

*INSS Insight* No. 1095, September 27, 2018

**The Crisis over the Downed Russian Plane: What Next?**

**Amos Yadlin, Zvi Magen, and Vera Michlin-Shapir**

**The downing of the Russian Il-20 plane by the Syrians on the night of September 17, 2018 has become one of the most complex incidents in the framework of Russia-Israel relations, at least since the start of Russia's intervention in Syria in October 2015. Following an Israeli attack in the Latakia region, a Syrian SA-5 anti-aircraft battery struck a Russian reconnaissance plane, which crashed into the sea, killing its crew of 15. Although it was Syria that failed to identify the Russian plane, Russia chose to blame Israel for the incident. However, it appears that both Russia and Israel still have a fundamental interest in continuing the good relations between them and maintaining their understandings in Syria. The recent announcement by the Russian Ministry of Defense about the transfer of advanced S-300 systems to Syria changes little in this regard, since Israel is well-equipped to withstand this challenge. However, it puts Russia and Israel on a precarious path and may signal that Russia has broader political motivations in this crisis.**

Following an Israeli attack on an Iranian target in the Latakia region on the night of September 17, 2018, a Syrian SA-5 anti-aircraft battery struck a Russian reconnaissance plane, which crashed into the sea, killing its crew of 15. The Russian Ministry of Defense formulated an official version for the media, in which it accused Israel of "irresponsibility" and "provocation," and of "hiding" Israeli F-16 planes behind the Russian Il-20. Although President Putin softened the Russian response and called the incident "a chain of tragic errors" and confirmed that Syria had downed the plane, he continued to support the positions expressed by the Ministry of Defense. The subject was widely covered in Russian government-controlled media outlets, and evoked sweeping anti-Israel commentary and calls for revenge, punishment, and sanctions.

The Israeli version of events, as was expressed by the IDF spokesperson (who departed from traditional policy and confirmed the Israeli action in Syria), expressed regret at the loss of life but placed the blame squarely on Syria, which shot down the plane (when Israeli planes were already back in Israeli territory) and on Iran, which is active in Syria. This version was substantiated by a detailed report delivered by Israeli Air Force (IAF) Commander Maj. Gen. Amikam Norkin in his visit to Moscow. Shortly afterwards, however, the Russian Ministry of Defense backed its own narrative with a video

presentation. This was followed by an announcement about the transfer of S-300 systems to Syria.

At first it appeared that Moscow's response reflected genuine anger at Israel, which operated not far from where Russian forces in Syria were deployed (at the Hmeimim base), and while the Russian plane was returning there. This created a situation that enhanced the possibility of an error by the Syrian air defenses. Moreover, it seemed that the Russian defense establishment was eager to deflect blame from the Russian force in Syria, because this force is operating in full cooperation and in combination with the Syrian Air Force and air defenses, which together were expected to prevent such errors. However, in the days that followed, the Russian reaction seems to indicate an intention to use the event, leveraging it to further Russian objectives and to change the rules of the game in Syria.

The current crisis with Russia might indicate a broader agenda pursued by Russia vis-a-vis the West and the US. Russia is trying to demonstrate its primacy in Syria and to position itself more advantageously in anticipation of a bargain with the US and other Western countries over the future political order in Syria. In such a case, Israel might find itself a party to a larger international game, where it would need the backing of the US. In this context, the recent statement by an unnamed senior US official that denounced the transfer of anti-aircraft missiles to Syria is welcomed. Yet it is also important that the US back its words with action in helping to prevent Iran's entrenchment in Syria at this critical point, where Israel's freedom of action is now threatened. In addition, Israel should take into account that the current crisis with Russia might be fueled by internal tensions within the Russian governing elite. Non-government Russian media outlets pointed out that the current crisis, led by the Ministry of Defense, might be a symptom of the Ministry's struggle with other government branches and elite clans over decision making in strategic areas.

Nevertheless, it seems that the current crisis does not change the strategic balance. Israeli and Russian interests are still fundamentally aligned, which may enable both sides to overcome this crisis. It is unlikely that Russia is interested in damaging the relations with Israel, which are valuable to Moscow as well as to Jerusalem. Ideally the parties will find a solution soon, more or less based on the familiar arrangements in the Syrian arena, with minimal restrictions on Israel's freedom of movement and mechanisms to avoid friction. In this context, the transfer of S-300 systems, should it take place, is also unlikely to change Israel's motivations and actions. There would be nothing new if the S-300 systems would be operated by Russians in Syria, as Russia already has a more advanced S-400 system in place. In addition, Israel has prepared for over a decade for Syria's operation of the S-300, and has weapon systems developed precisely to face the S-300 as

well as F-35 fighter jets, which were designed to hit exactly such systems. Such a scenario might damage the reputation of Russian air defense system.

The September 17 incident was perhaps inevitable sooner or later because of intensive Israeli Air Force activity against the Iranian presence in Syria and the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah. The reasons why Israel adopted this strategy are still valid, and it is of paramount importance that Israel continue the campaign to stop Iran's entrenchment in Syria, while preserving a friendly relationship with Russia. The IAF will certainly investigate the incident thoroughly and must draw the requisite conclusions and limit the conditions for attacks in areas where Russian forces are active, with greater consideration for Russian air activity, even at some distance from the Israeli aerial routes. IAF activity in Syria will presumably be cut back, at least in the near future, and will be under greater supervision at the political level. It may also be possible to make some changes to the warning mechanisms and prevent friction with the Russians, while taking into account the risk that such warnings will be passed on to the Syrian air defense system.

This incident must also be used to clarify to the Russians that the transfer of more advanced air defense systems to Syria, such as the S-300, will increase the risk to their own forces, since it illustrates the poor performance of Syrian air defenses. Moreover, this is another opportunity to clarify to Russia that the presence of Iranian forces and Iranian-controlled militias creates an explosive situation in Syria.