forward Base

Hezbollah is Tehran's closest ally in its efforts to undermine Israel, deter attacks on its nuclear infrastructure, and reshape regional geopolitics. Relations between the two were further strengthened by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's October 2010 visit to Lebanon.

Hezbollah is part and parcel of Iran's deterrent complex vis-a-vis Israel. To this end, Tehran has supplied many of the 40,000 rockets in the group's arsenal, as well as Mirsad- and Ababil-series reconnaissance and combat

unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and C-802 shore-based antiship missiles. Syria is likewise believed to have provided the group with short- and long-range rockets, and perhaps several Scud missiles to strengthen its deterrent posture (though the missiles and their crews are reportedly still in Syria).

Over the past three decades, Hezbollah has conducted a number of highly sensitive operations in conjunction with Iran's security services. These include a series of bombings in Paris in 1986, aimed at pressuring France into halting arms sales to Iraq; the 1992 assassination of Iranian Kurdish opposition leaders in Berlin; the 1996 Khobar Towers barracks bombing against U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia; and, since 2003, the arming and training of Shiite insurgents involved in attacks on coalition forces in Iraq. In each case, Hezbollah's security apparatus acted in support of Iranian national security objectives. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the group would help Iran (and Syria) counter NATO missile defenses in the eastern Mediterranean during a crisis or war.

## **Toward a Rudimentary Reconnaissance-Strike Complex**

**H**ezbollah might help Iran target the naval leg of NATO missile defenses by carrying out naval reconnaissance and strike activities, or by permitting Iranian personnel to stage operations out of the group's facilities in Lebanon. Although Hezbollah naval forces have engaged in activities such as sea-based weapons smuggling to Gaza and Lebanon, their capabilities are limited, and they lack combat experience.

Nevertheless, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah recently warned that if Israel blockaded Lebanon in a future war, the group would attack Israeli naval vessels and civilian shipping, perhaps indicating an intention to enhance its naval warfare capability. Hezbollah could also facilitate operations by Iran's more sophisticated and experienced naval guerilla warfare forces, should the latter seek a base on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

Iran could employ various nontraditional means to locate U.S. Aegis ships, including civilian pleasure craft and small boats (which could operate far from Lebanese shores due to the area's generally favorable sea and weather conditions), reconnaissance UAVs launched from the decks of ships, or private planes flying out of Lebanon or elsewhere in the area.

Iran and Hezbollah could also attempt to strike at the Aegis ships using a variety of other means:

- Exploding boats. During World War II, the Italian navy used unmanned exploding boats to sink the cruiser HMS York in Suda Bay, Crete. Al-Qaeda used virtually the same technique in its October 2000 suicide attack against the USS Cole in Yemen. Hezbollah or Iran could employ these tactics against Aegis ships.
- Small boats, human torpedoes, and midget submarines. Iran and Hezbollah could attack Aegis ships using speedboats armed with machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, 107-millimeter rockets, or mines. They could also use human torpedoes or midget submarines armed with torpedoes. Iranian forces pioneered swarm attacks during the Iran-Iraq War, though they were not very effective against large ships. Relatively placid seas would permit the use of such vessels far from Lebanese shores, though it is unlikely that Iran and Hezbollah could penetrate U.S. defenses.
- Combat UAVs. Although Hezbollah's attempts to use combat UAVs during the 2006 war with Israel were unsuccessful, such weapons could be launched from Lebanon or from boats near the Aegis ships. They are capable of delivering small payloads with precision, though it is unclear whether they could penetrate the close-in defenses of Aegis ships or their escorts in order to attack their sensitive radar arrays.
- Short-range missiles. Hezbollah's hundreds of M600 missiles and its handful of Scud missiles (with ranges of 250 and 300-500 kilometers, respectively) are probably not accurate enough to be effective against ships, even if armed with submunition warheads intended to damage their radar arrays. Iran has used missiles with such warheads against naval targets during exercises in the Gulf. Russia's potential delivery to Syria of the 300-kilometer-range Yakhont antiship cruise missile could pose a much greater threat to the Aegis ships if such missiles are transferred to Hezbollah.

## Friends in High Places

Hezbollah might also receive informal assistance from the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). When the group attacked the Israeli corvette INS Hanit during the 2006 war, it reportedly benefited from targeting information provided by Lebanese coastal observers or radar sites. More recently, the LAF has reportedly helped Hezbollah roll up several Israeli spy rings using technology provided by Western firms. Although the LAF leadership might be loath to provide the group with targeting intelligence due to possible ramifications for U.S. assistance to Lebanon, sympathizers within the LAF might secretly do so.

## Conclusions

Although Iran currently lacks a missile capable of reaching Europe, it would be able to hit targets in up to six eastern European countries if it opted to produce the Sajjil-2, which it tested in 2009 and which could become operational as early as 2012. In that scenario, Iran would probably not have enough missiles at first to saturate and overwhelm NATO missile defenses -- its preferred countermeasure. For this reason, Tehran might be tempted to target the defenses' sea-based leg in the eastern Mediterranean, launching attacks from Lebanon in conjunction with Hezbollah.

Given the relatively small number of Aegis ships in the U.S. Navy, the small number of SM-3 interceptors, and worldwide demands for the vessels, NATO could face a window of vulnerability until the first land-based SM-1s are deployed in Eastern Europe in 2015. Until then, any Aegis in the area might be a tempting target during a crisis or war. Thus, NATO should not assume that the sea-based phase of its missile defenses will operate unopposed. In particular, its naval forces should not fall victim to the combination of complacency and arrogance that has sometimes enabled small, unconventional forces to inflict painful blows against larger, more capable conventional navies.

Although Iran and Hezbollah are not currently positioned to disrupt Aegis operations in the eastern Mediterranean, Tehran could alter that situation simply by deploying its existing naval special warfare assets to Lebanon. Tehran may also wish to disrupt any U.S. effort to augment Israeli missile defenses with the Aegis in the event of a war between Israel and Iran. In either case, a surprise attack by Iranian and Hezbollah naval forces could temporarily disrupt Aegis operations, although at high cost to both. Even without such disruption, the dramatic images created by an attack against Aegis ships or their escorts might enable Tehran to claim a propaganda victory, and perhaps shake NATO's confidence in the missile shield.

Finally, the possibility that Iran might use Lebanon as a staging ground for operations in the eastern Mediterranean should draw the attention of NATO. Now more than ever, the alliance has a compelling interest in the outcome of the ongoing power struggle between Hezbollah and its Lebanese political rivals, and a stake in supporting the latter.

*Michael Eisenstadt is director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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