

How Serious the Russian Threat to Israel in Syria? A Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

The historic perspective tells us that the Soviet Union, and later Russia, have not been successful in providing the necessary strategic umbrella to their allied radical Arab regimes during their wars against Israel and the Russian weapons systems have suffered disgraceful defeats at the hands of the Israeli military. Although today's global strategic environment is missing the ideological zest of the Cold War era, it is interesting to compare the then Soviet regional behavior with Russia's present challenges in Syria, as the Israeli-Iranian direct confrontation threatens to involve the Russian interests there.

On February 10, 2018, Israel struck the T-4 base near Homs in Syria, after an Iranian explosives-laden drone based there flew into Israeli airspace, intended probably to attack an Israeli target. The operation quickly escalated when an Israeli F-16 was downed by heavy Syrian anti-aircraft fire, followed by Israeli retaliatory strikes on a dozen air defense targets in Syria, including four Iranian military positions.

After the Russian MoD, and the United States, pointed to Israel as responsible for a second attack against the Iranian drone base at the same airport, on April 9, 2018, President Putin called Prime Minister Netanyahu and urged Israel to refrain from taking action in Syria. The Prime Minister told the Russian leader that Israel won't allow Iran to set up military presence in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described the strike on Syria's T-4 airbase as a "very dangerous development."

After U.S.-led strikes against Syrian chemical facilities on April 14, 2018 as punishment for Assad's regime chemical attack on the Douma neighborhood of Damascus on April 7, 2018 it was evaluated by Western pundits that President Putin may limit Israel's operations in Syria in retaliation for the Western operation, by limiting Israel's use of Syrian airspace to attack Iranian targets.

Indeed, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia had not yet decided whether it would deliver advanced S-300 missile systems to Syria, but a senior Russian official told the *Kommersant* newspaper that Russia is

expected to provide Assad with S-300 anti-aircraft defense systems soon, and free of payment. If Israel attacks the new air defense systems, then it will suffer “catastrophic consequences,” the officials said.¹

In a quick reaction, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said that Israel may strike the Russian-made S-300 anti-aircraft defense systems in Syria if they are used against Israel. “What's important to us is that the weapons defense systems that the Russians transfer to Syria are not used against us. If they are used against us, we will act against them.”²

Russian air defense systems have, in fact, been deployed in Syria for years. Syria's air defenses are Russian made, and Israel has struck them several times, lately - after the downing of its F-16 jet in February. The Wall Street Journal revealed that Israeli military targeted a Russian-made Tor advanced air-defense system after Iran deployed it to the T-4 base in Syria earlier this month. In addition, Russia has deployed its own S-400 systems to protect its soldiers deployed in Latakia.

In Israel and in the West, there is a live discussion about how serious the Russian threat to Israel is, after several years of fruitful coordination between the two states in the Syrian arena, and what would be its strategic consequences for Israel in case it materializes.

The historic perspective tells us that the Soviet Union, and later Russia, have not been successful in providing the necessary strategic umbrella to their allied radical Arab regimes during their wars against Israel and the Russian weapons systems have suffered disgraceful defeats at the hands of the Israeli military.

1956: The Sinai campaign

Soviet relations with Israel had declined since Israel's declaration of independence in 1948. In the 1950s the Soviet Union became allies with Egypt and Syria due to the Anglo-French debacle at Suez and the Arab–Israeli conflict.

During secret talks by President Gamal Abdel Nasser with the Soviets, in September 1955, Egypt purchased a huge quantity of Soviet arms via Czechoslovakia, an event seen in the West as a major increase in Soviet influence in the Middle East.

Israel, which suffered since 1954 a wave of raids against civilians from Egypt, by Palestinian fedayeen, was prevented free passage through the Suez Canal and had its southern harbor of Eilat on the Red Sea blocked at the Tiran Straits, decided to attack Egypt before it absorbed the new Soviet arsenal and received even more Soviet weapons. The IDF conquered the Sinai Peninsula in a week, in a campaign devised also to serve allied British and French interests, after Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal.

