

# Israel Sends Staunch Warning to Russia, Syria

U.S. officials told *The Wall Street Journal* on Thursday that another round of Israeli airstrikes could target a new Russian transfer of advanced anti-ship missiles in the near future. Israeli and Western intelligence services believe the Yakhont missiles, which have been sold by Russia to Syria in recent years, could be transferred to Hezbollah within days, the newspaper reported on its website Friday.

At the same time, *The New York Times* reported Friday that the Yakhont missiles have already been delivered to Syria's armed forces. Israel has repeatedly reinforced, with words and actions, its stated red line: that it will not allow the transfer of "game-changing" weaponry to Islamic terror groups such as Hezbollah. Israel has also relayed messages that it is not seeking a confrontation with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, but will act against transfers of weaponry through his territory.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's last-minute trip to Russia on Tuesday apparently did not change the Russians' intentions to also deliver the advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missile system to Syria. According to the Journal, U.S. officials believe that Russia is moving more quickly than previously thought to deliver S-300 surface-to-air defense systems to Syria. U.S. officials told the paper that the S-300 system, which is capable of shooting down guided missiles and could make it more risky for any warplanes to enter Syrian airspace, could leave Russia for Syrian port of Tartus by the end of May.

Together, the S-300 anti-aircraft and anti-missile system, and the Yakhont anti-ship system, would pose a formidable threat to any outside intervention in Syria, based on the

international Libya model. The anti-ship missiles would be a serious threat to the Israeli navy, as well as the facilities above Israel's newfound underwater gas reserves. The S-300 could threaten Israeli military and civilian aircraft flying Israeli airspace, and not just over Lebanese and Syrian airspace.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Russia has sent a dozen or more warships to patrol waters near its naval base in Syria, a buildup that U.S. and European officials see as a newly aggressive stance meant partly to warn the West and Israel not to intervene in Syria's bloody civil war. Russia's expanded presence in the eastern Mediterranean, which began attracting U.S. officials' notice three months ago, represents one of its largest sustained naval deployments since the Cold War, according to the Journal.

The paper reported that Russia currently has 11 ships in the eastern Mediterranean, organized into three taskforces, including destroyers, frigates, support vessels and intelligence-collecting ships. Another three-ship group of amphibious vessels is headed to the region. Russia's navy chief confirmed that warships from Russia's Pacific Fleet had entered the Mediterranean for the first time in decades, and that the taskforce might be reinforced with nuclear submarines, as the country starts building up a permanent fleet in the region. The group includes the destroyer Admiral Panteleyev, two amphibious warfare ships called Peresvet and Admiral Nevelskoi, and a tanker and a tugboat.

"The taskforce has successfully passed through the Suez Canal and entered the Mediterranean. It is the first time in decades that Pacific Fleet warships have entered this region," Pacific Fleet spokesman Capt. 1st Rank Roman Martov told RIA.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov meanwhile told Lebanese TV station al-Mayadeen on Thursday that Moscow had not backed down from its contract to supply S-300 systems to Syria.

"We are not signing any new contracts, but we will complete the old ones, especially with regards to aerial defense systems," Lavrov said. In what could be perceived as a message to Israel, he said, "Those that aren't planning on acting aggressively against sovereign nations should not have any reason to fear this."

The unofficial response from Israeli government officials to Lavrov's statements amounted to saying that actions will be the deciding factor and not declarations. A senior government official noted that the deal between Russia and Syria had been signed in 2010 and was delayed multiple times, despite numerous Russian statements that it would be carried out.

"We relayed the message [to Russia]. Bringing weapons to Syria destabilizes the area and carries the risk of seeing them transferred to Hezbollah," a government official said.

In a sign of the growing tension in the region, CIA Director John Brennan arrived in Israel Thursday and met with the top officials in Israel's defense establishment, with a central focus on the developments in Syria. It was Brennan's first trip to Israel since assuming his position two months ago. The CIA chief went straight into a meeting in Tel Aviv with Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, a senior Israeli official told AFP.

Channel 10 TV said that Ya'alon reaffirmed during the talks that Israel "will not permit the transfer of weapons" from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. According to local press reports, Brennan's visit is aimed at coordinating U.S. and Israeli positions over the escalating crisis in Syria, specifically as international diplomatic momentum between the U.S. and Russia gathers for a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

According to the reports, the U.S. is concerned that Israel will act independently to strike any advanced arms shipments

in Syria it believes may be headed to Hezbollah, potentially scuttling the international diplomatic maneuvering.

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