



The Limits Of Russo-Israeli Cooperation

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Can Israel really rely on the Kremlin to preserve its security? That question has preoccupied policymakers in Jerusalem ever since Russia's formal intervention into the Syrian civil war in September 2015. In the three-and-a-half years since, diplomatic contacts between Jerusalem and Moscow have ballooned, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu making multiple, high-profile trips to the Russian capital to coordinate his government's approach to Syria with Russia's presence and priorities there.

For a while, at least, this strategy seemed to work. Netanyahu received repeated assurances from the Kremlin that it was committed to protecting Israel's northern border, and Russia's military made that mission a major part of its operations in the Syrian theater. The two countries also established a formal "deconfliction" mechanism to prevent military mishaps — a system that, despite some slips, has largely functioned as intended.

Increasingly, however, there are signs that the Russo-Israeli understanding over Syria has begun seriously fraying.

The reason has everything to do with Russia's longtime strategic partner, Iran. After years of direct support to the embattled regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, the Islamic Republic has erected a formidable strategic footprint in Syria. That presence includes a legion of proxy military forces (estimated to number 70,000 or more men under arms), as well as extensive influence over the country's politics and economy in everything from administration to education. The Russian government, meanwhile, has made clear that it cannot and will not dislodge this presence, as Israeli officials had once hoped it might.

That recognition has nudged Israel into a more assertive military posture vis-à-vis Iran in Syria in recent months, characterized by repeated cross-border air raids against Iran and its chief terrorist proxy, Hezbollah. So, too, has President Trump's unexpected December announcement that America would withdraw its forces from Syria in the near future, thereby removing the stabilizing presence they provide.

In response, Israel's government has vowed to accelerate its efforts to roll back Iran's military presence in Syria. "We aren't prepared to accept the Iranian military entrenchment in Syria, which is directed against us," Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly declared back in December. "We will act against it vigorously and continuously, including during the current period."

What's not clear, however, is whether it can truly do so, since Israel now faces an increasingly hostile operating environment on its northern border. Just how hostile was demonstrated last month, following Israel's Jan. 21 incursion into Syria. That raid targeted several Iranian military facilities near Damascus in an effort to erode Iranian operational capabilities in southern Syria.

In the wake of those strikes, Israel received a clear message from Moscow. "With regard to the latest Israeli attacks, we said that such arbitrary attacks on sovereign Syrian territory should be stopped and excluded," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin told reporters. "Any strikes destabilize the situation even more. No one should conduct actions in Syria that go beyond the scope of antiterrorist objectives."

Moscow, in other words, is happy with the current status quo in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad is again firmly in control of the country and where its strategic partner, Iran, has become firmly embedded. So, too, is Iran itself, which shows no sign of exiting Syria despite international pressure, and which warned recently that it is prepared to deliver a "crushing and proportional response" to any further Israeli incursions.

Israel thus finds itself on the horns of a serious strategic dilemma: It can sit back and hope that the Kremlin will continue to police and protect its northern border and keep Iran's activities and influence at bay, or it can step up its targeting of the Iranian presence in southern Syria, potentially risking a political rupture with Moscow in the process.

For the moment, at least, Jerusalem is leaning toward the latter — albeit cautiously. On Feb. 12, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confirmed that Israel had carried out a new strike on Iranian assets in Quneitra a day prior. But, as retired General Amos Yadlin, one of Israel's most astute military observers, has noted, this is now more the exception than the norm. Israel is increasingly limiting its military operations in Syria, cognizant of the growing danger of escalation — and painfully aware that Russia no longer has its back.