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Senior source denies reports that Presidents Assad, Medvedev discussed Damascus' offer to place Iskandar missile system on Syrian territory
Roe Nahmias Published: 08.22.08, 10:13 / Israel News

A senior Syrian source has denied recent reports that his country agreed to deploy a Russian Iskandar missile system on its territory, the official SANA news agency reported Friday.

The source, who claimed the reports were false, said that the issue was not even discussed this week in talks held between Syrian President Bashar Assad and his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev.

The Russia Today TV channel reported Thursday that Assad offered to place Russian missiles in Syria in response to the deployment of American missiles in Poland.

According to the report, Assad assumed that placing the missiles on Syrian territory would be an appropriate response to the deployment of US missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Following the reports and the Syrian plan to purchase Russian weapons, Defense Minister Ehud Barak said Thursday that "the defense establishment is analyzing the ramifications of Assad's visit to Russia, with an emphasis on the intentions to purchase advanced weaponry, aimed at upgrading the Syrian army's capabilities."

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is expected to leave for Moscow at the beginning of September in a bid to convince the Russian president to refrain from selling modern weapons to Syria.

Yedioth Ahronoth reported Friday that in a conversation between Olmert and Medvedev, the prime minister said that the Syrians should focus on their channel of dialogue with Israel in order to advance towards a peace agreement, rather than spend billions of dollars on weapons which the Jewish state would eventually be forced to destroy.

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3586189,00.html>

Syria we'll host Russian missile system Russia Today-08-22-08

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{flv}Syria well host Russian missile system RussiaToday-08-22-08{/flv}

Russia says ready to supply Syria with defensive weapons
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MOSCOW, August 21 (RIA Novosti) - Russia is ready to supply Syria with defensive weapons, the Russian foreign minister said on Thursday following a meeting between the two countries leaders in Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad arrived in Russia Wednesday on a two-day visit to discuss bilateral relations and regional developments, in particular the situation in the Middle East and Iraq.

"We are ready, and Dmitry Medvedev has confirmed this, to review a Syrian request to purchase new types of weapons,"

Sergei Lavrov said following the meeting between Medvedev and Assad.

"We will supply Syria primarily with weapons of a defensive nature that will not disturb the strategic balance in the region," he added.

In an interview with Russian business daily Kommersant Assad said before his trip: "Our position is we are ready to cooperate with Russia in any project that can strengthen its security... I think Russia really has to think of the response it will make when it finds itself closed in a circle."

Israeli media reported on Monday that Russia was planning to deploy Iskander surface missiles in Syria and its Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, in response to a proposed U.S. missile shield in Central Europe and arm sales by the U.S. and Israeli to Georgia.

When asked if Syria, a major importer of Russian weapons, would agree to consider the Russian air defense offer, Assad said: "In principle, yes. We have not yet thought about it." The issue of installing Iskander missile-defense systems had been raised by Syria several years ago he added.

<http://en.rian.ru/world/20080821/116199385.html>

Israel fears Russia may sell arms to Syria

On a visit to Russia, Syrian President Bashar Assad reportedly expresses willingness to let Moscow locate advanced weapons in his country.

By Ashraf Khalil, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
August 22, 2008

JERUSALEM -- Fears that Russia might sell advanced weaponry to Syria kicked up a mini-storm of concern in Israel on Thursday.

Syrian President Bashar Assad, in Russia for talks with President Dmitry Medvedev, has been campaigning to acquire weapons systems that include long-range surface-to-surface missiles, according to Russian media reports.

Syria rules out new IAEA visit to bombed site

The news of Assad's reported ambitions prompted immediate hand-wringing among Israeli officials and analysts. Defense Minister Ehud Barak said Israel was "analyzing the ramifications" of Assad's visit.

Knesset member Silvan Shalom said Israel should demand that Moscow refrain from "arming its enemies."

"Arming Syria would lead to a strategic change and could destabilize the Middle East and the world," said Shalom, a member of the right-wing opposition Likud party.

The deal, however, is far from done.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said his country was "ready to consider requests from the Syrian side" on buying more arms. But Lavrov added, "We are indeed prepared to sell only defensive weapons which do not violate the regional balance of power."

Anatoly Yurkov, Russia's acting ambassador to Israel, was even more direct.

"Why in the world would we need to deploy our missiles [in Syria]? Against whom? We have no enemies in the region," Yurkov told the Israeli news site Ynet.

Medvedev phoned Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Wednesday evening to affirm ties between the two countries, according to the Israeli newspaper Maariv. Olmert specifically asked the Russian leader not to approve any sales of advanced weapons to Syria, the paper reported.

The Russian weapons that most concern Israeli officials are the S-300 surface-to-air missile and the Iskander-E, a surface-to-surface missile with a reported maximum range of 170 miles.

The Israeli newspaper Haaretz, citing Russian media, said Assad offered to let Moscow deploy Iskander missiles in Syria as a response to a deal signed by Washington and Warsaw this week to place elements of a U.S. missile defense system in Poland, which has aggravated Moscow's ties with the West.

Although Russian officials remained noncommittal about specific weapons sales, analysts said that closer Russian-Syrian military cooperation was a very real possibility for a variety of reasons.

Moscow remains upset by the nearly universal condemnation it has received for its recent military campaign against Georgia in support of two breakaway regions. Israel helped supply weapons to Georgia, and Assad made a point of defending Moscow's actions during his meeting with Medvedev in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi.

"We understand Russia's stance regarding the breakaway regions and understand that it came in retaliation to Georgian provocation," Assad said.

Moscow also seeks to regain some of its Cold War regional sway, when Syria (under Bashar's father, Hafez Assad) was one of its primary client states.

"The timing of Assad's visit is very important. It happens at the time when Russia is very angry at the United States," said Alexander Golts, a defense analyst for Yezhednevny Zhurnal, an independent Russian online publication. "It is highly possible that Russia, being so angered by the West and the United States, now may sell something very nasty to Syria."

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Times staff writer Sergei L. Loiko in Moscow contributed to this report.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/asection/la-fg-syria22-2008aug22,0,6185840.story>