

After the Ilyushin Crash: Israel's Anti-Iran Operations in Syria

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Russia delivered advanced air-defense systems to Syria after the recent airplane-downing incident, but its desire to check Iran could permit continued Israeli operations in the Syrian skies.

On September 17, the Syrian Air Defense Force shot down a Russian Ilyushin 20 (IL-20) surveillance aircraft following the latest Israeli Air Force (IAF) strike on Iranian precision-missile-production sites in Latakia, bringing Russia-Israel relations to a crisis point. The simple case is that Syrian forces opened fire well after the Israeli attack, launching dozens of missiles in various directions and at various ranges—one of which hit the Russian plane, killing all fifteen crew members. As demonstrated following the U.S.-led missile strike on Syrian targets after a regime chemical attack in April, this type of Syrian response is not an exception.

In its propaganda campaign following the event, Moscow sought to deflect blame from the Syrian and Russian militaries. While not even mentioning Syria, the Russian Ministry of Defense laid the full blame on Israel. Most revealing, however, are the twenty-four minutes that elapsed—according to Russia's own purported timeline—between Israel's notification to Russia regarding the upcoming Latakia strike (21:39) and Syria's antiaircraft missile barrage in response (22:03). Given reasonably functioning aerial-picture, air-control, liaison, advisory, and supervision capabilities, this would be sufficient time to redirect the Russian plane out of the danger zone.

On September 24, a week after the accident, Russia pledged that, within two weeks, it would provide Syria with advanced surface-to-air (SAM) missiles (most likely the S-300PMU, or "Favorit," known in its NATO appellation as "Gargoyle B"), electronic warfare capabilities (likely Krasukha-4), and C4 systems. The announcement prompted waves of media speculation regarding future Israeli operations in Syria. On Israel's domestic front, a divide appears to have emerged between supporters of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who contend the situation is under control, and his opponents, who counter that the "game is over" and Israel will have to cease all air operations in Syria. Several aspects deserve a closer look.

Russia's Conduct

Few doubt that Russia's loss of fifteen servicemen to a close ally's fire, while exposing Russia's own military failures, could have a corrosive effect on Russian president Vladimir Putin and his country's defense establishment. But Putin has deep experience in attempting to tip such a situation to its advantage. His guiding principle when responding apparently involves maximizing the crisis leverage while attempting to place all players, including domestic ones, in his debt. In this calculation, Israel will owe Putin for its alleged responsibility, for protecting it from the Russian generals' wrath, and for allowing the crisis to flame out. Syria's Assad regime owes him for its actual culpability and for the new arms he has proffered. Iran owes him for his efforts to rein in Israel, and perhaps will even pay the bill (\$1 billion?). And the Russian Defense Ministry owes him for covering up its failures.

Cast in a larger historical context, Russia's weapons package to Syria follows the Soviet Union's steps in the mid-1980s. Back then, after Israel wiped out dozens of Syrian aircraft and several air-defense batteries in and over Lebanon, Moscow provided Damascus with S-200 batteries—one of which was now responsible for downing the IL-20—as well as the era's C3 systems. Currently, in addition to the lucrative arms sales themselves, operationalizing these systems will ensure Syrian reliance on Russia for decades to come. Indeed, the crisis has allowed Russia to move forward with arms sales that had been stalled for years, perhaps due to Israeli or even U.S. requests. After last week saw several reported Antonov An-124 cargo flights to Syria, on October 2, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu reported to President Putin that the systems delivery had been completed the day before, and included four launchers and forty-nine components in all. He added that Syrian crews would be trained to operate the system within three months. This prompt supply and gradual deployment (discussed below) has opened the Russian door to renewed requests from Israel and the United States, which Moscow can use for further leverage.

Israel's Conduct

For Israel, the approach to Russia during the crisis has been markedly composed and orderly, although reflecting full awareness of the possible ramifications. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officials were assigned to carry out fact finding and engage with Russia's senior military leadership. In presenting conclusions to their Russian colleagues, IDF officials emphasized the destabilizing strategic context of Iran's threatening entrenchment in Syria while also

detailing the full picture regarding the air, missile, and coordination channels during this specific incident. In stark contrast to Russia's bluster, the IDF has kept a low profile, apparently under clear directives to help the Kremlin save face, and not exacerbate the crisis. Prime Minister Netanyahu and Israeli defense minister Avigdor Liberman have solemnly but consistently expressed sorrow and condolences for the Russian losses, while quietly faulting Syria and committing both to continue blunting Iran's efforts in Syria and coordinating with Russia wherever possible.

