

## IDF assessment: Syria thinks Olmert wants to launch war

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Damascus does not believe Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's public statements of reassurance that Israel has no intention of attacking Syria, and is genuinely concerned about an Israeli preemptive attack, according to official Israeli assessments.

Olmert's attempts over the last few weeks to calm Syrian jitters have not been overly successful, and Syrian President Bashar Assad still believes he plans to attack, according to these estimates.

Just over two weeks ago, at a National Security College graduation ceremony, Olmert said: "I believe, in all my heart, that this summer and the fall will not be too hot. There is no reason to exaggerate in creating an atmosphere of the eve of war. Our neighbors know well that we prefer sitting and discussing peace with them, rather than proving to them that we are stronger"

Despite these assurances, the Syrians, according to these assessments, fear that Olmert will attack, in large part, to make up for the failure of last summer's war in Lebanon and to counter what is expected to be a damning final report issued later this year by the Winograd Committee looking into the Second Lebanon War.

Assad, according to this school of thought, believes Olmert's public comments that Israel has no belligerent intentions toward Syria are merely part of a "conspiracy" to lull the Syrians into complacency.

This Syrian concern, according to these assessments, has been fanned by the largest IDF maneuvers in the Golan Heights in some five years. The Syrian jitters are indeed so real that, according to some reports, the Syrian military has canceled large-scale summer training exercises so as not to give Israel a pretense for military action.

Military sources said intelligence shows Syria was nearing the end of an accelerated deployment of a large rocket arsenal of Katyusha and Scud missiles, including Scud D and other improved missiles supplied by Iran, that can deliver 500-kilogram payloads to Tel Aviv with a destructive force large enough to damage entire blocks of buildings.

According to the military sources, launchers now known to be located on the Syrian side could potentially unleash a barrage on IDF installations, infrastructure and civilian targets with missiles numbering in the hundreds within an hour.

IDF officials have said off the record that thwarting such a potentially catastrophic bombardment would be problematic for the Israel Air Force, and that ground forces would therefore need to get deep into Syrian territory quickly to stop the firing at its sources.

Also, according to the officials, Syria had accelerated training periods for its troops, emphasizing guerrilla tactics utilized by Hizbullah against the IDF. The sources said Syrian commandos equipped with advanced antitank missiles had learned from Hizbullah and were known to be stationed along the length of the border.

However, the latest Military Intelligence assessment said these forces remain in a defensive position, and that Syria did not intend to initiate an all-out war with Israel.

Along with accelerated missile deployment, officials in Jerusalem have noticed over the last nine months an increased emphasis inside Syria on its connection to the Golan. This has been manifest in greater media interest inside Syria about the Golan, as well as the launching of a biweekly newspaper last September called The Golan, which has now turned into a weekly.

Meanwhile, in Britain on Sunday, The Telegraph reported that Hizbullah was paying exorbitant prices to buy up large areas from Christian and Druze owners on the northern bank of the Litani River in southern Lebanon, where its fighters were then fortifying positions and stock-piling missiles in anticipation of a second round of hostilities with Israel. This was taking place, according to the report, just beyond the reach of UNIFIL patrols.

The northern bank of the Litani is within 16 kilometers of Israeli border communities, which are well within the range of Hizbullah's replenished arsenal of Katyusha rockets. The strategic valleys and rugged hilltops on the northern bank - well suited to Hizbullah's brand of guerrilla fighting - are just beyond the jurisdiction of the UN peacekeeping force sent to patrol south of the Litani as part of a cease-fire agreement that ended last summer's war.

The Lebanese Army is responsible for security to the north of the river, and half of its forces are believed to be Shi'ite. According to the report, non-Shia citizens in the area have accused the Lebanese Army of turning a blind eye to Hizbullah's activities.

by Herb Keinon and Josh Brannon, THE JERUSALEM POST Aug. 13, 2007 , JPost

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