

Inside the Syrian Missile Crisis

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Articles & Testimony

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak sent officials in Damascus and Washington scrambling when he claimed Tuesday that Syria is providing the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah with Scud missiles whose accuracy and range threaten more Israeli cities than ever before. His unexpected announcement, though vehemently denied by the Syrian regime, threatens to spark a new war between Israel and its antagonists in the region while further undermining U.S. President Barack Obama's efforts at engagement with Syria.

The alleged missile transfer now looms over the Senate confirmation of Obama's ambassador-designate to Syria, Robert S. Ford, who is slated to be Washington's first emissary to Damascus in more than five years. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's apparent decision to transfer more accurate and longer-range weapons to Hezbollah is a disheartening development for U.S. officials, who had hoped Obama's diplomatic opening would lead the Syrian regime to moderate its behavior. As Damascus arms its Lebanese ally with an increasingly lethal array of weaponry, Syria's credibility as a peace partner for Israel is increasingly in doubt.

Weapons have been flowing from Syria to Lebanon for decades. However, in recent months, reports have indicated that the sophistication of the weapons systems provided to Hezbollah has grown. In October 2009, the British military magazine Jane's Defence Weekly reported that Syria had supplied Hezbollah with M-600 rockets, a Syrian variant of the Iranian Fatah 110, whose rudimentary guidance system can carry a 500-kilogram payload to a target 250 kilometers away.

In early March, the head of the research division of the Israel Defense Forces' Military Intelligence, Brig. Gen. Yossi Baidatz, told the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, that Syria had recently provided Hezbollah with the Igla-S man-portable air defense systems. The shoulder-fired weapon can bring down the Israeli drones, helicopter gunships, and low-flying fighter aircraft that routinely fly over Lebanon to gather intelligence.

Reports of increased weapons transfers surfaced again following Ford's nomination hearing on March 16. Rumors circulated around Capitol Hill that Syria had delivered Scud-D missiles to Lebanon. These reports did not specify whether the missiles were Russian Scud-Ds or Syrian varieties of Scud-Ds, which are upgraded versions of older Scud models that Syria reportedly began producing in mass quantities during the last year. Both missiles have a range of up to 700 kilometers, which means they could hit most, if not all, Israeli cities even if fired from northern Lebanon. Both can carry chemical or biological warheads.

Less than a week after a Feb. 17 visit by Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns -- the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Damascus in more than five years -- Assad hosted Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah at a banquet in Damascus. During the visit, Assad openly mocked U.S. efforts to distance Syria from Iran and stated that his government is "preparing ourselves for any Israeli aggression."

These weapons transfers appear to mark a continuation of Assad's belligerent stance. While Lebanon has long been the battlefield between Syria and Israel, the transfer of these weapons may indicate that the Syrian president is calculating that the next war with Israel could involve strikes on Syrian territory. Conversely, others have postulated that the transfers could also be designed to put pressure on the United States to get Israel back to the negotiating table -- a bizarre tactic that is clearly not working.

In trying to answer these questions, U.S. congressional leaders -- most notably Senator John Kerry -- have visited Damascus over the last few weeks and attempted to engage Assad directly on the issue. The results of the meetings have not been made public. Meanwhile in Beirut, the United States is said to have issued a number of diplomatic demarches to Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri complaining about the transfers. Given that the Lebanese government exercises no control over the Syrian-Lebanese frontier, the demarches are likely to go unheeded.

These revelations have generated conflicting reactions in Washington regarding engagement with Syria. Skeptics say that the uncoordinated engagement by France, Saudi Arabia, the European Union -- and now the United States -- has fueled a bizarre outbreak of "Syrian triumphalism," causing Assad to throw caution to the wind. Syria's decision to send Scuds to Lebanon, they say, proves Damascus is unwilling to distance itself from Tehran. They argue that posting a U.S. ambassador to Syria under current circumstances would send the wrong signal to Damascus and only embolden Assad further.

Advocates of deeper engagement with Damascus argue that sending an ambassador will improve communication with the Syrian regime, thereby averting future crises. One unintended byproduct of Washington's policy of isolating Syria has been the elevation of the importance of Syrian Ambassador Imad

Moustapha, who has proved to be an unhelpful interlocutor. The return of an ambassador to Damascus could provide channels to bypass Moustapha -- and also help avoid an "accident" that, in the atmosphere of rising Syrian-Israeli tensions, could spark a conflict.

The ability of U.S. diplomacy to avert a crisis now depends on the Scuds' current location. Reports citing U.S. and Israeli officials indicate that missiles have crossed the border, but it is unclear how many missiles possibly destined for Hezbollah still remain on Syrian soil. If fighting does break out, diplomats in Washington are concerned that the conflict could distract diplomatic attention from the more pressing U.S. national interest: efforts aimed at halting Iran's nuclear program. In the event of a regional war, Washington would no doubt be distracted from its task of marshaling international support for U.N. sanctions on Iran. By demonstrating that Hezbollah could not be neutralized without Syrian cooperation, the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war helped break the Assad regime's international isolation -- a lesson not lost on Tehran.

Israel has traditionally responded to threats such as these by bombing Hezbollah missile sites in Lebanon. However, Israel has indicated privately over the last year that the next conflict could include strikes inside Syria as well, or perhaps target weapons convoys as they cross the porous Syrian-Lebanese border.

Although the risks of a Syrian counterstrike are great, some Israeli officials might see an advantage in striking at both Syria's and Lebanon's military hardware. Analysts say most decisions to go to war would be based on Israel's strategic calculations in the north. But there are regionwide calculations over Iran as well. If Israel destroys Hezbollah's weapons, it could provide a window of time in which Israeli cities are under a decreased threat of missile attack. This would give Israel a perfect opportunity to strike Iran without risking an immediate retaliation from Tehran's allies to its north. This scenario would not be cost-free for Israel, but given its overriding concern over Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon, Israeli leaders might judge it to be an acceptable level of risk. Given that an Israeli strike on Iran still seems out of the question for the time being, however, this may be one of the reasons why cooler heads have prevailed so far.

At the center of this unenviable situation sits ambassador-designate Robert Ford. The surprising escalation on the part of the Syrian regime represents yet another challenge to Obama's policy of engagement -- not to mention regional peace. Quiet diplomacy has so far managed to prevent the situation from disintegrating into an all-out war. However, if Israel locates the Scuds in Lebanon, this deceptive calm might not last for long.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in the [Program on Arab Politics \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at the Washington Institute. ❖

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