



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Israel Must Rethink Its Syria Strategy After Downing of Russian Plane

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The downing of the Russian plane requires Israel to reevaluate the continued relevance of its years-long air campaign in Syria. While the struggle to prevent the entrenchment of Iranian forces in Syria and the arming of Hezbollah with “tie-breaking” strategic weapons must continue, the nature and format of the campaign need to be adjusted to the new strategic reality that is being created by Moscow.

The crisis between Jerusalem and Moscow over culpability for the recent downing of the Russian plane has far less to do with the incident’s actual facts than with its wider framework: how the process that culminated in the disaster unfolded, and whose responsibility it was.

As far as Moscow is concerned, it all began with the Israeli decision to attack the Latakia military compound, and the question of who actually pulled the trigger and downed the plane is marginal. For Israel, on the other hand, the root of the problem is Tehran’s growing military entrenchment in Syria and its sustained delivery of advanced weaponry to its Hezbollah proxy. Here lie the seeds of the strategic crisis that is currently at the door of the Israeli leadership.

By way of putting matters in their broader context, it may be advisable to look at the IAF’s investigation of the winter 1997 collision of two helicopters in northern Israel in which 73 soldiers were killed. On the technical level, it was crucial to examine the flight procedures that had failed to prevent the disaster. At the systemic-strategic level, it was important to explore wider questions, notably the reasons why the IDF decided to fly fighters to in-depth posts in southern Lebanon when a simple risk-management calculation could have easily revealed that the potential risks of ground transportation (e.g., IEDs, Hezbollah fire) were significantly smaller. Investigating the accident within a

broader frame of reference could have had fundamental and vital implications for Israel's south Lebanon military strategy, to the extent of rethinking the continued utility of the security zone.

The same applies to the broader context of the current crisis. Focusing on the incident as a technical failure, such as a derailed train, makes the train's intended destination irrelevant for the investigation. But approaching the issue from a strategic perspective makes the objectives of the Latakia airstrike, or indeed the goals of Israel's Syria campaign, critical subjects for investigation.

Hence, while the effort to mend relations with Moscow is of great immediate importance, the IDF and the Israeli defense establishment must use the crisis as a catalyst for rethinking their Syria strategy, under clear new guidelines from the political echelon. This is particularly important as the Russian government is certain to exploit the tragedy to its own ends, in blatant disregard of the actual facts on the ground and in line with the Soviet legacy of rewriting narratives. In the words of Jean Daniel: "There is no other state where the government attributes such supreme importance to history, its writing and interpretation, as the Soviet Union. There is no other state where leaders use history and historiography as a political tool ... [where] it is self-evident for the political leadership to interfere in historical research and instruct how to relate to specific events." The bequest of these tendencies to the Russian state leaves little room for fact-based amelioration of the crisis between Jerusalem and Moscow.

In these circumstances, Israel must reevaluate its Syrian strategy, first and foremost the continued relevance of the years-long air campaign. For while the struggle to prevent the entrenchment of Iranian forces in Syria and the arming of Hezbollah with strategic weapons must continue, the nature and format of the campaign needs to be adjusted to the new strategic reality that is being created by Moscow.

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