



Russia's latest gambit is just another Middle East foray gone awry

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Syria's civil war long ago morphed into a playground for both real and wannabe regional hegemony. Until recently, Israel has for the most part shown remarkable restraint in engaging the hostiles intent on surrounding Israel on three sides as a tempting side benefit of helping Assad murder huge swathes of his own people. But Iranian forces, with their commitment to Israel's complete and utter destruction, have not gotten a bye and have been on the receiving end of countless Israeli attacks on their bases and installations in Syria, including Iranian positions at Damascus airport.

Until fall 2018, Russia kept its objections to a minimum as Moscow believed that a more forceful response would result in a larger Iranian-Israeli clash that could bring the United States back into the region in a more significant way.

Moscow's tone changed dramatically when it realized that there were limits to the White House's concerns in Syria. When Syria shot down a Russian plane, believing it was an Israeli target, Moscow blamed Israel for the attack and offered Syria its S-300 air defense system. Iran viewed this development as a signal that it could continue trying to build up its forces in Syria to create an extended front with its long-time proxy Hezbollah for whom shooting hundreds of rockets at Israel is a regular hobby. And while Israel's Damascus airport strike embarrassed Syria, Russia and Iran, it also provoked Moscow to demand an end to "arbitrary" Israeli attacks.

Yet, simultaneously Moscow reaffirmed its commitment to Israel's "strong security" and dismissed Iranian disappointment that Russia did not activate its S-300 air defenses against the strike at Damascus airport.

However, the recent public verbal tongue lashings by Moscow to Iran's leaders are just that. They are part of a false narrative that Moscow can exert its will over Turkey, Iran and Syria, and that Israel has a reliable and concerned partner in the Kremlin. If only. That Russia even felt compelled to go public with its warning to Iran speaks volumes of what Moscow thinks Tehran is planning and what Israel will do to counter it. Even Putin with his inflated sense of importance on the world stage, understands that he like his predecessors can only exert minimal if any control on the whims of his Syrian partners. The truth is that this Russian house of cards will collapse in ways that will not necessarily be favorable to Moscow. Putin, however, will wisely insist that this is all going according to his grand plan for the Middle East.

Why should we care? Observers who thought great power politics were a thing of the past forgot their opinions do not matter. What matters is what those supposed great powers believe and Russia has never stopped believing that it is a great power. Moscow must save face and will not accept Israeli actions that would diminish the scope of Putin's ambitions, Iran will exploit this every way it can and Israel will be forced to respond. That is what makes this more dangerous than ever before.

If this were only in the idle threat category Moscow's demands would not matter. But repeated failures of Russian-made air defense systems and Russian advisors deployed to ensure successful use is a bridge too far for a country intent on showing the superiority of its weapons systems and its commitment to Russian allies in the field. Russia cannot accept repeated humiliation or blithely disregard the huge financial loss of the weapons it has sold to Iran. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that Russia would respond by deploying an intricate and redundant air defense network in Syria to command Syrian and thus northern Israeli air space. That would allow Iran unprecedented freedom to build up its forces and pose an even greater threat.

We have been down this path before. In 1982, Syria moved a substantial piece of its Soviet-supplied air defenses, along with Soviet advisers, into Lebanon's Beqaa Valley in a direct attempt to threaten Israeli aircraft. Soviet defense officials reportedly cautioned against the move but then as now, their influence over actual decision-making was limited. The result was absolute destruction of Syria's air and air defense network. But what came next was potentially even more significant. The Soviets could not endure this defeat of their vaunted network. In response, they sent Syria their most modern and effective air defense system, the SAM-5. With this, a new Middle East arms race was born.

Miscalculations and visions of grandeur have defined this volatile region for millennia — current events are no exception. As Washington withdraws, Russia believes it is the superpower in the region and thus the arbiter between and among all of the competing factions. Iran, not about to take a back seat to anyone, believes that it is the one wagging the tail on the Russian dog. Hezbollah probably rejoices that its attacks on Israel are no longer limited to just Lebanon. And Assad who long ago put his destiny into the hands of the Supreme Leader, gets to keep his job.

Because Moscow must keep proving its fealty to its partners in Syria, public admonitions to the contrary, Russia will move ever closer to reconstituting Assad's Syria and assisting Iran to thwart Israel's defensive measures. Iran for its part will take maximum advantage moving forces and weapons, including rockets and missiles into Syria and Lebanon. To Putin, be careful what you wish for.

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