



INSS Insight No. 404, February 14, 2013

Syrian Weapons in Hizbollah Hands

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According to foreign sources, about two weeks ago, Israel attacked targets in Syrian territory. These sources say that a convoy of SA-17 anti-aircraft missiles was attacked en route from Syria to Lebanon.¹

Assuming that a weapons convoy en route from Syria to Lebanon was in fact attacked, what other types of weapons could Syria move to Lebanon, and what ramifications does this have for Israel? What are the possible reasons for Syria choosing to move these weapons to Lebanon at this time?

Background

In recent years, Syria has been Hizbollah's main arms supplier. Hizbollah has received weapons purchased by Syria for its own military, as well as weapons brought from Iran, with Syria in this case acting only as a pipeline. The weapons supplied in recent years have included various types of rockets – 122 mm Grad rockets and the heavier Iranian-made Fajr-3 and Fajr-5. Syrian-made 220 mm and 302 mm rockets have also been transferred to Hizbollah, along with Zelzal rockets and the Iranian-made Fateh 110 (or its Syrian equivalent, the M600). There have also been reports that Scud missile systems (Scud B, C, or D) have been supplied to Hizbollah.

Anti-tank missiles too have been provided, including Kornet missiles, which Syria acquired directly from Russia, and anti-ship missiles, specifically, an Iranian version of a Chinese-made missile. In the realm of air defense, Hizbollah has apparently equipped itself with shoulder-launched Strela and Igla missiles. There have also been reports that mobile SA-8 missile systems were supplied.

Other systems in Syria's possession that would be problematic for Israel should they reach Lebanon are the Strelas and the Pantsyr, both light, mobile air defense systems for point

¹ Syrian sources claimed that a scientific research facility in Jamraya was attacked, not a convoy of weapons. Syrian television showed photos of an industrial facility that was attacked, as well as photos of destroyed vehicles (which appear to be launch vehicles for SA-8 missiles).

defense. The Strelts is actually a set of 2-4 Igla or Igla-S shoulder launched missiles, which is installed on a vehicle. The Pantsyr-S1 is another mobile system for point defense, and is intended to replace the older Tunguska system. It includes a vehicle carrying a radar, short range anti-aircraft missiles, and two 30 mm cannons.

Syria has recently received new weapon systems from Russia. Both of the two main weapon systems in question arrived in Syria after the outbreak of the domestic uprising in March 2011. One is the Buk-M2E missile system, known as SA-17 in the West. The successor to the old Kub/Kvadrat system (called SA-6 in the West), the Buk-M2E is a mobile system with a range of some 50 km, designed to protect ground forces. The other system is the Bastion anti-ship system. It uses the Yakhont supersonic cruise missile, which is designed to operate against ships, though it also has a certain capability against coastal land targets. According to foreign sources, the Israeli attack reflected the fear that these systems, though they new for the Syrian army, would be moved to Hizbollah in Lebanon.

Recent Movement of Weapons

Hizbollah, along with the Bashar Assad regime, has been involved in the conflict in Syria since the outbreak of the uprising. At the same time, it has regularly been reported that weapons were transferred from Syria to Hizbollah. In particular, fears have repeatedly surfaced about the possibility that Syrian chemical weapons would reach Hizbollah.

If this information is in fact correct, then questions arise regarding recent developments. Why would Syria move weapons to Hizbollah precisely when its army is in the midst of heavy fighting on Syrian territory? Of course, it is possible that the Syrian army sees Hizbollah as an ally that can aid it in its war and therefore is eager to arm it. Another possibility is the fear of Israeli intervention in the fighting in Syria, and hence the need to equip Hizbollah, especially with air defense systems to protect against Israel Air Force operations over Lebanon and with missile and rocket systems for deterrence.

A more likely possibility is that the Syrian army is transferring to Hizbollah systems that it does not immediately need for its fighting against the rebels, but which it is interested in keeping on Lebanese territory, where it is safer from rebel attacks. This could explain the transfer of Scud missiles, which are complicated to operate and require a large force; it is difficult to imagine that Hizbollah has the wherewithal to operate these systems. It could also explain the transfer of air defense systems: since the rebels do not have an air force, there is no point in jeopardizing the advanced air defense systems located in areas that might be attacked by the rebels. The same rationale exists for the possible transfer of chemical weapons from Syrian territory to Lebanon.

The question remains regarding the usability of the systems in Hizbollah's possession. Were they given to Hizbollah so that it could use them, under Syrian orders or of its own volition, or were they moved to Hizbollah for storage purposes only? The answer apparently depends on the specific weapon systems. In terms of the various air defense systems, Hizbollah has an operational need to limit IAF capabilities over Lebanese territory. Bringing down an Israeli plane over Lebanon would undoubtedly provide it with a great propaganda achievement. However, it is not likely that Hizbollah would be capable of using chemical weapons, and it is even less likely that it would wish to use such weapons, which would be liable to cause it more serious political damage than any tactical advantage it could gain from their use.

Significance for Israel

Advanced air defense systems in Lebanon would undoubtedly constitute a serious problem for Israel. The IAF operates relatively freely over Lebanon today, gathering intelligence about both Lebanon and Syria. Until now, Hizbollah has apparently had very limited ability, if any, to interfere with this activity. The appearance of air defense systems such as the SA-17 is undoubtedly a red line for Israel, since their presence will make it difficult for the IAF to carry out most of its missions.

Another possible danger is the appearance of Bastion anti-ship missiles in Lebanon, whether they are used by Hizbollah or a Syrian team. If the system, if used from Syria, endangers ships and coastal installations approximately up to Netanya, it could certainly cover the entire coast of Israel if deployed from Lebanon. The fact that the Yakhont is supersonic and flies at a low altitude would make it very difficult for the defense systems of Israel navy ships to cope with it. The entry of this system into Lebanese territory would also certainly constitute a red line for the State of Israel.

