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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

The downing of the Russian plane in Syria: Repercussions and possibilities of escalation with Israel

Policy Analysis Unit | October 2018

Russia-Israel relations and the downed Russian plane

Series: Situation Assessment

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Introduction

The Russian Ministry of Defence has published an illustrated report showing the arrival of S300 missile battery parts to Syria. Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, has announced that his country has successfully completed the delivery of these batteries, considered to be highly developed aerial defence systems. Russia has taken this step, which has created unprecedented tension in Russian-Israeli relations, after the downing of one of its reconnaissance planes on 17 September 2018 and the deaths of 15 crew members.

Russia's motivations

The Russian Ministry of Defence has placed the blame for the downing of its plane squarely at Israel's door. They have asserted that the Israelis have breached the 2015 agreement stipulating cooperation between the chiefs of staff in Tel Aviv and the Russian air base at Homeimim in Latakia to avoid confrontations between the two, revealing that the Israeli army only gave Homeimim advance warning of raids to be carried out on Syrian territory one minute beforehand and misled them as to the location. They allege that Israeli aircraft were monitoring the Russian plane and used it as cover to protect themselves from Syrian anti-aircraft missiles.

In response, the Russian Minister of Defence announced on 24 September that Russia was to supply the Syrian regime with the S300 air defence system within the next two weeks, and that they would use electromagnetic distortion off the Syrian coast in the eastern Mediterranean to confront attacks against Syria. He expressed confidence that these steps 'will calm down those who act hastily and prevent them from acting irresponsibly on Syrian territory and exposing Russian soldiers' lives to danger.'¹

¹"Russia to deliver S300 to Syria within two weeks after downing of IL-20", Russia Today, 24/09/2018, accessed on 11/10/2018, <https://bit.ly/2Q14SDv>.

Russia believes that Israel has breached the mutual understanding reached in 2015 on three major points and expects them to account for these breaches.

- The fact that the Israeli aerial force launched an attack on Latakia near to the Russian air base at Homeimim, where Russian transport and reconnaissance planes land and take off on a daily basis, putting Russian soldiers' lives in danger. This in spite of Israel's commitment to not endanger Russian soldiers in any Israeli attack on Syrian territory. It would have been clear to whoever took the decision on the Israeli side that an attack such as this would lead to the immediate activation of Syrian air defence systems against the attacking plane.
- The decision to launch this attack despite knowing that the Russian reconnaissance plane was in the air at the time.
- The decision to give misleading information to Homeimim to the effect that the attack was to take place in northern Syria, whereas in fact it took place in the west. This warning led Homeimim to request the reconnaissance plane, which at the time was above Idlib in northern Syria, to return to base – which led to it being shot down.

However, Israel has not presented any explanation for these points in the communications and meetings held between the two sides.² The reader should not the refusal of Syria and Russia to tolerate strikes in western Syria.

Details of the Israeli position

Israel has denied any responsibility for the downing of the Russian plane, attributing it to the Syrian regime and the Iranian military presence in Syria. The political leadership and the military establishment in Israel have tried very hard to solve the crisis as quickly as possible for fear that Moscow's severe position will affect the freedom the Israeli air force enjoys in striking targets across Syria as well as Israel-Russian relations more generally. The Israeli leadership have attempted to feel out the possibility of a visit by President Netanyahu or his Security Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, to Moscow to explain the incident and reduce tensions. However, Russia has rejected this for the time being. In the aftermath of this refusal, Israel wanted to send a delegation headed by Meir Ben-Shabbat, the National Security Advisor, with representatives of the Israeli air force and the general staff. This was also rejected by the

² Yaqoub Qadami, "Three crucial questions about the downing of the Russian plane," Ha'aretz, 07/10/2018. Accessed on 11/10/2018, <https://bit.ly/2PoXJgl>

Russian government, who prefer for contact between the two sides to remain restricted to the military sphere in the first instance.³

Israel thus sent a military delegation to Moscow led by the commander of the Israeli Air Force, Amikam Norkin. However, this delegation has not provided answers to the questions asked by Russia regarding Israel's responsibility for the downing of the Russian plane. Likewise, Norkin has failed to change the Russian military establishment's reading of the circumstances in which it was shot down. As a result, Israel has resorted to the USA, encouraging it to intervene to solve the crisis and put pressure on Russia to prevent them delivering the S300 missile systems.

The Israeli leadership thought that Moscow was using the S300s as a bargaining chip, in an attempt to push Israel into getting the White House and Congress to ease its pressure on Russia. But it soon became clear that Russia was entirely serious in its intention to change the rules of engagement in Syria.

