

Syria Downs a Russian Plane: What Next?

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Brief Analysis

Despite Russia's anger and false media claims about the incident, Moscow is unlikely to demand that Israel halt its campaign against Iran's foreign military buildup.

On September 17, following the latest in a series of Israeli airstrikes on Iranian targets in northern Syria, one of the Assad regime's S-200 missile batteries accidentally shot down a Russian Ilyushin 20 (Il-20) reconnaissance plane, killing all fifteen service members on board. Given Iran's unrelenting effort to establish a strategic threat against Israel via Syria and Lebanon, the IAF once again struck targets related to precision missiles in Syria. And once again, Syrian air defenses proved incapable of stopping the strike. Instead, they belatedly launched dozens of SAMs in various directions, showing complete disregard for the Russian plane's safety and the fact that Israel's jets were already back in their own airspace.

Russian military sources quickly claimed that Israel was too late in notifying them of the strike through their deconfliction channel. Yet the IAF clarified that notification was given just as early as in hundreds of previous

strikes. Despite such disagreements, both governments appear to be taking public and private steps to preserve their arrangement in Syria.

RUSSIAN AND ISRAELI RESPONSE

According to Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov, Israel used the Il-20 as cover for its F-16s to attack in Syria, informing Russian counterparts “only one minute” prior to the strike. His allegation is both practically absurd (due to speed and flight profile differences between the two aircraft types) and contradictory to the IAF’s policies and track record (e.g., in late 2015 the IAF avoided intercepting a Russian Su-30 fighter in Israeli airspace).

Konashenkov also declared that Russia reserves the right for an “adequate” response. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu offered similar warnings during an angry call to his Israeli counterpart Avigdor Liberman, blaming the IAF and saying “we reserve the right to take retaliatory steps.” Aleksandr Sherin, deputy chairman of Russia’s parliamentary defense committee and member of the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party, reportedly went so far as to call for strikes against Israel, claiming that the IAF campaign in Syria is “based on U.S. bidding.”

President Vladimir Putin quickly toned down the bluster at a September 18 press conference. Although he agreed with the Defense Ministry’s statement, he said the incident was due to “a series of tragic mistakes.” Importantly, he emphasized that it was different from Turkey’s November 2015 shootdown of a Russian plane, which sparked an even angrier response in Moscow that included sanctions on Ankara.

At the same time, Russia announced temporary aerial restrictions over the Mediterranean Sea near Cyprus and Israel, requiring that any activity there be coordinated with its forces. Putin also made vague mention of additional security measures for Russian military personnel in Syria, and Shoigu reiterated that Moscow will respond.

Diplomacy soon came to the fore, however, with Putin and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu speaking by phone the evening of September 18. The Kremlin statement issued after the call claimed that Israel did not abide by bilateral agreements on avoiding dangerous incidents, and Putin reportedly asked Netanyahu to make sure it does not happen again.

For its part, Israel took the unusual step of acknowledging its strike in Syria, issuing a message that opened with condolences for the Russian aircrew and clarified that the plane was hit by a Syrian missile. The message went on to hold the Assad regime, Iran, and Hezbollah responsible for the incident, citing their ongoing efforts to threaten Israel with precision arms. Then, on September 20, IAF chief Amikam Norkin headed to Moscow with a team of liaison officers, planners, and intelligence personnel. While there, they met with Russian counterparts, presented a forty-page report on the Syria strike, and suggested improvements for the deconfliction mechanism.

SAVING FACE

The incident and Russia’s public response raise numerous questions, many of which are doubtlessly being investigated behind closed doors in Moscow and Damascus. For instance, with all its ground, naval, and airborne radars in Syria, wouldn’t Russia have known about Israel’s strike well before being notified? Did Russian air control play a role in the accident by putting its plane in Syria’s potential line of fire? Was Russian supervision of Syrian air defenses missing, and are any Russian officials answerable for this tragedy?

All of these loose threads, together with Moscow’s justifiable anger at its Syrian ally’s lethal recklessness, may explain its heated attempts to make baseless accusations against Israel. Yet it is difficult to see this as anything more than an effort to save face domestically and internationally. Russian-Syrian cooperation was always wrought with operational difficulties, and these kinks are likely to blame for the shootdown. To distract from such embarrassment, Moscow did what it always does—blame someone else.

