

Why Do So Many Dictators Use Scud Missiles?

Qaddafi just fired one at opposition forces in Libya.

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Forces loyal to Col. Muammar Qaddafi fired a surface-to-surface Scud missile at revolutionary forces in Libya on Sunday, their first such attack in the current conflict. The Scud was also the missile of choice for Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War, and it featured in the arsenal of Hosni Mubarak as well. Why do Middle Eastern dictators love the Scud?

It's the easiest way to terrorize nearby enemies. Many of the region's strongmen started arming themselves in earnest back in the 1970s and early 1980s. While military analysts now describe the Scud as cheap and crude, the Soviet-made missile was considered a high-prestige weapon at the time, especially for

countries with limited air power. (Several former Soviet client states, including Poland and Romania, stocked the Scud as well.) With a range of around 185 miles, the Scud provided Middle Eastern dictators with a means of attacking (or bullying) the regional rivals whom they perceived as the primary threats to their power. The Scud—which describes a family of ballistic missiles rather than one particular brand or model—could fly far enough from Iraq to hit Iran (and vice-versa), from Libya to strike Chad, and from almost anywhere in the region to threaten Israel (with a little tinkering, in some cases). It's impossible to aim a Scud with any precision, but leaders like Qaddafi don't mind. They use the missile as an instrument of terror rather than a tactical weapon, and close is good enough for that.

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The Scud is also remarkably rugged. According to U.S. estimates, Libya is still hanging on to between 80 and a few hundred Scud-B missiles bought from the Soviet Union decades ago. These don't need much maintenance, although their range and reliability diminish over the years. It's also pretty easy to train military personnel to fire them.

Aside from their inaccuracy, the main drawback in using the Scud is its reliance on highly corrosive liquid fuel. That means the missiles have to be stored separately from their power source and gassed up before they're fired. (U.S. missiles employ solid fuel, which is stored in the missile itself.)



Replicas of a North Korean Scud-B missile and South Korean Hawk surface-to-air missiles (foreground) Muammar Qaddafi would surely have liked to upgrade his ballistic missile arsenal—and there's plenty of evidence that he tried—but few countries are selling. While the Soviet Union supplied about 90 percent of Libya's weapons in the 1980s, Russia hasn't sold any significant weapons systems to the country for 20 years. (Russia had signed a deal to sell billions in unspecified weapons to Libya recently, but the current crisis erupted before anything shipped.) There have been

reports that China helped Qaddafi with his domestic program to develop ballistic missiles more than 10 years ago, but it doesn't appear the Chinese have been willing to sell whole systems. North Korea, which supplied longer-range Scud-Cs to the Libyans in 2004, appears to be Qaddafi's only source for ballistic missiles, and the missiles aren't exactly high-tech.

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Explainer thanks Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, John Pike of GlobalSecurity.org, and Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute.

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