



## Russia's Air Defenses in Syria: More Politics than Punch

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** As a result of Moscow's geopolitical considerations in Syria, chief among them the desire to avoid direct confrontation with the US and Israel, Russia's air defenses in the region have assumed the tasks of political intimidation and reassurance. The Kremlin has issued warnings to both Israel and the US-led anti-ISIS coalition not to strike forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar Assad, but Russia is unlikely to attempt to engage Israeli or coalition aerial assets unless its own forces are attacked or the assets approach Russian military installations too closely. Even then, intercepting them will be no easy task. While Russia's modern air defenses in Syria are formidable, they are not "game-changers."

In early October 2016, Russian Defense Ministry chief spokesman Maj.-Gen. Igor Konashenkov [warned](#) the US-led anti-ISIS coalition that "Russian air defense crews are unlikely to have time to clarify via the [de-confliction] line the exact flight path of missiles and who their carrier platforms belong to," adding that "any air or missiles strikes on territory controlled by the Syrian government will pose a clear threat to Russian military servicemen." The warning, issued in response to an accidental US strike against forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar Assad the previous month, renewed fears that Russia may attempt to target coalition and Israeli aerial assets.

Since then, however, both the US and Israel have struck pro-regime targets in Syria with no blowback from the Kremlin. Why has Moscow proven reluctant to respond?

Concerns about Russia [restricting coalition](#) and [Israeli freedom of action](#) over Syria intensified in late November 2015, following the downing of a Russian Su-

24M strike aircraft by a Turkish F-16. Commenting on the shoot-down, Lieut.-Gen. Sergey Rudskoy [threatened](#) that Russia would destroy “every target posing a potential threat.” Shortly afterwards, Russia deployed its much feared S-400 Triumf long-range SAM system at Khmeimim Airbase near Latakia.

The S-400 deployment created the impression that pro-Assad forces would benefit from Russia’s new SAM umbrella. However, [numerous IAF strikes](#) against weapons shipments destined for the Lebanon-based Hezbollah terror group proved this assumption wrong. The strikes indicated that Moscow, despite its rhetoric, takes Jerusalem's red lines seriously and does not wish to escalate tensions with Israel, a major regional power and key US ally. Moscow has no desire to see Israel expand its involvement in the conflict, especially given that the regional balance of power is not in Russia’s favor. [A recent unanswered strike](#), allegedly executed by Israel, against [a chemical and missile production and storage facility](#) near Masyaf – just 13km from a [new Russian S-400 site](#) – appears to support this notion.

Several incidents have occurred involving Russian and Israeli military assets, including [unconfirmed reports](#) of Russian forces firing on Israeli aircraft. Yet Israeli and Russian leaders have held a number of meetings intended to, [in the words of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#), “strengthen the security cooperation between us so as to avoid mishaps, misunderstandings, and unnecessary confrontations.” Furthermore, Israel and Russia established a [deconfliction line](#) in October 2015 that has [helped reduce](#) the risk of clashes.

Moscow’s warnings to Israel are therefore directed more towards the Syrian and Russian public than they are towards Jerusalem. Offering no threatening response to Israeli airstrikes would make the Kremlin appear weak, prompting pro-Assad factions to question Moscow’s commitment to the regime and weakening Russia’s influence.

At the same time, Russia has been [rebuilding Syria’s air defenses](#) in the hope that they would deter both Israel and the coalition from further strikes. Russia’s Defense Ministry [has mentioned](#) Syrian air defenses in warnings directed at coalition forces and [has pledged](#) to “increase [their] effectiveness” following the April 7, 2017, US Navy Tomahawk cruise missile strike against al-Shayrat Air Base. Doing so could backfire for Moscow, however, given that it might prompt Israel or the US to target Syrian air defenses and possibly other regime military assets as well.

As for Russia’s own air defenses, Moscow has not utilized them to defend Assad’s forces and is unlikely to do so for fear of an armed confrontation with the US and

its partners. Indeed, while Syrian fighters are [known to have flown](#) escort missions for Russian strike aircraft, the reverse has not occurred. Furthermore, like Israel, the US maintains a deconfliction line with Russia and has developed deconfliction agreements to avoid clashes.

