

Russia in Southern Syria: Israeli and Jordanian Concerns

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Brief Analysis

New Russian airstrikes in the south could portend a wider regime, Hezbollah, and Iranian ground campaign there, potentially violating Israel's Golan redline and exacerbating Jordan's refugee problems.

On October 28, for the first time since Moscow began its air campaign in Syria, Russian jets reportedly targeted rebel forces in the south. The strikes focused on Tal Harra -- which is less than twelve miles from the Israeli border -- and other locations in Deraa province. Such operations raise concerns in Israel and Jordan and will likely test Russia's relations with both countries. The strikes should not come as a surprise, however. Over the past few weeks, Russia's statements, diplomatic maneuvers, and battle dynamics have suggested that its plans may expand to other areas, including the south.

RUSSIAN STATEMENTS

On October 23, during the annual meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club -- a premier forum that gives participants rare private access to Russian officials -- President Vladimir Putin and other figures spoke about the Kremlin's strategy in Syria. According to a memo issued by the Eurasia Group, some of these Russian elites indicated that the intervention will extend to the south. They added that the Syrian army, Hezbollah, Iranian forces, and various Shiite militias will serve as the boots on the ground for the entire intervention, supported by Russian airstrikes. So far, Russian and allied offensives have focused on northern and central Syria, but Wednesday's strikes indicate they may now be turning more attention to the south.

SOUTHWARD GROUND ADVANCES

In mid-October, the Syrian army, Hezbollah reinforcements, and local militias loyal to the regime turned back a rebel offensive in the southern province of Quneitra. Hezbollah reportedly contributed around 500 fighters to the battle, helping the regime take back the Tal al-Ahmar height, the so-called "UN Hill," and other important posts that

could help Bashar al-Assad's forces expand their hold in the area. It is not yet clear whether the army will take advantage of this momentum and push forward in Quneitra or simply maintain the current situation.

In the regime's view, severing logistical and operational links between rebels in the south and those in the Damascus suburbs is crucial to defending the capital. Some reports indicate that the regime is already concentrating forces for a renewed offensive in the south. If the army decides to push forward, it might ask for increased Russian air support. The Syrian air force has operated in the south before, but it has been hesitant to execute airstrikes near the Israeli border since September 2014, when one of its fighter jets was shot down after crossing into Israeli airspace. Requesting Russian airstrikes is a smart move, as Damascus probably assumes that Israel will not challenge the Russian air force.

DIPLOMATIC MANEUVERS

On October 24, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Russia will coordinate its military operations with Jordan, including airstrikes. If Moscow is in fact planning to expand its air campaign in the south, establishing coordination with Amman was a necessary step. For the Assad regime, the southern border province of Deraa is where the rebellion began, so regaining control over this area would symbolize strength and a return to stability. To reach that goal, Assad and his allies will have to weaken the southern rebels, which requires a firmer hold on the border crossings with Jordan.

In early 2015, regime forces partnered with Hezbollah, Iranian, and Shiite militia personnel to execute a surprise offensive in northwestern Deraa, demonstrating how much they value this area. Yet according to a September report by the International Crisis Group, the offensive ended in March with no significant gains. On October 29, a Lebanese newspaper close to Hezbollah wrote that the Syrian army is planning a new offensive in the area, and that the latest airstrikes are part of this operation.

Deraa and its surroundings are also of great importance to Jordan, as anything that happens in that area can affect border security and the flow of refugees into the kingdom. Jordan is reportedly supporting the opposition there in an advise-and-equip capacity, mainly through the Military Operations Command (MOC) in Amman, which is helping the rebels with weapons and planning operations.

