

## Syrian rockets aimed at Tel Aviv

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Long-range rockets already in place on Golan; is Syria preparing for war?

The latest official IDF intelligence branch assessment, adopted by the Israeli government, is that Syria is not planning to attack Israel. At least not in the coming months.

The accelerated preparations for war undertaken by the Syrian army recently, according to the assessment, are not aimed at launching an offensive, but rather, stem from fears in Damascus that the IDF plans to attack Syria. As proof of this, IDF intelligence researchers point to the fact that the Syrian army has not fundamentally changed its deployment, which is still mostly defensive, vis-à-vis Israel.

However, intelligence officials estimate that there is still a risk of a war breaking out even in the near future as a result of a wrong estimate (here or there) regarding the other side's intentions — a "miscalculation" as it is referred to by IDF intelligence officers. This is why Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made sure to declare Wednesday that he was not seeking war.

This is the official assessment. Yet this is not the complete picture. The truth is that there is no certainty within Israel's intelligence community that Syria is not planning to initiate a military confrontation with Israel. Quite a few researchers in the IDF intelligence branch and Mossad suspect that Syria is waiting for a convenient point in time — which is not necessarily in the distant future.

We're not talking about the kind of war we're familiar with like the Six Day War or Yom Kippur War, but rather, a Hizbullah-style war — but on an immense scale. These arguments and assessments are being taken very seriously by officials in Jerusalem, and this is the reason why the cabinet tasked with monitoring home front preparedness convened again Wednesday for its third or fourth session in order to discuss the possibility of a massive Syrian missile offensive.

Why do intelligence officials fear a Syrian attack? Below are some reasons, based on foreign sources and information already reported by the media:

§ Syria is currently completing the accelerated deployment of a large rocket arsenal on the Golan aimed at Israel. We're not talking about 122-millimeter Katyusha rockets with a 20-kilometer (roughly 12 miles) range and warheads that contain only a few dozens of kilograms of explosives, but rather, heavy rockets of the type possessed by Hizbullah (most of them were destroyed in the Air Force attack at the start of the Second Lebanon War.) These are 222, 302, and even 600 millimeter rockets that can carry hundreds of kilograms of explosives — up to 500 — and can reach Tel Aviv. Dozens of launchers have already been deployed on the Golan and they can fire, in one barrage, hundreds of such rockets. This comes in addition to the various types of Scud missiles positioned deep within Syrian territory and capable of hitting southern Israel. However, the Arrow missile is supposed to intercept the Scuds. Yet at this time, the IDF has no good technological response, either aerial or on the ground, to the heavy rockets.

§ The Syrian army is quickly equipping itself with hundreds of advanced anti-aircraft and anti-tank rockets made by Russia and funded by Iran with the aim of thwarting an IDF ground or air assault — an assault aimed at paralyzing the missile arsenal.

§ Since the end of last year, the Syrian army has accelerated the training sessions of all its formations, both regular and reserve, and already views them as fit for confrontation.

No advance warning

The military implication of the above-mentioned facts, according to some of those tasked with assessing Syrian intentions, is that Syria is preparing and able to embark on a Hizbullah-style war of attrition even without changing its military deployment from a defensive to an offensive one.

Therefore, if Bashar Assad decides to launch such war, there will be no clear advance warning that will attest to his country's intention to embark on a military campaign — and it would be able to launch it based on the current deployment.

In addition, intelligence officials point to a growing Syrian-Iranian interest in such war, for the following reasons:

§ Syria's president is currently confident of his military power and truly believes that if he only adopts the Hezbollah model, he has the ability to force Israel to accept his demands regarding the Golan Heights, and ease some of the international pressure over the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri.

§ Syria sustained harsh blows when it was forced to withdraw from Lebanon and isolated in the international arena. In addition, Sunni opposition elements in Syria are getting stronger. All these factors threaten Assad's regime and the Alawite sect he bases his power on. A military achievement, and even a partial one, in a confrontation with Israel may boost the regime.

§ Teheran is investing efforts to convince Syria that Israel is about to attack it "in order to erase the shame of the defeat in Lebanon" or as part of the clash that will develop as a result of an American assault on Iran's nuclear sites. The Iranians tell the Syrians that President Bush intends to strike in the summer or fall, and they expect Damascus to join Iran's counter-attack on western interests in the region. Therefore, Teheran says, there is a need to prepare and possibly even launch a pre-emptive strike, before Israel possesses effective systems for intercepting rockets. Iranian figures who visited Syria convinced Damascus that the Israeli home front is the Zionist enemy's Achilles heel and that hitting it gravely would force Israel to accept the Arab dictates on the Golan.

In this context, we should be paying attention to what a senior Syrian official told the New York Sun about a month ago. Should the Golan not be in Syrian hands by August-September, Syria would be allowed to embark on a "resistance" campaign, including raids and attacks on Jewish targets, the official said.

The interviewee, who is a member of the ruling Baath party, provided the American newspaper with incredibly detailed information regarding his country's intentions and its military preparations. His words make it appear that Syria is planning a war of attrition that would start with border attacks and continue, after the IDF responds, with severe blows to the Israeli home front. He also noted that Damascus has established for that end a new underground organization, called the Committees for the Liberation of the Golan, which will be tasked with carrying out attacks on IDF border outposts and even infiltrating Golan communities.

The senior official said that Syria possesses hundreds of missiles that would hit Tel Aviv and overcome Israel's interception efforts. We can treat these words with contempt, or as an attempt to scare Israel and the United States in order to bring about negotiations on the Golan and ease the pressure over the Hariri affair. Yet the facts on the ground fully support the Syrian official's thesis, and therefore it would be worthwhile to address his words seriously.

One way or another, the information and declarations coming from Damascus create a high level of uncertainty within Israel's intelligence community regarding the other side's intentions. And in cases of uncertainty, one must prepare for the worst-case scenario.

by Ron Ben Yishai, Aug. 9, 2007, YNetNews