During the war, Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin threatened to intervene on the Egyptian side and to launch ballistic missiles attacks on Britain, France and Israel. Bulganin accused Ben-Gurion of supporting European colonialism and the Soviet Union recalled its ambassador from Israel.³ The Soviet threat to send troops to Egypt to fight the Allies led U.S. President Eisenhower to fear that this might be the beginning of World War III.

Under American pressure, Israel decided to withdraw from the Sinai in March 1957, as did the UK and France. Nevertheless, Israel fulfilled important strategic objectives: freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal and

¹ Anna Ahronheim, “Russia to Move Air Defenses to Syria 'Soon,' Warns Israel Against Attack,” *Jerusalem Post*, April 23, 2018.

² “We May Hit Russian Systems in Syria, Israel Says After Threats of 'Catastrophic Consequences',” *Haaretz*, April 26, 2018.

³ “Exchange of Letters- Bulganin- Ben-Gurion- 5 and 8 November 1956.” *Israel's Foreign Policy - Historical Documents*, Israeli MFA, Vols. 1-2: 1947-1974.

Straits of Tiran to Africa and Asia, the presence of UN Peacekeepers in Sinai and an eleven-year calm from terrorist activities on its southern border.

The attack on Egypt during the Sinai Campaign was perceived by the USSR as a direct threat to its own interests. Soviet Union's policy remained unchanged and continued to be based on its interest to support the Arab states. The Czech-Egyptian arms deal established the USSR as a major arms supplier in the Middle East for the next decades.⁴

Operation Diamond. In the mid-1960s, the Soviet fighter MiG-21 was used extensively in the Middle East conflicts by the Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi Air Forces, especially against the Israeli Air Forces (IAF). Less than a year before the next Israeli Arab war, on August 16, 1966, the Israeli Mossad recruited an Iraqi air force pilot who defected to Israel with his MiG-21. The MiG-21 enabled IAF to evaluate the aircraft and discover its strengths and weaknesses — knowledge that proved instrumental in the IAF's successes during the Arab-Israeli wars in the period 1967 to 1973. Operation Diamond also contributed to the advancement of U.S.-Israeli security and intelligence relations following Israel's consent to lend the MiG-21 to the Americans for enabling them to extract technological Intelligence from the aircraft.⁵

The 1967 Six Days War

In early November, 1966, Syria signed a mutual defense agreement with Egypt. Several months before the June 1967 Six Days War, the Soviets began a more militant, anti-Israeli line in the hope of ensuring the support and survival of a pro-Soviet new Syrian regime. In this framework, they encouraged unity between their Egyptian ally Nasser and the Syrian leadership, hoping thereby to gain increased control over the fanatical Syrians. The Soviets failed to foresee the results of this policy. When they lost control of the situation, they were reluctant to spend their influence trying to restrain Nasser.⁶

Throughout April-May 1967, the Kremlin suspected that Israel was planning an aggression against Syria and determined to rescue the new radical-left regime in Damascus. The Soviet government informed Syria and Egypt that Israel had mobilized its armed forces on the border with Syria thus manipulating Nasser into assisting Syria by concentrating his armed forces on Egypt's border with Israel. Moscow even consented to the ejection of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping forces from outposts on the Israeli-Egyptian border, and to the concentration of Egyptian troops on the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip.⁷

Some researchers have argued that Moscow instigated the war in order to increase Arab dependence on Soviet aid, as well as to unify progressive forces in the Middle East and to further consolidate its position in the region.⁸

Other scholars contend there was a power struggle between members of the collective leadership, which had overthrown Nikita Khrushchev in October 1964. According to this view, the Six-Day War was a conspiracy designed to precipitate an armed conflict in the Middle East and to improve the domestic position of the

⁴ Micky Aharonson, "Relations between Israel and the USSR/Russia," *The Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies (JISS)*, May 1, 2018, URL: <http://jiss.org.il/en/aharonson-relations-israel-ussr-russia/>

⁵ Tom Cooper, "In 1966, Israeli Intelligence Convinced an Iraqi Pilot to Defect with His MiG-21 Fighter," *The National Interest*, August 28, 2016.

