

# The Syrian Army Buildup

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In recent months much has been made in the media of concern over an imminent war with Syria. The basis for these assessments is three-fold: first, preparations taken by the Syrian army; second, the range of political statements by Syria, Israel, and the United States; and third, the backdrop of a buildup process that has been underway in the Syrian army for approximately two years.

This essay will survey developments in Syria, both in terms of the military buildup and preparation measures. It will present three main arguments. First, the buildup underway in the Syrian armed forces is a normal process for a military. After a long period during which Syria was forced to neglect procurement and buildup operations totally, previously closed doors were suddenly opened and it is making the most of this opportunity. Second, the buildup process is focused on defense and deterrence means. Third, tension of this sort does not necessarily indicate intent to launch an offensive, but it does entail risks of escalation that can lead to a war that neither side wants.

## Background

After the Second Lebanon War, President Basher al-Asad called on Israel to begin talks on liberating the Golan Heights. It appears that there were also secret contacts on the matter between Israeli and Syrian officials. At the same time, aggressive rhetoric regarding the liberation of the Golan Heights through military means increased. President Asad himself declared immediately after the war in Lebanon that “there are alternatives to diplomatic options,” and even explicitly claimed that Syria is liable to attack Israel if the latter does not withdraw from the Golan, such that “even [its] atomic bomb won’t save [it].” Syrian state television interviewed

Hizbollah leaders who told the Syrian public that liberating the Golan through military means would be an easy task. More recently, Syrian prime minister Otari visited Kuneitra and announced the Golan Heights Festival.

In Israel too there were gloomy assessments. The IDF intelligence assessment in early July maintained that Asad had yet to decide on war, but that there was a perceptible increase in hostility from Syria. Similar concerns over war with Syria were expressed by senior Israeli spokespeople: the Israeli ambassador to Washington, Sallai Meridor, noted in an interview that Israel is facing the largest military buildup along the Golan Heights border since 1973.

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## Military Buildup

For many years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Syrian armed forces were plunged into a crisis, given the loss of their patron that had supplied them with arms and technical support. Unlike the Soviet Union, Russia was not prepared to provide Syria with arms and technical support gratis. Moreover, Russia asked Syria to pay its debt for weapon systems it had received previously, a debt that totaled about \$11 billion and has increased over the years. As a result, Syria stopped acquiring weapon systems, and over many years its military prowess decreased as its arms became obsolete and it suffered a severe shortage of spare parts.

This situation notwithstanding, there were repeated reports of major arms deals between Syria and Russia. Ultimately, the only significant deal that was completed was Syria's purchase of Metis-M and Kornet-E anti-tank missiles in 2000, some of which were passed on to Hizbollah.

The breakthrough in acquisition and technical assistance relations with Russia came in 2005, when Russia agreed to write off 73 percent of the Syrian debt. A settlement was also reached over an installment plan for the outstanding debt, part in cash and part in goods. The end of the debt affair generated a wave of reports about large weapons sales to Syria. At the same time, the US and Israel applied pressure on the Russian government to refrain from providing systems that once in Syrian hands could upset stability in the Middle East. In particular, the Iskander-E surface-to-surface missiles and the S-300 anti-aircraft missile system were mentioned in this context.

The breakthrough in Syrian-Russian relations was not a result of Russian altruism. The Russia of Vladimir Putin has revived its

interest in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. As part of these renewed ties the Syrians agreed to allow the Russian fleet to operate from the port of Tartous, as was the case during the Cold War. Periodic infrastructure work at this port (including deepening the harbor) will allow the Russian fleet to operate from there freely.

The Syrian buildup is not limited to acquisitions from Russia. Two aspects in particular are noteworthy. One relates to the special security ties between Syria and Iran: the two states have maintained close security cooperation for many years, and they jointly develop weapon systems, such as ballistic missiles. Syria's current buildup includes both Iranian financial aid for Syria's purchases from Russia, and trilateral deals of joint acquisitions of arms and purchases of Iranian manufactured weapons – weapons that are generally a licensed copy or production of arms designed by Russia, China, or even the US. The July visit to Syria by Iranian president Ahmadinejad was accompanied by reports – denied by Tehran – of an agreement by Iran to finance weapons to Syria to the tune of one billion dollars.

