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Defanging Hezbollah: A Directed Energy Defense Could Help

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Hezbollah's Katyusha rocket attacks have killed and wounded dozens of Israelis, destroyed property, and sent thousands to bomb shelters. They threaten to plunge the entire region into conflict. There is a way to shoot these missiles out of the sky, limiting the danger to innocents and mitigating the serious threat of one of the region's most dangerous terrorist groups. The U.S. Army and Israeli Defense Ministry have a joint program that has developed a high-energy laser that can do the job, but they have been slow to deploy the system. The United States should ready the system for operational use as quickly as possible and make it available to the Israeli Defense Forces.

A Known Threat and a Known Countermeasure

Katyusha multiple rocket launchers were first fielded by the Soviets during World War II. They fire a primitive, short-range unguided rocket that is not very accurate. They have only limited military utility but are perfect for terror. Hezbollah has a vast stockpile of Katyushas.

This threat is not new, and the United States and Israel have been working on countermeasures for over a decade. In 1996, the U.S. Army and the Israeli Ministry of Defense began joint development of a system, the Tactical High Energy Laser (THEL), to defend against the types of rockets Hezbollah is using against Israel today. The Army terminated development of the system in 2006 because of technical complexities and lack of mobility. It wasn't

really ready for the battlefield. There is a "relocatable" version of THEL in development, but funding for the program has been limited. It will not be ready for at least another 18 months. So ten years after development began, there is still no defensive system in the field to protect America and its allies from terrorist rocket attacks.

The real tragedy is that the THEL works. At the White Sands Missile Range, THEL intercepted Katyusha rockets 46 times, as well as artillery and mortar projectiles, in single, multiple, and surprise engagements. The basic technology is proven and has been in development for 20 years.

This is a clear case of the perfect being the enemy of the good. If the U.S. Army continues development of THEL and deploys it, even with imperfections, Israel would have a defensive capability in place in the near future, when it is desperately needed.

The Promise of Directed Energy

Directed energy weapons demonstrate tremendous potential against all kinds of mortar, artillery, rocket, aircraft, and missile threats. Directed energy can be used against short-range threats like the

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Katyusha rockets being fired at Israel and against ballistic missiles in their boost phase. Putting a system in the field now will not only help Israel, but also provide invaluable operational experience on how to use these systems.

Congress should provide emergency supplemental funding to rush THEL into production. The Administration should direct the Army to acceler-

ate the program as rapidly as possible.

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