⁶ "Soviet Policy and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War," *CIA Intelligence Report*, June 2017, URL: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/caesar-50.pdf>

⁷ Uri Bar-Noi, "The Soviet Union and The Six-Day War: Revelations from The Polish Archives," *Cold War International History Project*, Wilson Center, July 7, 2011, URL: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-soviet-union-and-the-six-day-war-revelations-the-polish-archives>

⁸ Ibid.

Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) Leonid Brezhnev and Defense Minister Marshall Andrei Grechko.

The Soviet high command not only encouraged high-ranking Egyptian and Syrian officers to go to war against Israel, and persuaded the political leadership to support its designs, but took practical steps to assist Syria in stopping the advance of Israeli troops into Syrian territory toward the end of the war by a naval landing, airborne reinforcements and air support for ground operations. However, military operations were aborted for fear of American retaliation and due to dissension within the Kremlin. Moscow decided to pursue a policy designed to stop the offensive through diplomatic efforts and to guarantee the survival of Nasser's regime.⁹

In the end, the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967 was both a humiliating defeat for the Arabs and a major setback for Soviet prestige.

Between the wars

Moscow's failure to rescue the clients it had armed and assisted touched off complaints and disappointment throughout the Arab world and other Soviet allies. In order to redeem the reputation of its weaponry, Moscow had to double down on its support, but this time the Soviets resolved to keep direct control of their hardware. The Soviet standing in the Egyptian military was fundamentally enhanced, the number of advisers multiplied, with direct access to field units and quasi-command authority over ports and airbases which became Soviet bases in all but name. The Soviet strategic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean was launched toward its all-time peak – which President Putin is now striving to restore.¹⁰

During the War of Attrition between Egypt and Israel (1967-1970), Israel carried out bombing raids against some 100 quality targets deep inside Egyptian territory. The Soviet Union had built up the Egyptian Air Force to unprecedented levels in the Middle East since the 1967 Six-Day War, when the majority of the Egyptian air force was destroyed on the ground. Despite the rearmament effort and 20,000 military advisers, including Russian pilots flying from Egyptian airports, the Egyptians were still in no position to confront the IAF.

On July 30, 1970 the IAF decided to challenge the Soviet pilots in an air battle codenamed Rimon 20 (Pomegranate in Hebrew), by choosing its most skilled fighter pilots to participate in the planned dogfight. During the three-minute engagement, the Soviets were dominated by their veteran Israeli counterparts, resulting in the downing of five Soviet-flown MiG-21s by Israeli F-4 Phantoms and Mirage IIIs. Egyptian military leaders were satisfied to hear the outcome of the battle because the Soviets had long been criticizing Egypt's aerial losses to Israel and attributing them to the lack of skill of its fighter pilots. It was one of the final engagements of the War of Attrition and is believed to have contributed to its conclusion.¹¹

By 1971 the Egyptians were still in no position to confront the Israeli Air Force over the Sinai. Soviet Premier Brezhnev authorized the deployment of a reconnaissance task force of four MiG-25 "Foxbat" aircraft to Egypt, the newest Soviet secret aircraft, to scout the Israeli defenses in the Sinai. The first operational reconnaissance mission took place on 10 October 1971 and Israeli interception by F-4 Phantoms failed. An increasing number of overflights of the Sinai resulted in failed intercepts and useless Hawk missiles fire. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, frustrated that the Soviets were not training his pilots in the aircraft and that it was not being offered to him for sale, and after a superpower summit when both Brezhnev and Nixon agreed on maintaining the status quo in the Middle East, ordered nearly all of the Soviet advisers out of the country and preceded to plan

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gideon Remez, "How the Six-Day War became the Soviet-Israeli War," *History News Network*, George Washington University, September 4, 2017. URL: <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/165616>

¹¹ "Operation Rimon 20," *WikiVisually*, URL: https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Operation_Rimon_20.

for war without their assistance.¹² This was the first serious setback for the Soviet Union in the Middle East during the Cold War.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War