Liberman also clarified that "Israel doesn't manage its relations with Russia over the media," and indeed the Israeli prime minister and defense minister have maintained private talks with their Russian counterparts. This approach, which appears coordinated with Putin, helps confine tensions to the professional-officer level, while allowing space for the principals to navigate in a coordinated, if uneasy, manner. On September 26, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, Netanyahu claimed that all his requests on the matter to President Trump had been granted, although he did not cite concrete steps. Trump, in turn, said that he is 100 percent behind Israel.

The Future of Syrian Airspace

As is typical in such instances, several media sources got swept up in the Russian messaging and drew sharp conclusions about the future of Israel's air campaign in Syria, as well as U.S. and coalition activity in the country. At the technological-tactical level, it is true, the S-300 SAM system—with its long-range advanced missiles and multi-target engagement capabilities—raises the risk to all air forces operating near and over Syria, including Israel. Yet advanced air forces, and surely the U.S. Air Force, have the capability to operate in such a threat environment. The IAF has effectively been preparing for this development for two decades—it recently received F-35 stealth fighters from the United States designed for such advanced threats. Moreover, the presence of this system in the hands of incompetent, reckless Syrian operators will likely concern parties beyond Israel. Any who recollect the 2014 downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 by a Russian SAM will feel the chill.

More important than the system's techno-tactical capabilities is Russia's role in its operation. This is the key factor in assessing the prospective change in threat level and implications for Israel's freedom of action. As of 2015, Russia had already deployed the more advanced S-400 missile system to Syria, but so far it has refrained from using it to engage either Israeli, U.S., or coalition targets. Should Russian crews man the new S-300, it would probably be operated under Moscow's control and responsible policy. Once under Syrian control, however, concerns would become more serious, and engagement with IAF or U.S. Air Force targets could entail an increased risk of a counterstrike. More "friendly fire" against Russian aircraft might also be expected. The most complicated situation would be one with mixed Russian-Syrian crews, experts, advisors, or supervisors. Russia, Israel, and the United States would likely seek to prevent such a hazardous situation, in which Moscow may find itself answerable to Syrian fire on U.S. aircraft, with all its evident implications. Perhaps such scenarios were in U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo's mind when he described this system's delivery to Syria a "serious escalation."

Beyond the seemingly straightforward Russian provision of weapons to Syria, the strategic devil will be in the details—what exactly will be delivered, to whom, when, and where. Other questions, as already intimated, will involve the division of labor between Russia and Syria when it comes to both authority and operation, as well as the fire policy implemented by whoever holds the reins. The S-200s granted to the Syrians decades ago, for example, were initially manned by Russian teams, with Syrian personnel only taking the helm years later. In actual supplies and in operational and fire-authority modalities, Russia can nod to all actors while maintaining necessary control. This would include demonstrated support to Syria, avoiding humiliating failures or additional Russian casualties, addressing some of Israel's concerns, tamping down Iran's buildup momentum, and maintaining leverage and relevance by phasing and grading.

Continued Israel-Russia top leadership dialogue will be essential as a way out of the crisis. In this dynamic, Israel will likely be expected to keep its current low profile in the near term, certainly in public statements. To be sure, both Iran and its proxy Hezbollah are itching to exploit this latest flare-up, possibly putting all parties to the test quite soon. But the larger question remains of whether the incident has truly realigned the Russian position on Iran's military entrenchment in Syria. There are reasons to doubt it has. Iran, one can fairly assume, still undermines Russia's goals both in terms of the competition for influence in Syria and by raising the risk of a wide-scale Israel-Iran conflict, endangering Russia's achievements there. As a result, Russia may well continue to accept an open window for Israeli action in Syria over the middle and long term.

In the "littoral" between the techno-tactical and strategic threats, Israeli decisionmakers are well aware of the higher risk and complexity in future operations they approve, with implications for the volume and profile of overall activity. But the greater the menace Israel sees in Iranian arms shipments, the higher its leadership's willingness will be for approving more-dangerous action, including both tactical hazards from S-300 and strategic difficulties with Russia. Moreover, if these batteries imminently and directly threaten Israeli aircraft, the IAF will finally have little choice but to destroy them. Understanding this reality, Russia may well maintain fire authorities and control over "Syrian" systems, seeking to prevent incidents that could have strategic, reputational, and domestic repercussions. As Iran pushes on, the countdown to the next strike in Syria may not be long.

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