



Moscow's Central Role:

Have the Rules of Engagement Changed in Syria after the recent Israeli Strikes?

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On July 19, 22 and 25, Israel carried out three strikes in less than one week using surface-to-air missiles against Syria. These strikes are considered the first of their kind executed by the new Israeli "Bennett-Lapid" government. Although this type of strikes is not novel, the Russian reaction to it was different this time. The Russian Ministry of Defense engaged in the scene for the first time, sending indirect messages to Israel. This made analysts refer to a possible shift in the rules of engagement in Syria.

The understandings between Moscow and Tel Aviv were based on Moscow turning a blind eye to Israeli fighters launching airstrikes in Syria against Iranian targets, in return for Israel not targeting Syrian regime forces or Russian forces, which provide direct support to the Syrian army against the armed opposition. The Russian position reflected a clear desire to weaken the Iranian military presence in Syria, particularly with the escalation of rivalry between Moscow and Tehran over economic and military influence there.

An altered Russian position

The Russian Ministry of Defense issued three consecutive statements, and reflected Russian rage over the recent Israeli strikes. Announcing the shooting down of the Israeli missiles came once through the Russian Ministry of Defense, and another time through the Reconciliation Center in Hmeimim. The Russian me-

dia also highlighted the weapons and systems that contributed to intercepting the Israeli missiles.

This is a new remarkable variable that calls for attention, especially when considering that Russia has never commented on any previous Israeli attacks against Syrian territories. The change in the Russian position can be attributed to the following:

1- A lack of prior coordination: Levels of coordination and prior notification through the joint communication channel between Moscow and Tel Aviv have declined. This angered Moscow, as it fears that its troops will be endangered, in areas close to Israeli targets. This happened in 2018, when Israel caused the "deliberate" downing of a Russian plane through deception and camouflage of the Syrian air defense, leading to the mistargeting of the Russian plane by the Syrian defenses and the killing of 18 Russian sol-

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diers. Thus, Moscow insists on the necessity of Israel coordinating with it prior to carrying out any operations within Syria.

It is worth noting that there was a hot line of communication between Russia and Israel, where the latter would inform the Russian army of its intent to carry out operations within Syria shortly before implementation. Israeli sources point out that since the new government of Naftali Bennett took power in Israel, this line has become no longer effective.

2- Moscow's pressure towards the agreement over new rules: Early 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov sent a message to Israel regarding the importance of agreeing over "new rules" for engagement in Syria. He said that his country maintains "close coordination" with the Israeli side and "rejects the use of Syrian territory against Israel".

Russia seeks to support Syrian government forces and to reduce Iranian influence within Syria, particularly that of the Shi'ite militias. Moscow may pose pressure on Iran to force it to reduce its military presence, especially around Damascus or near the Southern areas bordering Israel.

Russian forces are deployed in areas considered to be under Iranian control, especially in Deir ez-Zor. The Syrian Fifth Corps, which was established by Russia, is widespread in Southern Syria and in areas close to the control of Hezbollah and Iran in Quneitra. Additionally, mysterious assassinations of senior Syrian officers close to Iran have been taking place. All these indicators worry Tehran, as they reveal the possibility of organized Russian tactics to undermine the Iranian military presence and influence in Syria.

Russia also suggested that Israel inform it of security threats observed around the movements of some forces within Syria (whether countries or militias), so that Russia would handle these threats, on the condition that the Russians are provided with specific and detailed information. These proposals were not met with a positive response from the Israeli side.

3- Defending the reputation of Russian weapons: For the first, the Russian Ministry of Defense deliber-

ately referred to the role of the Russian air defense system in intercepting several Israeli missiles, which were launched during the recent concurrent raids. By doing so, Moscow seeks to stress on the ability of its military systems to confront Israeli threats, so as not to negatively impact the reputation of Russian weapons in the Middle East markets.

4- Bolstering the Syrian role: Moscow seeks to present Syria as a sovereign state, particularly with Moscow's focus on reconstruction endeavors over the coming period. Thus, the repeated Israeli targeting of Syria without deterrence adversely affects this position.

Moscow also desires to play the role of mediation between Syria and Israel, a role previously played by the US. This was evident in Russia's leading role to exchange an Israeli prisoner with a number of Syrian prisoners in Israel in February 2021.

Analyzing the Israeli position

Israel has adopted a number of standpoints, which can be illustrated as follows:

1- Ignore releasing an official statement: Tel Aviv did not issue any official statements following the Russian statements, and preferred to respond unofficially, by publishing pictures over the international media exposing the extent of the destruction inflicted on the targeted sites, which casts doubt on the Russian narrative.

2- Attempting to understand the Russian position: The Israeli government sought to examine the new Russian statements, and find out whether they indicate a retreat on the part of Moscow from the previous understandings that existed between former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Putin.

3- Denial of Israeli missile interception: Israeli officials denied the Russian statement that the air defenses were able to intercept a number of Israeli missiles over Syria, confirming that all the missiles hit their targets quite accurately.

On the other hand, other officials acknowledged



the Russian narrative. Rear Admiral Vadim Kolet, Vice-President of the Russian Reconciliation Center in Syria, confirmed for the first time that Russian forces assisted their Syrian counterparts to intercept four missiles fired by Israel from an Israeli F-16. The Buk M2E system is a medium-range advanced defense missile complex (ADMC) that was primarily manufactured by the Russian army.

Tel Aviv options:

The Israeli government will have to adopt the following options, should the continuation of targeting the Iranian presence in Syria be its aim:


1- Agreement with Moscow: One of the key options for Tel Aviv is for Israeli Prime Minister Naftali to communicate with President Putin, and try to revive old understandings or establish new ones, including Israel's continued efforts to keep Iranian threats away from its borders.

2- Remote strikes : The Israeli air force will have to carry out its operations away from the Syrian airspace. This can be done this through Lebanese territory, or the use of long-range missiles, such as the Rampage missiles, which are capable of destroying infrastructure such as command centers.


In conclusion, the magnitude of the change in the Russian position regarding the repeated Israeli attacks on Syrian sites could be tactical, and may fall within Moscow's endeavors to control Israeli behavior and to emphasize the centrality of the Russian role in managing interactions around the Syrian crisis. This imposes the necessity of negotiations between Israel and Moscow, particularly since the Russian army has several options to impede the ability of the Israeli aviation to operate freely in the Syrian airspace and its surroundings, such as supplying the Syrian army with the S-400 system and training the Syrian army for its use.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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