

Hezbollah: Syria to Supply Weapons to Militia

By AP / BASSEM MROUE | May 10, 2013 |

(BEIRUT) — Syria will supply “game-changing” weapons to Hezbollah, the chief of the Lebanese militant group said Thursday, less than a week after Israeli airstrikes on Damascus targeted alleged shipments of advanced Iranian missiles bound for Hezbollah.

Israel has signaled it will respond with airstrikes to any future weapons shipments, meaning it could quickly get drawn into Syria’s civil war if the Hezbollah chief’s declaration is more than an empty threat

Tension has been rising in the region since Israel struck targets inside Syria on Friday and Sunday. Hezbollah and Israel fought several battles in the past three decades, including a 34-day war in 2006 that left some 1,200 Lebanese and 160 Israelis dead.

(More: [Bring Your Family: The Secrets of a Hizballah Arms Smuggler](#))

Israel has largely tried to stay out of Syria’s 26-month-old conflict. It never acknowledged the airstrikes, but Israeli officials have signaled Israel’s air force would strike against any shipments of strategic missiles that might be bound for Hezbollah.

Israel and Hezbollah have been exchanging threats over the past months.

Israeli officials say the Lebanese militant group has tens of thousands of rockets, though most of them are unguided. The shipments targeted last week included precision-guided missiles, the officials said.

Hezbollah chief Sheik Hassan Nasrallah has said in the past that his group has missiles that can strike anywhere in Israel, including as far south as the Red Sea resort of Eilat.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah and Iran have become increasingly involved in Syria's civil war, supplying troops and military advisers to help Syrian President Bashar Assad fight armed rebels trying to oust him.

Nasrallah spoke Thursday to mark the 25th anniversary of the founding of Hezbollah's radio station, Al-Nour, in a speech televised in Beirut. Nasrallah has rarely appeared in public since the 2006 war, for fear of being targeted by Israel.

Nasrallah said Hezbollah could expect strategic weapons from Syria in the future.

"Syria will give the resistance special weapons it never had before," Nasrallah said. "We mean game-changing."

Nasrallah said the weapons shipments were Syria's response to the Israeli airstrikes. "This is the Syrian strategic reaction," Nasrallah said. "This is more important than firing a rocket or carrying out an airstrike" against Israel.

The military alliance between Syria and Hezbollah will continue, the Hezbollah chief said.

"We in the Lebanese resistance declare that we stand by the Syrian popular resistance and give our material and moral support, and cooperate and coordinate in order to liberate the Syrian Golan," he said.

Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Mideast war and later annexed the strategic plateau.

Asked to comment on Nasrallah's declaration, Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor said: "We don't respond to words. We respond to action."

In a related development, Israeli security officials said Thursday they have asked Russia to cancel the imminent sale of an advanced air defense system to Syria.

The officials said Israel shared information with the United States in hopes of persuading Russia to halt the planned deal to provide S-300 anti-aircraft missiles. The Israeli officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief reporters.

In Rome, Secretary of State John Kerry said Thursday the transfer of advanced missile defense systems from Russia to Syria would be a

“destabilizing” factor for Israel’s security.

Kerry said the U.S. has expressed concerns about what such defensive systems in Syria would mean for Israel’s security, though he declined to address what the missiles might mean for Syria’s civil war.

Earlier Thursday, the Assad regime said it welcomed efforts by the United States and Russia to try to bring the sides to the negotiating table before the end of the month.

Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi said the government is willing to consider any proposals for a political solution of the conflict, while it retains the right to fight “terrorists,” the regime’s term for the opposition fighters and their supporters.

Al-Zoubi did not specifically mention the U.S.-Russian initiative in his brief remarks to reporters in Damascus, carried by the state-run SANA news agency.

The main Western-backed opposition group, the Syrian National Coalition, said Wednesday it welcomes the U.S.-Russia effort to reach a political solution but that any transition must begin with the departure of Assad and officials in his regime.

The U.S.-Russian initiative is identical to a plan, set out in Geneva last year, to bring the Damascus regime and opposition representatives together for talks on an interim government. Each side would be allowed to veto candidates it finds unacceptable.

The Geneva proposal also called for an open-ended cease-fire and the formation of a transitional government to run the country until new elections can be held.

Even modest international efforts to halt the fighting have failed as neither side in the Syrian civil war has embraced dialogue, underlining their resolve to prevail on the battlefield.

In Cairo, the U.S. ambassador to Egypt, Anne Patterson, briefed Arab League chief Nabil Elaraby on the U.S.-Russian efforts, according to a diplomat at the Arab League. Patterson called for Arab support for the plan, including pressing the Syrian opposition to back it, said the diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss details of a private meeting.

Separately, Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohammed Amr Kamel welcomed an international Syria conference and said Egypt is willing to help make it work.

At the United Nations, an Arab-backed resolution calling for a political transition in Syria and strongly condemning Assad's regime's escalating use of heavy weapons and "gross violations" of human rights was circulated Thursday to the 193-member U.N. General Assembly.

The Arab group decided to seek approval of a wide-ranging resolution on Syria in the assembly, where there are no vetoes, to reflect international dismay at the growing death toll, which has surpassed 70,000, and the failure to end the more than 2-year-old conflict.

A General Assembly resolution would also counter the paralysis of the deeply divided U.N. Security Council, where Syrian allies Russia and China have vetoed three Western-backed resolutions aimed at pressuring Assad to end the violence. Unlike Security Council resolutions, which are legally binding, General Assembly resolutions cannot be enforced. But if they are approved, especially by a large majority, they do reflect world opinion and can carry moral weight.

In fighting Thursday, Assad's forces attacked rebel positions in Aleppo and Idlib in the north, said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The group said warplanes hit rebels near the Mannagh military air base outside Aleppo.

The rebels stormed the base near the border with Turkey and captured parts of it on Sunday but were later forced to retreat in the face of the regime's superior air power.

In neighboring Idlib province, heavy clashes were under way Thursday outside several army bases near the government-controlled provincial capital, according to the Observatory, which relies on a network of informants inside Syria.

In Damascus, the state-run SANA news agency said government troops regained control of one more village and some land near the border with Lebanon on Thursday. The agency claimed troops inflicted heavy losses on the rebels in Aleppo and Idlib.

In Lebanon, a senior security official said several rockets landed Thursday on Lebanese territory, the latest incident of the Syria conflict spilling over the country's volatile borders. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in line with state regulations. There were no reports of casualties in the northwestern Lebanese town of Harmel.

