

Netanyahu Goes to Moscow

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Brief Analysis

The visit focused on Syria-related issues such as ensuring deconfliction, preventing the transfer of strategic Russian arms to Hezbollah, and keeping the Golan quiet, though potential Palestinian friction at the upcoming UN session may have come up as well.

On September 21, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu met with Russian president Vladimir Putin in Moscow against a backdrop of major developments in the Syria war. While Washington signals that it is still not planning to play a major role in the conflict, the Kremlin is further stepping up its direct support for the Assad regime. Following reports that Moscow has deployed personnel, armored vehicles, weaponry, and four Sukhoi-27 fighter jets to Syria's Mediterranean coastal provinces, Netanyahu's office has publicized the need to deconflict with Russian forces.

In addition to his personal national security staff who regularly participate in such trips, Netanyahu was accompanied by Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot and military intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Herzl Halevy -- a highly unusual move. Other defense officials may have traveled with them as well, though their names would not necessarily be announced due to political or diplomatic sensitivities.

Netanyahu clearly wants to ensure that Moscow will respect Israel's redline: namely, supplying Hezbollah with strategic weaponry. This includes relaying concerns that Russian weapons sent to shore up the Assad regime could wind up in the terrorist group's hands, as has happened in the past. For example, Hezbollah acquired and used Russian Kornet antitank missiles in the 2006 war with Israel. On multiple occasions since then, Israel has hit convoys attempting to move strategic weapons from Syria to Lebanon, and it wants to ensure that Russian aircraft would deconflict with Israeli planes if they need to hit such Hezbollah convoys again. After his two-and-a-half hours of talks with Putin, Netanyahu said he was satisfied that Russia also wants to deconflict to avoid

"misunderstandings" and "clashes."

The visit comes on the heels of a September 18 phone conversation between U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter and his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu, who similarly discussed "mechanisms for deconfliction" in Syria, according to the Pentagon spokesman. Following his meeting with Putin, Netanyahu told reporters that he had briefed Washington before the visit about his plans. And despite his rocky relationship with President Obama, Netanyahu insisted that Israeli-U.S. relations were of "foremost importance." The statement was apparently made to prevent people from interpreting the trip to Moscow as somehow supplanting Israel's special relationship with the United States.

Yossi Cohen, Netanyahu's national security advisor, recently told Israel Radio that the prime minister wanted to hear directly from Putin about Russia's intentions. Beyond bolstering the Assad regime, Israeli officials assume that Moscow wants to expand its influence in Syria and the broader Middle East amid U.S. reticence to assert itself. They also want to understand how Russia plans to deal with the "Islamic State"/ISIS in Syria, and how Moscow sees its relationship with Iran in the aftermath of the nuclear deal. Therefore, they likely asked about Russian leverage with regard to the recent deployment of Iranian Revolutionary Guard personnel and Hezbollah forces north of Quneitra, on the Syrian part of the Golan Heights. After the meeting, Netanyahu told reporters that Israel "will not tolerate armament that Iran is leading against us" in southern Syria, and he expressed satisfaction that Putin agreed on this score. Israel is keen on preventing instability from spilling over its northern border. Ironically, when the Assad regime was strong, it kept the Golan border quiet but allowed Lebanon's border with Israel to heat up via Hezbollah strikes. Now that Hezbollah is strong and Damascus is weak, the reverse dynamic seems to be at work.

In general, Israel has pursued a risk-averse policy to avoid deepening its involvement in the war. The exceptions have been defensive in nature -- the IDF has only used force against armed elements firing into Israel, and against Hezbollah weapons convoys as described above. Israel has also been careful to avoid turning certain Syrian border factions into enemies, even offering them the use of field hospital facilities.

Beyond the recent dynamics in Syria, and despite sharp differences over Iran, Putin and Netanyahu have enjoyed a good relationship. For example, Israel did not show up for the United Nations vote on the Ukraine crisis, apparently to avoid angering Moscow. And despite their basic enmity and lack of bilateral diplomatic relations from 1967 to the early 1990s, the two countries have avoided fighting each other directly since the height of the Cold War in 1969-1970, when the Soviets viewed Egypt as a proxy and became involved in hostilities along the Suez Canal.

While Syria was the focal point of the Moscow meeting, Netanyahu and Putin might also have consulted on the Palestinian issue in light of the upcoming UN General Assembly session. In past years, the Palestinian Authority has used these sessions to press its bid for statehood, and President Mahmoud Abbas has promised a surprise during his scheduled September 26 speech before the assembly. (It should be noted that Abbas will be in Moscow this Wednesday for the inauguration of a major new mosque.) Netanyahu visited London recently as well, indicating his desire to consult with various permanent members of the UN Security Council in advance of the General Assembly session, where he is scheduled to speak on September 29. Yet Topic A during his trip to Moscow was clearly Syria.

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