Nevertheless, some independent Russian commentators pinned the blame on Putin and the Assad regime despite heavy government control of the media. They also raised broader questions about why Russian soldiers continue to die in Syria after Putin has at least twice announced “victory” and “withdrawal.”

WHAT NEXT?

Neither Russia nor Israel is interested in a bilateral crisis, but Moscow will likely bring some pressure to bear. In the short term, one can certainly expect temporary steps signaling that Russian blood is not cheap, such as the already announced naval and aerial closures. Generally, Putin prefers dependent subjects to equal partners, so he will probably try to leverage the crisis to squeeze benefits from Syria, Iran, and Israel.

For example, he may demand that the IAF provide earlier updates about any Syria strikes, and perhaps keep Israel under a cloud of potential retribution that may have a chilling effect on its decisions. It is also possible that Russian military figures in theater and back in Moscow could decide on their own accord to make Israel’s activity in Syria more challenging.

As for Damascus, Putin may ask the regime to punish the responsible officers and accept a stronger Russian advisory and supervisory role over its air defense system. To temper such demands, he may promise the Syrian military better visibility into the Russian air picture and more advanced SAMs, though actual delivery of the latter is less probable.

None of these measures is likely to cause a breakdown in Israeli-Russian relations in the foreseeable future. Despite their distinct differences, the two governments have successfully identified a common zone of interests in Syria. Russia even benefits from the dynamic of allowing Israel to strike Iranian targets unhindered without taking any action of its own to stop Tehran’s transfer of advanced weapons. As long as Russian forces are safe and the Assad regime is not threatened, Moscow believes it can enjoy its role as middleman.

To avoid giving ground on its own interests in Syria, the Israeli leadership did well to quickly express condolences without shouldering blame, to engage their Russian counterparts at the highest political level and the military level, and to share the relevant intelligence, operational data, and hard facts professionally and transparently. Carrying this approach forward would mean showing goodwill and continuing to inform the Russians of expected operations in a timely manner, including in the Golan Heights, where Russian military police are currently adjacent to Israel’s enemies.

More broadly, the incident shows the challenges of Israel’s anti-Iranian campaign in Syria, highlighting the need to expand its toolbox and widen its support base. This includes securing more explicit U.S. backing for the campaign and/or specific operations.

Indeed, the United States should make clear that it has no objections to an active Israeli policy of preventing a permanent Iranian military presence in Syria. U.S. interests would be well-served if Tehran and Moscow understood that Washington has given Israel a green light in this regard. Speaking before the UN Security Council the day after Russia’s plane was downed, Ambassador James Jeffrey, the State Department’s special representative for Syria engagement, noted, “There will not be stability in Syria so long as Iran and its proxy forces remain. These groups are responsible for some of the most egregious violence in this war. They have directed the regime’s starve-and-surrender campaign. Now they are on Israel’s doorstep. This is unacceptable.” He concluded: “If Russia is interested in bringing peace to Syria, it should make sure Iran and its militias leave Syria once and for all.”

In the longer term, the combination of U.S. pressure and Israeli military action could pose a dilemma for Moscow: commit to an increasingly costly effort to keep Bashar al-Assad in power, which entails the risk of a wider Israel-Iran conflict in Syria, or work with the United States to transition away from Assad and preserve Russian gains there. So long as Iran and its agents—especially foreign fighters—are active in Syria, U.S. policy should be to contain the Assad

regime and oppose steps that would strengthen it.

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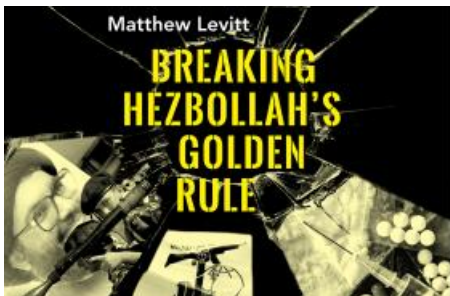
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