

Iran, Syria, Hizballah Gear Up to Provoke Summer War

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Syrian Fateh A-110B for Hizballah

US defense secretary Robert Gates said Tuesday night, April 27: “Hizballah has far more rockets and missile than most governments in the world.” He and Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak were talking to reporters after their talks in the Pentagon. Military sources did not see his as high commendation for Barak’s achievements as defense minister. All he had to contribute on this occasion was: “We do not intend to provoke any kind of major collision in Lebanon or with Syria, but are watching closely these developments.” Gates went on to accuse Syria and Iran of “providing Hizballah with rockets of ever-increasing capability,” adding, “This is obviously destabilizing for the whole region and we’re watching it very carefully.

Both defense chiefs seemed to think that careful watching would somehow erase the hostile buildup of deadly hardware. In fact, Barak’s comment told Iran, Syria and Hizballah they had nothing to fear from continuing their “carefully watched” buildup, even though Syria took it a step forward this month. As debkafile’s military sources reported last week, Syrian instructors have trained two Hizballah brigades in the use of mobile Scud missiles which carry one-ton warheads. It does not matter if those missiles are moved physically across the border to Lebanon, because those brigades can operate them against Israel at short notice from either side of the border.

Our Washington sources report that Syrian president Bashar Assad, under heavy pressure from Washington to keep the Scuds out of Hizballah’s hands, explained to the Obama administration through diplomatic channels that as long as they were kept inside Syria, the Scuds must be seen as a defensive and deterrent weapon against a possible Israeli attack on Lebanon and Syria. He thus placed on Israel the onus for any future outbreak of hostilities. Gates’ accusation of Iran and Syria Tuesday was the administration’s way of telling Damascus that it does not buy that message.

Unlike the United States, Israel has a ringside seat for watching the rockets and missiles pile up just across its 70-kilometer long border with Lebanon. Gates’ comment – and even more Barak’s assurance – gave Syria and the Hizballah space to carry on building a mighty arsenal, which is aimed at only one country, Israel.

Barak as Defense Minister, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Israel’s security chiefs need to explain how Hizballah was allowed in the four years since the 2006 war to pile up tens of thousands of rockets and missiles, which in volume and sophistication have already overtaken the weaponry that battered northern Israel then and which have extended their reach to all parts of Israel.

“Careful watch” – without corresponding action to interrupt the massive flow of weapons shipments constantly smuggled in from Syria to Hizballah – is a repeat of the misplaced self-restraint which invited the Hizballah to launch the last Lebanon conflict in the summer of 2006. Dragging Israeli and its homeland into war in the summer of 2010 would serve the political and military interests of Iran, Syria and Hizballah well. It would generate a Middle East crisis overwhelming enough to focus international efforts on calming the situation, so distracting the world’s attention Iran’s arrival at the critical stages of its nuclear bomb program and its drive for sanctions against the Islamic Republic.