Initially, it appeared that because of the strategic surprise, Egypt and Syria would emerge victorious from the conflict. Armed with up-to-date Soviet weaponry, the two nations hoped to avenge their humiliating defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War. It should be stressed that Israel entered the Yom Kippur War in a state of denial, refusing to recognize that the deployment of Soviet surface-to-air missiles west of the Canal had neutralized much of the Israel Air Force's potential in case of war.¹³

But Israeli counterattacks turned the tide, the Syrians were driven back from the strategically important Golan Heights while thousands of Egyptian troops retreating back through the Sinai Desert were surrounded and cut off by the Israeli army. When it became clear that Israel would not give up its siege of the Egyptian troops (low on food and medicine), the Soviets threatened to take unilateral action to rescue them. U.S. military forces went to a Stage 3 alert (Stage 5 is the launch of nuclear attacks). The Soviets backed down on their threat but the damage to relations between the two nations was serious and long lasting. Eventually, Israeli troops withdrew from some of their positions in both the Sinai and Syrian territory, while Egypt promised to forego the use of force in its dealings with Israel.¹⁴

According to newly declassified CIA papers, The United States went on high alert in October 1973 because "American intelligence had detected a Soviet ship headed for Egypt that it believed was carrying nuclear weapons...In addition, the United States detected two Soviet amphibious ships nearing Egypt." The DEFCON III alert put in place on October 24, 1973, was removed the next day after Soviet ships near Egypt dispersed.¹⁵

The Soviet military penetration and influence in Syria was overwhelming. Soviet advisers and experts operated in Syria after the Six Days War at almost all levels: from consulting to defense minister and to the chief of staff, to assisting the Syrian commanders at the battalion level in the ground forces and in parallel units in the air force and navy. They first focused on assistance in absorbing new weapons and equipment provided by the Soviet Union, in the training of personnel, ongoing maintenance, preparing the forces for fighting according to the principles of Soviet combat doctrine and in planning defensive and offensive operations. The Soviet staff of advisers and experts was aware of everything that was happening in the Syrian army, of all decisions made and all actions taken.¹⁶

A senior Syrian delegation led by Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass, visited Moscow in July 1973 to meet with the Minister of Defense, Marshal Grechko, and his staff, to present them the main points of the Syrian operational plan for the coming war for the liberation of the Golan Heights. Grechko refused to discuss the plan, claiming that the Soviet Union did not want to intervene in the Arab-Israeli conflict in such a way, but promised to assist the Syrians morally and materially according to the parameters agreed by the political leadership.

¹² "Foxbats Over the Sinai," *Tails Through Time*, November 12, 2010, URL: <http://www.tailsthroughtime.com/2010/11/foxbats-over-sinai.html>

¹³ Moshe Arens, "Going to War in Denial: A Look Back at Yom Kippur," *Haaretz*, October 2, 2012.

¹⁴ "Cold War 1973. The Yom Kippur War brings United States and USSR to brink of conflict," *This Day In History: Oct 06*, URL: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-yom-kippur-war-brings-united-states-and-ussr-to-brink-of-conflict>

¹⁵ JTA, "Report of Soviet nukes sent US on highest alert during '73 war," *Times of Israel*, August 29, 2016, URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-of-soviet-nukes-sent-us-on-highest-alert-during-73-war/>

¹⁶ Pesach Malovany, "Soviet involvement in the Yom Kippur War on the Syrian front," *Maarachot (in Hebrew)*, 469-468, November 2016.

A few months before the outbreak of the war, Syrian teams were dispatched to the U.S.R.R. to train in the use of surface-to-air SA-6 missiles to form the new air defense divisions. A CIA report on Syria stated that during the war in 1973, Soviet advisors supervised the operation of Syrian ground-to-air forces and were present at various headquarters. According to the testimony of an adviser to one of the bombardment squadrons (MiG MF 21) stationed at the Syrian air base in Damir, the consultants helped planning the first air strike. Soviet officers took part in the fighting on the Syrian side, alongside commanders of divisions and battalions and also with the chief of staff, helped repair tanks and equipment that were damaged, assembled airplanes who arrived by air and drove tanks from the harbors to the front. Tank brigades were accompanied to battle by advisers to the commanders but were instructed not to pass the international border (ie, the 1967 borders). Some advisers paid with their lives for the help and at least two colonels were killed.¹⁷