RAMIFICATIONS FOR ISRAEL AND JORDAN

For Israel, sustained Russian air activity near its border would be a worrisome signal. If Hezbollah and Iran use Russian air cover to move closer to the border, they will cross one of Israel's redlines. Earlier this year, Israel reportedly targeted Hezbollah and Iranian commanders in the Golan Heights for that reason. Jerusalem has conveyed this and other redlines to the Russians more than once, so any further Hezbollah/Iranian challenges in the Golan would greatly test Israeli-Russian coordination. They would also test Russian-Iranian relations -- on the one hand, Moscow does not want to aggravate Israel by facilitating Iranian provocations, but on the other hand, it needs Iranian boots on the ground to fight the rebels.

As for Jordan, a more intense air campaign in Deraa could further increase the cross-border refugee flow. Since Russia and the Assad regime began their offensive in the north, more than 120,000 civilians have reportedly left their homes to escape the fighting. If this is any indicator of what can happen in Deraa, Jordan should be worried. The kingdom is already struggling under the financial and infrastructure pressures of helping the hundreds of thousands of refugees in its territory, and if many more arrive, its ability to help them would be limited.

Jordan and Israel also want to keep the extremist factions in southern Syria at bay. They have managed to do so thus far, but a greater Russia and regime presence in the south might change that. As other analysts have pointed out, the Russian intervention in the north is already pushing more moderate factions into the hands of extremist groups

such as al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, and there is no reason to believe that the dynamics in the south would be different. Moderate southern rebels have cooperated with Jabhat al-Nusra in the past, so they already share operational linkages. If these rebels come to believe that they are alone in fighting the regime and Russia, at least some of them would likely strengthen their relations with Jabhat al-Nusra or other extremists, especially now that Jordan has apparently agreed to coordinate with Moscow. A weakened moderate front and a strengthened extremist front would pose a clear threat to Israel and Jordan.

WHAT ARE JORDAN AND ISRAEL'S OPTIONS?

Although neither country has many options for keeping the Russian air force out of the south, Israel could reiterate to Moscow that it will take action if Hezbollah or Iranian elements join any ground offensive close to the border. It is still a big question whether Israel would actually strike if Russian forces are in the area, but restating its oft-repeated redline could give Moscow pause about enabling an Iranian/Hezbollah front in the Golan.

If Hezbollah, other Iranian proxies, or Syrian forces do move closer to the border, Israel could use ground fire against them, including artillery or tanks. It could also use standoff weapons from its airspace. Yet both options are risky because they could escalate the situation with any Russian forces operating in the area. Unexpected errors tend to happen in combat situations -- whether it is Israeli artillery rounds interfering with Russian close air support, a human error leading to target misidentification, or similar problems, the probability of friction between Israel and Russia would increase.

Given their limited options, Amman and Jerusalem should express their concerns to their close ally, the United States, who can in turn convey them to Moscow. Jordan and Israel both have strong militaries, but they are not in the same league as Russia's. The only country currently involved in the Syrian quagmire that can guarantee their interests is the United States.

CONCLUSION

For now, southern Syria is not a top priority for Russia and its coalition of ground forces, as intense battles are ongoing in Aleppo, Hama, and other places to the north. Yet the south may be part of Russia's broader strategy, and it could still allocate some resources to the area even while occupied elsewhere. If this week's southern airstrikes lead to expanded Russian, regime, and allied activity there, it would test Moscow's complicated relations with Israel, Jordan, Iran, and Hezbollah. To forestall or manage such escalation, Jerusalem and Amman should ask Washington to make sure that Russia takes their interests into account, particularly regarding Iranian and Hezbollah operations near the borders.

Nadav Pollak is the Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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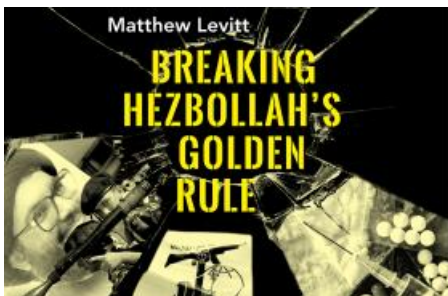
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