The second aspect is connected to the Syrian defense industry itself. The industry, despite lagging far behind the Iranian industry, has been assembling Scud missiles for several years (in cooperation with North Korea and Iran). The industry also manufactures rockets, notably the 220 mm and 302 mm rockets, which are of Syrian design and have been absorbed by the Syrian forces in recent years and even passed on to Hizbollah.

## Details of the Buildup

What, then, does the buildup process incorporate? The Syrian buildup is particularly noticeable in the area of anti-tank missiles,

**The buildup underway in the Syrian armed forces is a normal process for a military, and is focused on defense and deterrence measures.**

**It appears that the Syrians have applied the lessons of the Second Lebanon War and have deployed rockets in camouflaged underground installations.**

air defense for ground forces, and naval forces.

### ***Anti-tank Missiles***

After the end of the Second Lebanon War there were reports of Syrian transactions for additional large numbers of Metis-M and Kornet-E anti-tank missiles. These missiles, which were acquired by Syria in the past, made their way to Hizbollah. Syria also purchased for the first time the most advanced anti-tank missile produced by the Russian defense industry – the Khrizantema system. The new anti-tank missiles will enable Syria to defend itself against tanks and other armored vehicles from great distances, up to six kilometers. The Second Lebanon War also showed that the missiles are effective against a range of targets, such as buildings.

### ***Air Defense***

In the area of air defense the Syrians concentrated on mobile systems for point specific defense and on portable missiles. The first deal that attracted attention was Syria's plan to purchase advanced Igla-S (SA-18) shoulder-held missiles. The deal, which was initiated in 2003, was blocked by international pressure on the Russian government due to concern that these missiles would make their way to terror organizations, in particular to Hizbollah. The solution arrived at was to develop a new system specifically for Syria – the Strelets system. This is a light armored vehicle that carries four Igla-S missiles that cannot be removed and held on the shoulder. The deal was completed in 2006, although there may be another deal for more of this type of vehicle.

Another deal in the field of air defense includes thirty-six (some reports say fifty) Pantsyr S-1 systems. This system, which is the

successor to the Tunguska system, includes a vehicle that carries missiles and canons. The system was developed for and funded by the United Arab Emirates. Development of the system was recently completed.

With regard to the older air defense systems, there are unsubstantiated reports of Syria's intent to upgrade its SA-3 systems, similar to the upgrade that was carried out by Egypt. The air defense systems that were purchased were designed to enhance the Syrian ability to defend against aerial attack and thereby attempt to neutralize the supremacy of the Israeli air force. Most of the systems that were purchased are mobile, and their main purpose is to protect the ground forces, including forces in motion.

### ***The Navy***

The Syrian navy has been badly neglected over the last decade, and its fighting ability and the usability of its ships have deteriorated. The buildup process began with Iranian aid only recently, and is mainly based on Iranian imports. The most important weapon system acquired by the navy is the C-802 missiles – a Chinese sea-to-sea or shore-to-sea missile manufactured in Iran. These missiles were passed on to Hizbollah, which used them during the Second Lebanon War. Following the war, it became known that Syria acquired very large quantities of these missiles. It appears that most of the missiles are shore-to-sea missiles, and their main purpose is to protect Syria's coastlines. However, the missile's long range will also enable Syria to hit ships far from its coast.

Furthermore, Syria has increased the number of ships in its possession, although there is no information about the type and number of ships acquired. If these were acquisitions from Iran, it is reasonable to assume that the

Iranians sold Syria MIG-S-1800, MIG-G-1900, and MIG-S-2600 rapid patrol boats, all manufactured by Iran. Similar types of patrol boats are used for coastal patrol missions all over the world, although Iran developed a special operational approach whereby a large number of small and rapid craft attack far larger vessels. The Syrian navy may also want to adopt this tactic, which enables a weak fleet without heavy vessels to strike and cause serious damage to a more powerful enemy.

### ***The Air Force***

In June, there were reports – and denials – in the Russian press of a deal for the acquisition of five MiG-31E aircraft. This aircraft, which was developed in the mid 1980s, is an advanced version of the MiG-25 used by the Syrian air force for many years. It is a fast interception plane capable of intercepting targets beyond the horizon using R-33 missiles. However, its other capabilities – including attack of ground targets and even close aerial combat – are very limited. If this aircraft is obtained by the Syrian air force it will pose a threat to the operational ability of the Israeli air force, particularly in the collection of intelligence against Syria.

