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Russia in Syria: Caught Between Iran and Israel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Intermittent Israeli strikes against Iranian positions in Syria have alarmed Russia, which is trying to solidify its military gains there. Active Israeli interference could bring down the highly unstable security architecture the Russians are working on in Syria. Moscow must balance between its war ally, Iran, and Israel, an important regional player – two states with radically different geopolitical imperatives.

Over the past several months, one of the Kremlin's major concerns has been the extent to which Israel will continue to carry out preventive strikes on Syrian soil.

On February 10, an armed Iranian drone was shot down over Israeli airspace prompting a swift and devastating Israeli response. Two months later, on April 9, Israeli jets struck again, bombing the T4 base and killing 14 personnel – including at least seven IRGC troops. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called this a "very dangerous development."

These incidents suggest that an Israeli-Syrian (by extension Iranian) military engagement could evolve into a serious situation that could spin out of Russia's control. This is worrisome to Moscow as it is keen to keep the balance in Syria.

How, then, might Russia respond as tensions escalate between Iran and Israel on Syrian ground?

For Moscow, alienating Jerusalem around the Syrian battlefield would be an unfortunate development. Russia is attempting to maintain a dominant position in Syria after having gained important victories. Achieving this grows more difficult as the Syrian battlefield becomes more crowded. The US is unlikely to withdraw its military forces. The Turks are operating in Afrin, in the north of the country. Powerful Iranian proxy forces are currently close to the Israeli border, and little success has been achieved at recent peace

conferences. The last thing Russia wants is to have Israel drawn into the conflict militarily.

This could explain why Russia has conceded several crucial points regarding Israel's security.

Consider, for instance, what occurred after the US and its allies shot cruise missiles into Syria on April 14. Initially, Moscow responded by proposing the resumption of delivery of advanced S-300 air-defense missiles to Damascus, a supply that had been suspended in 2013 because of Israeli opposition.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said that in view of the strikes by the western allies, Russia no longer had any moral obligation to refrain from transferring the missiles to Syria. Russia's prominent daily *Kommersant* quoted unnamed military sources as saying deliveries might begin imminently.

However, following the Israeli PM's visit to Russia in early May for Victory Day festivities, another prominent Russia daily, *Izvestia*, quoted top Kremlin aide Vladimir Kozhin as saying that Moscow was not in talks with the Syrian government about supplying S-300 ground-to-air missiles. Moreover, on May 31, Israeli defense minister Avigdor Lieberman visited Moscow. Numerous Kremlin-linked Russian analysts claimed that a deal had been reached whereby Iran would pull its forces from the Israeli-Syrian border. If true, this is an apparent U-turn by the Russian government.

Another consideration for Moscow might be the hints that occasionally appear in the Russian media from defense and political sources that if Iran attacks Israel from Syria, either by itself or through its proxy Hezbollah, Israel will not hold back. It will respond forcefully, targeting Iranian soil.

On a global level, there is a hypothetical possibility that Russia might be a potential mediator between Iran and Israel. It would be a grand diplomatic coup to show the world that peace between two such bitter archrivals hinges upon Moscow. The Kremlin does appear to be considering this possibility, judging from numerous recent suggestions in the Russian media. Moreover, as Vladimir Putin has been largely left out of the potentially historic developments on the Korean Peninsula, the Kremlin might be seeking a means of playing power broker in the Middle East.

Russia's concessions to Israeli interests in Syria do not preclude a further strengthening of the Iran-Russia partnership. There are many new sticking points for both countries. The American withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement put Russia and the European countries on the same side against the possible breakdown of the agreement. Shared opposition to US pressure makes

Moscow and Tehran more than just allies of convenience. It is this that makes Russia's position in the nascent Iran-Israel confrontation in Syria tricky. Both Russia and Iran seek to balance the unstable geopolitical situation in and around Syria. As the Syrian conflict is still going on, it is extremely difficult to forecast a scenario, even for a short period.

A couple of things are clear, though. The Russians understand that in view of Israel's security imperatives, intermittent Israeli intervention is going to take place. They also know that Israel will almost certainly have to respond again, even if the Golan Heights are not directly threatened. The Iranians, on the other hand, are unlikely to make concessions in Syria due to their geopolitical imperatives and military interests. These different perspectives are bound to clash from time to time.

Russia has to perform a difficult balancing act between Israel and Iran as it tries to position itself as the primary player in mitigating conflict between the two geopolitical enemies.

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