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Israel Says Russian Missile System Not Headed to Syria Yet

By The Moscow Times

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JERUSALEM — An advanced anti-aircraft system destined for Syria has not left Russia yet, but Israel will know how to act if it does, Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon said Tuesday.

Yaalon's remarks appeared to contradict Israel's air force chief, who said last week that the shipment of S-300 missiles was "on its way" to Syrian President Bashar Assad, who is battling a popular uprising that has turned into a civil war.

Israel is alarmed by the prospect of Russia supplying advanced weapon systems to Syria, saying such arms could end up in the hands of arch-foe Iran or the Lebanese Hezbollah group.

"I can say that the shipments are not on their way yet," Yaalon told reporters. "I hope they will not leave, and if, God forbid, they reach Syria, we will know what to do," he said, without disclosing how he came by the information.

A top Russian diplomat on Tuesday confirmed that Moscow will provide Syria with the state-of-the art air defense missiles to prevent foreign intervention in the country.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov would not say whether Russia has shipped any of the S-300 missile systems, but added that Moscow is not going to abandon the deal despite strong Western and Israeli criticism.

Ryabkov said the deal helps restrain some "hot heads" considering a military intervention in Syria.

Although Israel has not publicly taken sides in the Syrian conflict, Western and Israeli sources say it has launched air strikes inside Syria to destroy weapons it believed were destined for Hezbollah guerrillas allied to Assad.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on May 13 that Moscow had no new plans to sell the S-300 to Syria but left open the possibility of delivering such systems under an existing contract.

Israeli Strategic Affairs and Intelligence Minister Yuval Steinitz said the S-300 could reach deep into the Jewish state and threaten flights over its main commercial airport near Tel Aviv. He said he hoped Russia would cancel the deal.

"This is still unfortunately the plan, and we are very concerned," Steinitz told reporters in Jerusalem. "This is a kind of encouragement, a kind of support for a brutal regime, which is totally wrong, also from a moral point of view."

Material from The Associated Press is included in this report.

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