

Israel, Lebanon: Hezbollah's Problematic New Rocket

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Summary

A new addition to Hezbollah's rocket arsenal has increased the militant organization's rockets range to some 185 miles, Israeli defense officials revealed March 27. The rockets create more tactical and operational problems for Hezbollah than they offer benefits to the militant group, however.

Analysis

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officials revealed March 27 that the Lebanese militant organization Hezbollah has obtained rockets with Iranian assistance that have a range of 185 miles. These rockets could wind up posing a threat to Hezbollah, too.

Much has been made of the implications of the range of these new rockets, which can reach Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Israel's nuclear facility at Dimona. A similar threat from another rocket existed during the monthlong conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006. Known as the Zelzal-2, that rocket had a range of 130 miles, putting much of Israel at risk at a time when more than 100 rockets were falling on the Jewish state on some days. But the Zelzal-2 never materialized. How many — if any — Zelzal-2s were destroyed by Israeli warplanes remains unknown.

Focusing on range alone can be misleading, however. A 185-mile range might appear to offer Hezbollah the ability to strike at almost all Israeli targets from inside its strongholds in the Bekaa Valley. But these new weapons are not accurate, and Hezbollah is not likely to possess enough of the rockets to fire salvos large enough to compensate for inaccuracy.

Iran has manufactured numerous unguided rockets based on everything from Brazilian designs to North Korean modifications to the Scud missile. Some have been based on the widely proliferated Soviet Free Rocket Over Ground-7 (FROG-7). These munitions, like their smaller artillery rocket kin, are not equipped with guidance. Their flight is stabilized by fins; the direction and degree of elevation of their launcher is the only input the operator has on its point of impact. The problem is further complicated by wind and the tendency of a long cylindrical body to wobble in the descent phase, further degrading accuracy.

Iran is doing extensive work on missile guidance, however. But while it is not clear what the precise characteristics of this new rocket are — it could be nothing more than a Zelzal-2 with strap-on rocket boosters, or it could be a new design altogether — at present it appears to be nothing more than an unguided rocket. (We have yet to see meaningful indications that ballistic missiles or guidance technology have reached Hezbollah.)

As a rocket's range increases, so does its size and the difficulty of launching it. At the low end of the size spectrum are Palestinian Qassams, homemade rockets that are fired from little more than launch rails of welded scrap metal. They are light, easy to fabricate and disposable. On the other end are the large, purpose-built, transporter erector launcher (TEL) vehicle that both moves and launches a large rocket like the FROG-7 or Zelzal-2.

Three militants can carry a Grad artillery rocket on their shoulders. A small pick-up truck can be modified to launch a handful of artillery rockets and flee (the so-called "shoot-and-scoot" tactic). By contrast, a small crane generally is required to load a TEL. Thus, as the size of the rocket increases, so does the challenge to Hezbollah of fielding it. By moving from small to large vehicles, Hezbollah increases its exposure to Israeli air power, not only in emplacement and targeting — which takes more time — but because the shape and silhouette of a TEL is distinctive and hard to conceal. Rockets of this size are harder to squeeze into the buried, camouflaged and otherwise-concealed arsenals Hezbollah used effectively in southern Lebanon in 2006, and they greatly complicate the militant organization's logistical problems.

Moreover, the 4,000 artillery rockets Hezbollah fired at Israel in 2006 were not military weapons; they were weapons of terror. Their poor accuracy precluded targeting anything smaller than a large town. Though there were casualties, at no point was the integrity of the Jewish state threatened.

Significantly, reports of the Hezbollah weaponry came from Israeli officials. Israel has released numerous reports about Hezbollah's advanced military capabilities as it seeks to build the case for another war against the Lebanese

militant group.

Larger rockets like the Zelzal-2 and Hezbollah's purported new rockets do bring larger warheads to the table. But they are hindered by many of the same failings as smaller artillery rockets. As such, they present more tactical and operational problems for Hezbollah than they offer in benefits.