Interestingly, [a Russian TV special on Khmeimim Air Base](#), which aired on June 11, 2017, claimed Russia has agreed not to target coalition aircraft as long as they maintain a distance of 60 km or more from the base. The special featured Lieut.-Gen. Viktor Gumyonny, head of the Russian Aerospace Forces' (VKS) Air and Missile Defense Troops, who asserted that coalition aircraft approaching Khmeimim are tracked by Russian air defenses (presumably by the S-400's fire control radar) and immediately leave the area. Coalition sources have confirmed neither the validity of these claims nor the truth of whether or not coalition aircraft have flown within close proximity to Khmeimim; nevertheless, such statements highlight Moscow's reluctance to defend regime forces.

On June 18, a week after the airing of the TV special, a US Navy F/A-18E downed a Syrian Su-22 strike aircraft near Raqqa, prompting Russia's Defense Ministry to issue another warning – one that seemed to convey a shift in Russia's policy on targeting coalition aircraft. The [warning](#) asserted that “jets and unmanned aerial vehicles of the international coalition discovered west of the Euphrates River will be tracked by Russian air and ground defenses as air targets.” However, as Western analysts were quick to [point out](#), this rather ambiguous threat, like those before it, was intended primarily to reassure Russian and pro-Assad audiences, and to deter coalition forces from further strikes against regime forces. Moreover, though Russia threatened to cut the deconfliction line with the US, [the line remained open](#).

The constant portrayal by the Moscow press of Russian SAM systems and fighters as nothing short of super-weapons has made the Kremlin's task of explaining its lack of response to coalition and Israeli strikes all the more difficult. This was most evident following al-Shayrat, when Russia's Defense Ministry, attempting to discredit the strike, falsely [claimed that](#) only 23 of the 59 Tomahawks launched against the air base had hit. As the Kremlin no doubt had hoped, pro-Russian fringe news sites wrongly interpreted this to mean that Russian air defenses had been responsible for downing those that didn't.

Western and Russian analysts and commentators, meanwhile, have produced countless articles analyzing the lack of a response from Moscow, with many concluding that Russia's SAM systems [could not have intercepted](#) the cruise missiles unless they were based near Shayrat beforehand. (Even then, their limited numbers would not have permitted the interception of all the

Tomahawks.) Though most of the focus was on the S-400, some analysts [mentioned](#) other Russian air defense assets, including the S-300V4 long-range SAM system [allegedly deployed](#) to Syria in October 2016 to defend Russia's naval facility in Tartus. (Russia's Defense Ministry [did confirm](#) the deployment of an S-300, but did not specify the variant.)

While diving into the capabilities of these and other systems in detail is beyond the scope of this analysis, it is nevertheless necessary to briefly address the most common misconception about Russia's long-range SAM systems: their ability to establish a "no-fly zone" some 400 km in radius, covering the air space over most of Syria and parts of neighboring states. On paper, the S-300V4 and the S-400 appear very impressive. The former is capable of engaging targets at distances of up to 400 km thanks to a new long-range interceptor; while the latter is limited to a more modest yet still formidable 250 km engagement range. (Russia developed a 400 km interceptor for the S-400, but it is not known to be operational.) In reality, however, multiple factors affect kill ranges of different target types.

Contrary to Kremlin rhetoric, targeting stealth aircraft and cruise missiles remains a major challenge for Russian air defenses. Furthermore, due to the radar horizon limit, even non-stealth aircraft can significantly reduce detection by flying at very low altitudes. Also, sophisticated electronic warfare systems can degrade the performance of enemy radar. Hence, at long ranges, systems such as the S-400 and S-300V4 can realistically be expected to successfully intercept only cumbersome targets with good radar return (for example, tankers, transport, and AEW&C aircraft).

In conclusion, Moscow's geopolitical considerations in Syria – primarily its desire to avoid direct confrontation with Washington and Jerusalem – have led Russian air defenses to stick to the tasks of political intimidation and reassurance. The Kremlin has issued multiple warnings to Israel and the coalition not to strike pro-Assad forces, but Russia is unlikely to engage Israeli or coalition aerial assets unless its own forces are subjected to attack or if the assets approach Russian military installations too closely without prior notice. Even then, intercepting them will not be easy. While Russia's modern air defenses in Syria are formidable, they are not super-weapons or "game-changers," and they are present in the region in only limited numbers.

This does not mean Russia's air defenses in Syria should be neglected. On the contrary: Jerusalem and Washington must keep a close watch, particularly as the post-ISIS stage of the Syrian conflict sets in. Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that the conflict has enabled Moscow to evaluate many different air defense assets,

including SAM systems, AEW&C aircraft, multi-role fighters, and jammers, under real combat conditions. The invaluable experience gained in Syria by Russian forces will enhance the capability of Russian air defenses in the future.

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