

Obama: 'Israel Has a Right to Defend Itself Against Hezbollah Threats'

Washington continues to remain mum on Israel's reported strike in Syria, but several officials in U.S. President Barack Obama's administration have expressed their unequivocal support for the Israeli operation.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest insisted Sunday that he did not have any new details about the strike, which targeted a shipment of advanced Iranian missiles believed to be headed for Hezbollah, adding that "President Obama believes Israel is justifiably concerned by the threat posed by Hezbollah obtaining advanced weapons systems, and that Israel, as a sovereign nation, has the right to defend itself against threats from Hezbollah."

"The U.S. is in very close contact" with the Israeli government on a range of issues, he added.

On Saturday, Obama refused to comment on the strike saying, "I'll let the Israeli government confirm or deny whatever strikes that they've taken." He continued, "The Israelis, justifiably, have to guard against the transfer of advanced weaponry to terrorist organizations like Hezbollah."

British Foreign Secretary William Hague echoed the statement saying, "All countries have to look after their own national security, of course, and are able to take actions to protect their own national security."

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed grave concern about the reported IAF strikes in Syria and urged both sides "to exercise maximum calm and restraint": "At this time, the United Nations does not have details of the reported

incidents. Nor is the United Nations in a position to independently verify what has occurred.”

“The Secretary-General urges respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries in the region, and adherence to all relevant Security Council resolutions,” he said in a statement.

Also on Sunday, Republican Senator John McCain hedged that the reported Israeli airstrikes are likely to “put more pressure on the administration to act” in Syria. “Every day that goes by, Hezbollah increases their influence and the radical jihadists flow into Syria and the situation becomes more and more tenuous,” McCain said on “Fox News Sunday.”

He said that the raids “appear to have weakened the argument that Syria has a far more daunting air defense system than, for example, Libya had under Col. Moammar Gadhafi. The Israelis seem to be able to penetrate [Syrian airspace] fairly easily.”

Republican Representative Mike Rogers, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, warned that the situation in the Middle East was “deteriorating by the day” because of the massive influx of foreign fighters pouring into Syria that could reach more than 10,000 this year.”

“Hezbollah is now moving troops—Hezbollah troops, financed by Iran—across Syria. They’re engaged in the fight to protect the Assad regime,” Rogers said on CBS’s “Face the Nation.” He said all fighters were trying to get their hands on chemical weapons and more sophisticated conventional arms; while refugees were fleeing the country and threatened to add more instability to the region.

“This is as bad a situation I have seen in a long time that has an opportunity to cascade,” Rogers said, adding the U.S. needed to “provide leadership through intelligence and training to the opposition, and work with the Arab League to

help stabilize the situation in Syria.”

‘U.S. Not Briefed on Strike’

Meanwhile, a U.S. intelligence official said Monday that Washington was not given any warning before the strike in Syria. The official said that the U.S. “was essentially told of the air raids after the fact” and was notified as the bombs went off.

“It would not be unusual for (Israel) to take aggressive steps when there was some chance that some sophisticated weapons system would fall into the hands of people like Hezbollah,” the unnamed intelligence official told Reuters. He said additional strikes in the future could not be ruled out.

Another Western official said that “Any sophisticated weaponry that looks to be destined to fall in the hands of bad actors, I think there is a likelihood that those could be targets as well.”

U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said last week that Washington was rethinking its opposition to arming the Syrian rebels. He cautioned that giving weapons to the forces fighting Assad was only one option, which carried the risk of arms finding their way into the hands of anti-American extremists among the insurgents.

The U.S. has said it has “varying degrees of confidence” that chemical weapons have been used in Syria on a limited scale, but it is seeking more evidence to determine who used them, how they were used and when.

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