Changing the rules of the game

Ever since Russia launched a direct military intervention in late September 2015, Russia and Israel have maintained constant coordination regarding Israel's military activity in Syria. The two countries formed a coordination committee between the Russian military leadership at Homeimim and the Israeli general staff to avoid any clash between Israeli aircraft and Russian aerial defence systems. From the very beginning, Russia has recognized the red lines set down by Israel, crossing which would lead to an Israel strike, which were not in any case fixed – since Israel when it began its military activity within Syria at the beginning of 2012 limited its targets to heavy weaponry being shipped from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. At the end of 2015, Israel added to its list of red lines the presence of Iranian or Hezbollah forces or militias loyal to them in southern Syria near to occupied Golan. In 2017, it added the entrenchment of Iranian forces armed with heavy weapons and the establishment of military factories producing advanced long-range missiles.

³ "Russia refuses Israeli suggestion to send high-level political figures to discuss the downing of the plane", Ha'aretz, 26/09/2018. Accessed on 11/10/2018. <https://bit.ly/2QJjUxR>

Throughout the Syrian conflict Israel has seen Syria's territory as fair game, and has treated it as part of the Israeli sphere of influence to be targeted as it likes. The intensity of Israeli attacks on Syrian territory has increased in the last two years. Since the beginning of 2017 and as of mid-September, it has launched, according to the Israeli army, more than 200 strikes across Syria – an average of one strike every three days. Some of these attacks have caused embarrassment to the Russian government, who are made to look like collaborators, especially when these strikes target regime forces who should objectively be under the protection of the Russian military presence.

It seems that Russia believes that the time is ripe to lay down limits on Israeli intervention, not least since it has succeeded in stabilising the regime and settling events militarily in its favour. It has exploited the downing of its plane to quickly change the rules of the game in this regard. The Russian reaction has shown that Moscow will not simply tolerate its plane being shot down and is intent on realizing its aims in Syria. As such it has not sufficed itself with placing the blame on Israel, but also has also provided the regime with the S300 with various military commitments, including agreeing to use them in coordination with Russia.

Within its efforts to change the rules of the game, Russia has communicated with both Iran and Israel to control the conflict and arrive at an implicit understanding as to the nature of the Iranian military presence in Syria. Whether these efforts succeed or fail, their decision to equip Syria with S300 systems represents a serious challenge to the movement of Israeli aircraft and their activities and their repeated military infringements in Syria.

Despite statements made by Netanyahu and other officials to the effect that Israel will do whatever necessary to ensure its security,⁴ that it still maintains its red lines in Syria – in particular preventing the establishment of a permanent Iranian military presence – and that the Israeli air force can deal with the S300s and destroy them if necessary, it has not launched any new aggression on Syrian territory since the downing of the Russian plane, despite Iran exploiting the opportunity to reinforce its qualitative military presence in Syria. It is unlikely that Israeli aircraft will resume striking any targets in Syria before arriving at an understanding with Moscow on the new rules of engagement. Any action of this sort would put Israel in direct

⁴ Noa Landau, "Netanyahu: We will continue to block Iranian entrenchment in Syria and we will continue security coordination with Russia," Ha'aretz, 25/09/2018. Accessed on 11/10/2018, <https://bit.ly/2C8I80z>

confrontation with Russia, whose own forces will be operating the S300 systems for the first three months while Syrian operators complete their training. On 7 October, Netanyahu announced that he and Russian President Vladimir Putin had agreed to hold a meeting in the very near future in order to resume security coordination between their armies.⁵

But what if Russia refuses Netanyahu's request to resume coordination and decides to finally put down limits to Israeli incursions onto Syrian territory? And if Moscow has already made a final decision on this matter, what will be the Israeli response? Will Israel risk targeting S300 systems operated by Russians in order to get at the Iranians? Will Mosco accept that, or will it work to contain events by removing the pretexts for Israel's incursions, i.e. the continuing Iranian presence in Syria? The direction that developments take in the coming stage will be to a great extent tied up with the balance of interests and challenges, a balance which has come to govern the relationship between Russia, Israel and Iran in the Syrian conflict. But it appears that Russia is not yet ready to do without Iran in Syria – and likewise, it seems that it wants to play the role of mediator between Syria and Israel, and perhaps even Israel and Iran as well.

⁵ Noa Landau, "Netanyahu and Putin agree to meet for the first time since the downing of the Russian plane in Syria," Ha'aretz, 07/10/2018. Accessed on 11/10/2018, <https://bit.ly/2C8I80z>