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PROGRAM ABC World News Tonight STATION WJLA TV  
ABC Network

DATE January 4, 1983 7:00 PM CITY Washington, DC

SUBJECT Syrians May Acquire New Soviet Weapons

FRANK REYNOLDS: The United States made it clear today it is disturbed by reports that Syria may soon acquire new weapons from the Soviet Union; weapons that because of their long-range capability pose an increased threat not only to Israel, but also to American military forces in the area.

Pentagon correspondent John McWethy has this report.

JOHN McWETHY: U. S. intelligence sources tell ABC News that there are no Soviet long-range SA-5 anti-aircraft missiles in Syria yet. Nonetheless, these sources say new missile sites are being prepared in Syria -- they could be operational in weeks -- and the SA-5s themselves are on their way from the Soviet Union by ship, representing a major escalation by both Syria and Russia.

At the State Department, there were warnings.

JOHN HUGHES: Obviously, any exacerbation of tensions in the region from anybody would be something we would regret.

McWETHY: If the SA-5s arrive in Syria, U. S. officials predict trouble for two reasons. First, the SA-5 is far more capable than anything the Soviets have thus far supplied to Syria. The SA-6, for example, which is fielded in Syria, has a range of 19 miles. The SA-5s have a range of 185 miles, meaning from Syria the missiles could shoot down Israeli planes over every square inch of Lebanon and much of Israel as well.

The missiles could also threaten U. S. planes flying from aircraft carriers off the coast of Lebanon.

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Second, when the SA-5s are deployed outside the Soviet Union, like these in Afghanistan, Soviet technicians and soldiers come with them to run the system.

Some U. S. analysts say if Syria deploys the new missiles, Israel will try to destroy the missiles and the Russians operating them immediately, even if it involves risking another war.

John McWethy, ABC News, the Pentagon.