

## It's Not the Scuds, It's Support for the Resistance

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### Articles & Testimony

In late March, reports emerged in the Kuwaiti press that Syria had transferred Scud missiles to Hizballah. One month on, news of the Scud transfer continues to reverberate in Washington and the Middle East. A congressional resolution condemning Syria has been drafted and the confirmation of the Obama administration's ambassador-designate to Damascus has been delayed. Meanwhile, tensions on the Lebanese-Israeli border have spiked, once again raising the specter of war.

Despite the fact that no authoritative evidence has been presented showing that the transfer actually occurred, in many ways the reports appear credible. First, the Israeli accusations were tabled by two unlikely officials -- President Shimon Peres and Minister of Defense Ehud Barak -- who are well-known supporters of Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations. Likewise, although Washington has not officially confirmed the transfer, several statements -- including one from Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Dianne Feinstein and another off-the-record statement by a senior administration official to the Wall Street Journal -- have lent weight to the allegations.

At the same time, the transfer of Scuds to Hizballah would be entirely consistent with the reckless and provocative policies pursued by Syrian President Bashar Assad in recent years. Despite the risks, for example, Damascus for years openly facilitated the movement of insurgents into Iraq to kill Americans and destabilize its neighbor. And Syria -- which proclaims that its "foreign policy depends on supporting the resistance" -- has a track record of providing top-shelf weapons to Hizballah, including the Russian-made Kornet anti-tank system and its own indigenously-produced 220mm anti-personnel rockets. In this regard, the Scuds -- if transferred -- would represent a change of magnitude but not of kind.

Not surprisingly, Damascus and Beirut -- which increasingly is parroting the Syrian line -- have denied the Scud reports. Indeed, in a recent interview with the Italian daily La Stampa, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri derisively likened the Scud claims to faulty US intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Meanwhile, in typical fashion, Hizballah has neither confirmed nor denied the Scud transfer, preferring, in its own inimical way, constructive ambiguity. Hizballah's reaction in fact has been quite similar to the way the organization responded last year to reports that Syria provided it with the IGLA advanced anti-aircraft system, a weapon many analysts believe the Shi'ite militia has indeed obtained.

The Scud crisis is to some extent a tempest in a teapot. An antiquated system, the Scud is more a psychological than strategic threat to Israel. While the missile is capable of carrying WMD warheads or a heavy payload in excess of 1,000 pounds, it does little to expand the already impressive arsenal that Syria has helped Hizballah to acquire. Likewise, this heavy weapon would seem an anathema to the successful highly mobile insurgency tactics employed by the organization since its inception. On April 15, an article in the Kuwaiti daily Al Rai laid out why Hizballah -- irrespective of whether the transfer occurred -- does not consider the Scud to be a significant upgrade to its armory.

According to the anonymous Hizballah official interviewed, while the Scud has a range of 1,000-1,500 kilometers, the fire prep time is a lengthy 45-60 minutes, and it is only accurate to five kilometers. (Reports in the western press suggest the weapon in question, the Scud D variant, is accurate to within 50 meters). Meanwhile, the official said, Hizballah already possesses the Iranian-made (Syria-provided) Fatah-110, which takes "less than four minutes for an experienced hand" to launch and is accurate to within 5-10 meters. Of course, the payload capacity and range are less, but 250 kilometers, the Hizballahi says, "is the distance required for precise strikes in all the land of occupied Palestine". The Fatah-110 is also WMD capable.

Given the negligible strategic benefit the Scud constitutes for Hizballah -- as well as the logistical headaches involved with establishing an infrastructure for the nearly 40 feet tall weapon and its challenging liquid fuel rocket -- and the minimal additional detrimental impact for Israel, the real question is: why have the reports emerged now? Some analysts in the region, including senior officials of the militia, suggest that the government of Israel invented the issue to distract from its current bilateral problems with the Obama administration. Based on Washington's sympathetic response to Israeli claims, however, this explanation isn't particularly convincing.

More likely, Damascus and Tehran engineered the Scud crisis to divert US-led efforts to build an international coalition to sanction Iran for its nuclear endeavors. Indeed, the timing of the reports is eerily reminiscent of Hizballah's cross-border operation on July 12, 2006, which occurred the same day the P-5+1 meeting in Paris was slated to refer the Iranian nuclear issue to the UN Security Council. The kidnapping/killing of Israeli soldiers sparked a war that effectively purchased Tehran nearly another year of unfettered enrichment activity. (While it's impossible to know with any certainty, the new diversion initiative might have been what was discussed at the February 2010 meeting in Damascus between Assad, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Iranian

President Mahmoud Ahmedinezhad).

Today, though tensions remain high, both Israel and Hizballah do not appear interested in an escalation. And until the next war, it will likely not be known whether Hizballah in fact obtained the Scuds from Syria. Nevertheless, for Washington the crisis is a useful reminder that Damascus, whether innocent or guilty of this particular transfer, continues to provide the Shi'ite militia with increasingly advanced capabilities that will make the next war even costlier for Lebanon and Israel. But for Washington, the Scud issue should prompt more than just a temporary refocusing on the well-intentioned but poorly implemented United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which calls for Syria to end weapons transfers to its Iranian-backed allies in Lebanon.

That the Assad regime is upping the ante with Israel via Hizballah at the very moment Washington is working to deepen its diplomatic engagement with Damascus should give the Obama administration pause. If this unhelpful Syrian behavior continues, the Obama administration will likely arrive at the same conclusion the Bush administration reached in 2004: that Damascus actually is -- as it so vociferously claims to be -- a regime dedicated to supporting "the resistance." One year into President Barack Obama's tenure, it may be too early to declare the Syria policy a failure. But the administration's decision earlier this month to renew sanctions against Damascus just might suggest a growing appreciation in the White House as to the nature of the Syrian regime and perhaps for the limits of diplomatic engagement with this self-defined resistance state.

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