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Netanyahu's Moscow Visit Cements Russian–Israeli Cooperation in Syria

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Introduction

No sooner had Russia announced it would be intensifying the support it provides to Bashar al Assad's regime, than Israel's leadership requested a top-level meeting at the Kremlin with the stated aim of coordinating military efforts in the Syrian theater. Moscow immediately welcomed the Israeli suggestion, and President Putin's spokesman set aside September 21 for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Moscow.¹ A number of high-ranking Israeli military and intelligence officials accompanied Netanyahu on what was his fifth trip to Russia over six years as premier, including: Chief of the General Staff Gadi Eizenkot; Chief of Military Intelligence, Herzl Halevi; National Security Chief Yossi Cohen; and the government's Military Secretary Eliezer Toledano.

In addition to the discussions between Netanyahu and Putin, which lasted for more than two hours, Eizenkot held a separate meeting with his Russian counterpart to allow the two sides to discuss the fallout for Israel of an increased Russian military presence in Syria. The two Generals agreed to form a joint military committee, to be chaired by their respective Deputies, which would oversee airspace, maritime boundaries, and cyberspace during the conflict, to prevent any unintentional or "friendly fire" incidents between the two sides. The purview of the committee, which is scheduled to hold its first meeting on October 25, will notably include the activities of the Israeli Air Force in Syrian airspace."²

Russian Escalation and the Israeli Response

While the exact size and nature of the military forces which Russia has deployed to Syria remains unclear—just as Moscow's ultimate endgame remains shrouded in secrecy—the Israelis nonetheless view Russia's expanded intervention in Syria as a development that could ultimately serve their policy aims. From an Israeli perspective, an increased Russian military presence in Syria will prevent the downfall of the Assad regime, thus prolonging the conflict while simultaneously depleting the resources of the

¹ "Netanyahu to Russia next week for talks on Syria: Israeli official", *Reuters*, September 16, 2015: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/16/us-mideast-crisis-israel-russia-idUSKCN0RG1B820150916>

² "Israeli, Russian Armies to form Joint Committee on Syria Actions", Gili Cohen, *Haaretz* (English edition), September 22, 2015: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.677080>

Syrian state and people. It will also, Israeli military analysts predict, turn the Syrian coast—a region they refer to as “Syria Minor”—into a Russian sphere of influence in which Bashar al Assad is kept in power. This fits in to a wider Israeli strategy, declared at the outset of the Syrian revolution, where a weakened Bashar al Assad would remain in power as a titular head of state with whom compromises could be reached. Israeli worries, meanwhile, revolve around Tel Aviv’s continued ability to impose its own “red lines” on the progress of events on the ground in Syria, amidst a notably enlarged Russian military presence in Syria.

The restrictions which the Israelis placed on Damascus at the outset of the revolution, threatening military intervention if they were violated, included: that the Syrian regime shall not transfer heavy artillery, chemical weapons, advanced air defense systems, long-range surface-to-surface or any anti-ship missiles to Hezbollah or other groups in Lebanon; and that Iranian or Hezbollah forces would not be allowed into the territories adjoining the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and the de-facto armistice line between Syria and Israel. Nevertheless, Israel has welcomed Iranian and Hezbollah armed support for the Syrian regime, viewing this intervention on the part of the Shia partisans as inflaming the sectarian conflict in Syria and the wider Arab Middle East, while ensuring a prolonged conflict in Syria. Such military involvement would also, Israeli military analysts believed, help to tie up Hezbollah and Iran in a war of attrition and thereby deplete their resources. Since 2013, the Israeli military has enforced these “red lines” through no fewer than 10 air strikes carried out against military targets across Damascus and Latakia provinces, to which there was no Syrian response.³

Aims of the Netanyahu Visit

In visiting Russia, Netanyahu sought to arrive at a number of compromises and concessions with the Kremlin over certain key issues, including: ensuring freedom of action for the Israeli military across Syrian territory, given the presence of Russian forces across the Syrian coast, and the prevention of any unintentional clashes between the Russian and Israeli militaries. Further to this, Netanyahu also sought Russian assistance in preventing the transfer of weapons from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon; that Iranian and Hezbollah forces would not be allowed into the areas adjacent to the armistice line along the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights; a guarantee that those Iranian

³ “For Israel, Syria Red Lines Matter More than a Hotline to the Kremlin”, Amos Harel, *Haaretz* (English edition), September 30, 2015: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.677183>

and Hezbollah forces present in Syria would not threaten Israeli security; and a confirmation of previous Russian-Israeli understandings, such as that Moscow not pass on to Syria any weapons that would overturn or damage Israel's qualitative military edge, in particular with regards to advanced anti-aircraft missiles systems.⁴

The Israeli prime minister affirmed the necessity of Russian-Israeli coordination on Syria in addresses given both before and after his meeting with President Putin, also highlighting the importance of avoiding "misunderstandings" between the two sides. Netanyahu affirmed that Israel was working to prevent the transfer of advanced weapons from Syrian territory into Hezbollah's hands, as well as to prevent Hezbollah and Iran from engaging Israel on a new front in the Golan Heights. According to the Israeli premier, the increase in numbers of Russian troops in Syria over the previous few weeks would not deter the Israelis from these aims⁵. Leaving no room for doubt on the sincerity of these pledges, Netanyahu emphasized that the presence of high-ranking military officers accompanying him to Moscow was a means of avoiding any misunderstandings.

For his part, President Putin made clear that Russia has always behaved responsibly in its operations throughout the Middle East, adding that Moscow "denounces" rocket attacks against Israeli locations. While he made clear his belief that the Syrian military could not afford to be drawn into a new battleground along the Golan Heights, he added that he nonetheless "understands [Israeli] concerns" with respect to that risk⁶. Such statements by the Russian president underscore the significance he places on relations with Tel Aviv, the site of his first official visit following his second ascendancy to the presidency in May of 2012. For Israel, in its trepidation towards the revolutions of the Arab Spring, has more in common with Moscow than with Washington.

⁴ Udi Dekel, "The Time is Ripe to Change the Rules of the Game over Syria", Volume 750 of *Insight* (Hebrew edition), published by the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), September 24, 2015

⁵ "Netanyahu tells Putin: I Came to Moscow to Prevent Misunderstandings between IDF and Russian Forces in Syria", Barak Ravid, *Haaretz* (English edition), September 21, 2015: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.676988>

⁶ Ibid

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, Russia has taken on board both US and Israeli requests not to provide Syria with weapons that would overturn Israel's military edge in the Middle East. Netanyahu sought to uphold this pattern in his latest visit to Moscow, where he wanted assurances that the latest Russian weapons to be transferred into Syria over the past month would not lead to a restriction on the freedom of movement which Israeli jets presently enjoy over Syrian airspace, including over the coastal provinces. The outcome of the visit appears to suggest that Netanyahu's requests were accepted in full by the Russians, including the Israeli prime minister's demands that no Russian weapons be handed over to Hezbollah from their present positions in Syria. Finally, the establishment of a joint military committee to oversee all these activities can be seen as a new milestone in the development of Russian-Israeli relations, which have blossomed during Putin's time in office.