However, it seems that the Syrian command (and also the Egyptian) did not like the Soviet intervention on the front and the advices given by the Russians. According to Soviet sources, the Egyptian and Syrian command were not ready to listen to the advisers since they wanted to conduct the war according to their understanding and not from what they learned from them. On one occasion, while presenting the picture of the military situation in the war to the Politburo in the Kremlin, regarding the balance of power on the Golan Heights and the contribution of Soviet arms to the successes of the Egyptians and the Syrians at that stage of the war, the Soviet chief of staff, General Victor Kulikov was asked why the Soviet advisers do not correct the Syrians their mistakes in the conduct of the war. "They do not listen to us...they pretend to be their own strategists," he replied.¹⁸

In contrast to the Israeli air force (IAF) and the Israeli land forces (ILF), the Israeli Navy (IN) did not perform well during the 1967 war. Combined naval and commando attacks on Syrian and Egyptian ports accomplished little. But the IN took its revanche during the Yom Kippur War, practically destroying the Egyptian and Syrian fleets: forty-four vessels were destroyed and captured by the navy while the IN did not lose any vessels, even though sixty sea missiles were fired at it in the two naval battle theaters.¹⁹ These were the first naval engagements in history in which both sides fired missiles that homed in on targets with radar. Although the Soviet SS-N-23 Styx missiles supplied to the Arab navies had twice the range of the Gabriel missile the Israelis had developed, the Israelis had also produced electronic countermeasures that, together with chaff fired by rockets, succeeded in diverting incoming missiles. The Soviet-made vessels had no such countermeasures. Arab fleets did not venture out again from their harbors for the rest of the war.²⁰ By winning the battles with the Syrian and Egyptian gunboats, the Israelis gained command of the eastern Mediterranean.²¹

The Israeli navy had also encounters with Soviet ships, which monitored vessels on clandestine long-distance missions before reaching their objective. Six days into the war, Israeli boats firing missiles at the Syrian port of Tartus inadvertently sank a Soviet freighter, the Ilya Mechnikov, which brought war supplies for Syria. After this incident naval vessels escorted Soviet merchant ships to Syrian ports. The commander of the Israeli navy, Admiral Benny Telem, in an interview a year after the war, said that if Russian warships had acted belligerently he intended to meet them head-on. The sweeping success of the Israeli missile boats off Latakia and Alexandria against Soviet missile boats was an unsettling factor for the Soviet squadron in the Mediterranean while

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Zeev Almog, "Israeli Naval Power: An Essential Factor in the Operational Battlefield," *Military and Strategic Affairs*, vol.3, No.1, May 2011.

²⁰ Abraham Rabinovich, "The little-known US-Soviet confrontation during Yom Kippur War," *Global Post*, October 26, 2012.

²¹ Dov S. Zakheim, *The United States Navy and Israeli Navy*, CNA Strategic Studies, February 2012.

trailing the American Sixth Fleet's aircraft carriers, whose planes could reach the southern part of the Soviet Union.²²

Following the war and Sadat's turn toward the United States, the relationship between Egypt and the USSR weakened. The two countries continued to maintain relations but the USSR now shifted its attention to Syria, which became the main Soviet foothold in the Middle East.²³

Operation Opera. Increasingly concerned by Iraq's program to produce weapons-grade plutonium, on June 7, 1981 IAF took out the Osirak reactor in a mission code-named Operation Opera. Once again, Israel's ability to strike unilaterally and preemptively against a threat to its national security was demonstrated. Israeli pilots managed to complete the raid in broad daylight, without aerial refueling, and infiltrated one of Iraq's most heavily defended airspaces, including the advanced mobile SAM-6 anti-air missiles, completely undetected. Remarkably, 26 years later Israel would use this mission template again during **Operation Orchard**, the preemptive attack on September 6, 2007 against a Syrian nuclear reactor built by North Korea in the Deir ez-Zor area.²⁴

Operation Mole Cricket 19 (Hebrew Mivtza Artzav 19), was a suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) campaign launched by the IAF against Syrian targets on June 9, 1982, at the outset of the 1982 Lebanon War.

