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## **SYRIA AND LIBYA: BEYOND THE AXIS OF EVIL**

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In a recent speech at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John R. Bolton presented the Bush Administration's perception of threats to U.S. and international security from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and long-range delivery systems. After reviewing the familiar threats from what President Bush termed "the axis of evil," namely, North Korea, Iran and Iraq, Bolton added a new list of "evil states" -- Cuba, Libya and Syria.

### **Syrian and Libyan WMD Programs**

Bolton's account of Syrian and Libyan programs came as no surprise to those acquainted with the Middle East, since both states have been actively pursuing WMD for several decades. Beginning in the early 1970's, Syria procured most of its surface-to-surface missiles (SSM) from the Soviet Union. The first acquisitions were Luna rockets (FROG-7), which were used in the Yom Kippur War. Then came the R-17 (Scud-B) in 1975, and in the mid-1980's, Syria acquired the Tochka (SS-21 "Scarab"). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it turned to North Korea, from which it acquired the improved Scud-C. North Korea, along with Iran, also transferred the know-how to

assemble these missiles and even to produce some of their components. Furthermore, Syria launched a project to upgrade the missiles, and later tested its own "Scud-D." Syria is also interested in the North Korean "No-Dong" and is investing in the capability to produce advanced, solid-fuel ballistic missiles.

Syria also has a chemical weapons (CW) capability of long standing. During the 1980's, it developed the ability to produce Sarin and to weaponize it in aerial bombs and warheads for its Scud-B missiles. During the 1990's, it was able to produce and weaponize deadlier nerve agents, like VX. Syria is also suspected of attempting to develop biological weapons, though not much is known about this program.

Syria's strategic forces are all mobile, but during peacetime they are well dug into tunnels in remote areas. Thus, they are almost invulnerable to attack but can be quickly deployed to any region in the country, thereby threatening the whole area of Israel and most of Turkey (including the capital, Ankara).

Libya also acquired its first ballistic missiles from the Soviet Union in the 1970's, when it procured about 80 R-17 (Scud-B) launchers. This inventory exceeded any conceivable strategic need, particularly since the Scud-B did not reach any serious strategic target in the countries surrounding Libya. (Libya's only

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attempt to use these missiles was a single missile fired at the Italian island of Lampedusa). Libya has been attempting to develop an indigenous missile, called al-Fateh, since the late 1970's, but it seems that the program never came to fruition.

Libya has been involved in the production of chemical weapons since the 1980's. During that decade, there were unconfirmed reports that it had used chemical weapons in Chad. Libya had a large CW production facility in Rabta which it had to shut down and convert to civilian production when media reports about its activities were followed by international pressure. The production of CW was allegedly transferred to other sites (like Tarhouna). Today, most analysts believe that production has ceased, though Libya still possesses large stocks of CW agents.

### **Why do they need it?**

Viewed from Damascus, the world around Syria looks very intimidating. The country is surrounded by Israel, Turkey and Iraq -- all of which pose a potential threat -- though Israel is seen as the main threat. Syria's strategic forces are kept as a deterrent in an attempt to achieve some minimal strategic balance with Israel. But Syria's military shortcomings were clearly demonstrated in 1982, when its air force proved totally incapable of defending Syria's skies, much less inflicting any damage on Israel. Ballistic missiles and non-conventional warheads are believed to be the only way for Syria to retain its national dignity and some capability to deter Israel from carrying out attacks on strategic targets within Syria.

Libya's position is different. The country's leader, Mu'ammar Qaddafi, saw himself as a leader in the ideological struggle against the West, and his arsenal of ballistic missiles and chemical weapons was more of a status symbol than a response to a specific threat.

What threat do these two states pose to global

security? From an Israeli perspective, the threat from Syrian WMD is obviously real. Israel has to invest much energy and resources in a multi-layered system of protection against ballistic missiles and chemical weapons. For its part, Libya is much too weak and far away to constitute a serious threat.

But from a global perspective, things look different. Although both states are mentioned together with other states that might threaten the U.S. itself, it is unlikely that either Syria or Libya would actually pose such a threat. Syria's weapons were acquired in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict and are unlikely to be used against American assets in the region. As for Libya, it is gradually abandoning its posture of confrontation with the West. In 1999, it turned over the two men suspected of bombing Pan Am Flight 103, and it has indicated its intention of joining the Chemical Weapons Convention, though it persists in its efforts to acquire more ballistic missiles.

Finally, it should be noted that what is usually decisive in determining the extent to which weapons are deemed to be a threat is the political orientation of the government controlling them. The best example of this is Egypt, which has a large inventory of ballistic missiles, pursues programs to enhance its capabilities, and is also suspected of possessing an arsenal of chemical agents. But Egypt is an ally of the USA and has a peace treaty with Israel. Therefore, its weapons are never mentioned as a threat to global security. The same logic may eventually be applied to Syria and Libya. If those countries change course and align themselves with the United States, their weapons will cease to be seen as a threat to global security. At this point, the possibility of that happening seems rather remote, particularly in Syria. But in Libya, trends in recent years suggest that a process of reorientation, however uncertain, might already be underway.