### ***Missiles and Rocket Weapons***

The Syrian armed forces have worked for many years to improve their surface-to-surface missile capacity, and the Syrian industry, with Iranian and North Korean cooperation, is trying to develop enhanced models of the Scud missile. In addition, in recent years the Syrians have acquired locally produced unguided 220 mm and 302 mm diameter rockets, which were also used by Hizbollah during the Second Lebanon War.

After the war the Syrians began a process of accelerated buildup of rockets and speed-



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ed up acquisitions of short range rockets (such as the Grad). In the field of long range missiles, over the past year the Syrians have accelerated production of the Scud D and Scud C missiles. This past February, the Scud missile was test fired and there was a report of construction of underground launch bases for Scud missiles in the area of Homs and Hamat.

It is difficult to relate to reports about the Scud as a development of immediate deterrence significance, as the processes of development and production of systems like the Scud are long term and take many years. Generally, important milestones of such projects are represented by a gradual, cumulative process and not by a single event with immediate impact. On the other hand, deployment of rockets along the border may be a deterrence development. Such deployment can also be interpreted as the application of lessons learned from the use of rockets during the Second Lebanon War. In the event of a war, it can allow the Syrians to inflict ongoing damage on the Israeli home front, similar to the damage caused by Hizbollah rockets in the summer of 2006.

**Syria has recognized the advantage to be gained from anti-tank missiles as well as the damage that can be inflicted on the civilian front using rockets.**

### **Recent Preparation Measures**

In the past year, the Syrian armed forces took a number of measures that increased their readiness for war. The most prominent move was advancing large scale exercises. This year, the exercises, which are normally carried out in the fall as part of the culmination of the Syrian military's training year, were held in the spring. In addition:

- There have been reports of increased rocket deployment along the Golan Heights front. It appears that the Syrians have also applied the lessons of the Second Lebanon War and have deployed rockets in camouflaged underground installations, which Hizbollah did with great success.

- Forces were moved from deep inside the country and from the Syrian-Iraqi border towards the Golan Heights front. Particularly noticeable was the reinforcement of the 14<sup>th</sup> commando division in the area near the northern Golan Heights and Mt. Hermon. One report suggested that the division was reinforced with an entire brigade that was moved from inside the country.

- Logistical infrastructures, including storage facilities that can provide arms, and fuel resources were transferred to the south of the country.

- "Villages," some inhabited and some not, were constructed near the Golan Heights front. These were designed to force the IDF, if it attacks, to fight in a built up area where, the Syrians believe, the IDF will be in an inferior position.

These measures, however, do not involve the advance of major conventional army forces to the actual frontline. The disengagement agreements between Israel and Syria, drawn up in 1974, limited deployment of forces in the region. General Jilke, commander of the UNDOF force, said his forces had

not noticed any military moves and that the situation there is calm.

### **Not Included in the Buildup Process**

The Syrian army was neglected for many years, and its equipment acquisition process stalled after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was natural to expect, as the acquisition process resumed, that the armed forces would replenish their weapons with major weapon systems, but this did not happen. For example, one of the most noticeable absences is main battle tanks. The Syrian army uses T-72 tanks, yet except for one brigade, whose tanks were upgraded with Italian-manufactured fire-control systems, there have been no reports of new tank acquisitions or upgrade kits. There is also no information about any buildup of any other armored combat vehicles.

The air force is in a similar situation. It acquired MiG-29 aircraft at the end of the 1990s, and since then has not made any purchases. It continues to use outdated MiG-23 and MiG-21 aircraft. It is natural for the air force to want to build up its equipment – with the new versions of the MiG-29 jets, by upgrading its aircraft to more advanced configurations, or with Su-27 jets and its more advanced versions. However, this process is not taking place. Even if MiG-31 jets are acquired, it will only be in small numbers and for very special missions. Such aircraft cannot provide the backbone of a multi-task air force.

The Syrians might also be interested in acquiring other systems, for example, long range air defense systems such as the S-300PMU-1/2 and medium range mobile air defense systems that would replace the outdated SA-6 model, systems such as the Buk-M1 (SA-11) or Buk-M1-2 (SA-17).



