



PERSPECTIVES

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The Russian Perspective on the Downing of the IL-20

by Emil Avdaliani

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The downing of a Russian air force plane by Syrian government forces during an Israeli F-16 strike in Syria was a predictable consequence of the overcrowding of the Syrian battleground. The Russians might genuinely be angry about what happened, but from a geopolitical perspective, they understand that Israel will not abstain from further military interventions in Syria when needed. Israel's national interest is at stake, and Jerusalem will not allow Iran to increase its already substantial presence.

The Russian press and overall public opinion in Russia has been exceptionally negative towards Israel over the past few weeks following the downing of a Russian military plane off the Syrian coast on September 17 that killed 15 Russian troops.

Russian analysts largely agree that though the downing of the plane was allegedly caused by an Israeli mistake, there will be no major deterioration of bilateral relations, and that this is not a *casus belli* compelling Russia to go to war with Israel economically or militarily. However, this does not mean the Russians see the situation in positive light. They agree, from high-level politicians to analysts to ordinary citizens, that the situation is in fact quite bad. Bilateral relations between the countries will certainly be undermined to some degree.

Various suggestions have been made about how to penalize Israel, up to and including the severance of diplomatic relations. However, these opinions are being expressed primarily by radical nationalists. Essentially the entire political

class understands that Russia and Israel need each other as both have strategic interests in Syria.

Some analysts have suggested that the situation could, in principle, be corrected by Israel if it agrees to pay compensation for the IL-20. Israel has not indicated any desire to comply with this suggestion.

Following the downing, a line of thought developed among politicians and analysts that the incident can be compared to what happened over Turkish skies in November 2015, when the Turks shot down a Russian fighter jet. These comparisons have since been discarded, as the Russians maintain that the Turkish pilot had the express mission of shooting down the Su-24 jet.

Others note that as a result of the conflict escalation between Moscow and Ankara, both sides lost more than \$40 billion, and the consequences of a similar confrontation with Israel could be even more destructive for Russia. This concern is based on the popular view of Israel's position in the international political and financial system and its powerful lobbying power abroad, particularly in the White House.

The wider opinion also goes that if it turns out that the events that led up to the incident were part of a purposeful game by Israel in which its military deliberately put a Russian plane at risk to spoil Moscow's relations with Damascus, this will not be left unanswered.

Russian analysts and many middle-level politicians have suggested that Jerusalem misinterpreted Russian agreement to allow Israel to strike certain targets in Syria. That agreement, they argue, was a temporary expedient, not a permanent status to be taken for granted. In their view, Israel's explanations for the F-16 strike in Syria, in the aftermath of which Syrian government forces downed the IL-20 – that Israel was striking “infrastructure facilities of the Syrian army that produced weapons of mass destruction for the terrorist organization Hezbollah” and “these weapons were intended for use against Israel” – cannot serve as an excuse.

More radical analysts associated with the Kremlin have proffered that Israel does not want strong neighbors and is doing everything it can to weaken them. The war in Syria is beneficial to Israel, they argue, because Arabs who would otherwise be united in their hatred of the Jewish State are engaged in mutual destruction. However, thanks to Russia, the war is coming to an end – and Israel, if it wants to preserve the chances for some sort of peace, needs to get used to the fact that it will have to respect the territorial sovereignty of its neighbors. It has even been suggested by State Duma officials that Israel will

have to stop attacking targets in the seaside Syrian province of Latakia, which is located about 500 kilometers from the borders of Israel.

Moderate Russians have voiced the opinion that the Israeli actions were not deliberate. Most likely, they reason, the Israeli pilots decided to use a Russian aircraft as a shield on the spot and did so on their own initiative. Few believe Israel would have done this on purpose, as Jerusalem has no desire to complicate its relations with Russia.

The Russian logic goes that at the very beginning, Israel did not oppose the regime in Syria, but then, when the opportunity appeared to remove Assad, Israel began to contact the opposition and even provided it with weapons. However, Assad won in the end, and Israel found itself on the losing side. In that situation, purposefully ratcheting up tensions with Russia would be deeply unwise.

Igor Delanoe, deputy head of the Observo Franco-Russian Analytical Center and a specialist in international politics, believes the coordination between the Russian and Israeli militaries will remain in place, as it benefits both Moscow and Jerusalem. "They have a common understanding that confrontation with each other is unprofitable for them," he told *RIA Novosti*. In view of the overall geopolitical context, it is indeed highly unlikely that even after so tragic an incident, Israeli-Russian relations will deteriorate substantially. Tensions will persist, but the states understand that they need each other.

For Russia, alienating Israel around the Syrian battlefield would be an unfortunate development. Moscow is trying to maintain a dominant position in Syria after having gained important victories. Achieving this will grow ever more difficult as the Syrian battlefield becomes more crowded. 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. This is a difficult geopolitical situation. Moscow sees the value of the understanding between the two countries, but military complications are bound to occur again from time to time. Cooperation is essential for Russia and Israel, but full separation of their military zones and interests so that both sides are completely safe is impossible.

Emil Avdaliani teaches history and international relations at Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University. He has worked for various international consulting companies and currently publishes articles on military and political developments across the former Soviet space.