## Conclusion

The renewed links between Syria and Russia provide the Syrian army with a means of reinforcement and renewal that the Syrian leadership believes is long overdue. The purchase and installation of new weapon systems is a long though essential process for the Syrian armed forces, as it would be for any military. As such, the buildup process should not be viewed as a development with immediate deterrence-related significance.

The Syrian leadership opted for a buildup tailored specifically to its needs and based on the view that it is not able to stand up to the IDF in a conventional battle – tanks versus tanks, air force against air force. The lessons learned from the Second Lebanon War accentuated this trend in Syria's strategic military approach. It understood the limitations of the IDF and recognized the advantage to be gained from anti-tank missiles as well as the damage that can be inflicted on the civilian front using rockets.

The focus of the Syrian buildup is defensive: air defense systems are naturally used as defense systems against an attacking air force. The various types of anti-tank missiles are also used principally for protection against offensive armored forces, and are basically not an attack weapon. In the navy, too, the emphasis is on surface-to-sea missiles fired from small coastguard vessels and used to protect the coast, not as a means of attack. The situation is the same with the air force. If the Syrians do acquire the MiG-31, this aircraft will almost certainly be used to thwart operations of the Israeli air force.

The nature of the Syrian buildup indicates the asymmetric character of the weapons acquisitions. Syria is not acquiring tanks to combat Israeli tanks, or fighter jets to engage Israeli jets, or missiles ships to be used

against the Israeli navy. In any case it prefers guided weapons that will enable it to inflict damage on Israel's main weapon systems.

With regard to rockets and surface-to-surface missiles, it appears that the Syrians' main advantage is deterrent. It would allow the Syrians to respond to an Israeli attack in a manner that will make it very difficult for Israel to defend itself, as proven by the Second Lebanon War. On the other hand, rocket weapons as used by Hizbollah cannot constitute an almost exclusive means of attack. This is because Syria is a sovereign state where there is "an address" that the Israeli response can target. As a state, Syria can be deterred, in contrast with a sub-state organization such as Hizbollah that has no responsibility towards the citizens of the country in which it lives and operates.

The buildup process and preparatory steps taken by the Syrian army are thus designed to allow the Syrians to protect themselves against Israeli attack: on the one hand the Syrian army will be able to inflict heavy damage on the IDF if it attacks, and on the other hand, it can threaten the Israeli home front in the case of such an attack.

A more problematic issue is whether the Syrians are taking these steps due to concern over an Israel-initiated attack, or they are preparing to launch a war themselves. Such a war could start with a surprise move by a Syrian commando unit on Mt. Hermon or on the Golan Heights, and could evolve into a war in which the IDF is drawn into fighting in difficult conditions: in built up areas and against anti-tank missile facilities and heavy surface-to-air missiles, while the Israel home front is attacked by rockets and long range missiles.

There is no way of knowing precisely what the Syrian leadership has in mind. On

the one hand, the voices coming out of Damascus are certainly cause for concern, and may indicate preparations for a proactive war aimed at jumpstarting a process that will restore the Golan Heights to Syria on comfortable terms. On the other hand, such calls may be deterrent messages designed to preempt an Israeli attack. Moreover, examination of the Syrian buildup indicates that the process is in its early stages. Some of the new weapon systems have yet to reach Syria, and the Syrian military needs more time in order to absorb the new systems. It is difficult to assume that the military considers itself ready to take on a proactive confrontation at the moment. However, the tense situation that has arisen following the developments on the Syrian side and on the Israeli side may

generate a process of escalation in the form of declarations and military moves that may spark acts of hostility at stages undesirable to both sides.

Finally, one cannot examine the Syrian buildup on its own without also addressing the other forces that come into play here. On the one hand, there are the close ties between the current Syrian regime and Hizbollah in Lebanon and Iran, ties that may embroil Syria in a conflict that is intertwined with Iranian or Lebanese domestic interests. On the other hand, Russia's increasing involvement may actually act as a restraining factor, as Russia's main interest is to maintain a base in the Mediterranean that will enable it to renew its influence in the Mediterranean basin. War in Syria could damage that interest.