Rising tensions between Israel and Syria over Lebanon escalated in the early 1980s and culminated in Syria deploying the SAM batteries in the Beqaa Valley. On June 6, 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon, and on the third day of the war, with clashes going on between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Syrian Army, Israel launched the operation. The battle lasted about two hours and involved innovative tactics and technology. By the end of the day, the IAF had destroyed 29 of 30 SAM batteries deployed in Syria close to Lebanon's Beqaa Valley and shot down between 82–86 enemy aircraft with minimal losses.²⁵

It was the first time in history that a Western-equipped air force successfully destroyed a Soviet-built surface-to-air missile (SAM) network without the use of ground troops. It also became one of the biggest air battles since World War II.

According to Maj.- Gen. (res.) David Ivri, a former commander of the IAF, a senior Czech general told him that when he was in the National Defense College in Moscow in 1982, "he learned that the blow to the Syrian surface-to-air missile batteries [SAM] was a catalyst for *glasnost* [increased government transparency] in the Soviet Union. The strategic theory that the West lacked the capability to withstand the SAM system had been disproven, and this raised many doubts about Soviet capabilities in general, and the defense sector in particular." To this day, the details of Operation Mole Cricket 19 remain classified.²⁶

The 1948 Israeli Independence War

Ironically, the only successful Soviet victory story could be considered its early support to Israel in achieving its independence.

In 1947, the Soviet representative at the UN, Andrei Gromyko, declared the support of his country for the Partition Plan and following its approval the U.S.S.R. supported the acceptance of Israel as a member of the UN. On May 17th 1948, three days after the declaration of independence, the Soviet Union recognized the

²² Abraham Rabinovich, "The War That Nearly Was," *Jerusalem Post*, October 2, 2012.

²³ Micky Aharonson, *Relations between Israel and the USSR/Russia*.

²⁴ Tom Demerly, "36 Years Ago today, "Operation Opera": The Israeli Air Strike on an Iraqi Nuclear Reactor," *The Aviationist*, June 7, 2017.

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Mole_Cricket_19

²⁶ Uri Milstein, "Operation Mole Cricket 19: 34 Years Later, The IAF's Most Decisive Victory Remains The Standard," *Jerusalem Post*, July 18, 2016.

State of Israel. At the same time, shipments of weapons were sent from Czechoslovakia as the Soviet Union tried to attract Israel into the Eastern Bloc and to reduce the influence of Britain in the region. The Soviets also hoped that Israel would be receptive to this approach in view of the Soviet Union's role in defeating the Nazis in the Second World War.²⁷

It was a very important episode in the history of that war. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion once stated that thanks to this assistance the IDF was able to win the war. Israel's appeal to the Communist bloc came as a result of the arms embargo the United States imposed on Israel. As part of the deal, Czechoslovakia supplied some 50,000 rifles (that remained in use in the IDF for around 30 years), some 6,000 machine guns and around 90 million bullets and most importantly supplied 25 Messerschmitt fighter planes and arranged for the training - on Czech soil and in Czech military facilities - of Israeli pilots and technicians who would fly and maintain them. The assistance to the air force continued to flow in during the second half of 1948 - when it consisted of 56 Spitfire fighter planes.²⁸

To the dismay of the Soviets, the ruling Mapai party led by David Ben Gurion chose to openly identify with the West, which could be seen in its public support for the Korean War, among other examples.

According to the Israeli researcher Pesach Malovany, the Soviet leadership was convinced that the Egyptian and Syrian armies had successes in the first phase of the Yom Kippur War due to the extensive assistance they received from their Soviet advisers. In retrospect the Soviets saw themselves as partners in the Arab successes in the 1967 and 1973 wars and emphasized the success of the Soviet weapons provided to their Arab allies.²⁹

Insights on the current situation in Syria

It is difficult to evaluate if the present Russian leadership takes into consideration the historical background of the Soviet Union's military interventions in the Middle East in support to its Arab allies.

Certainly, Syria is Russia's most important ally in the region, where Russia has heavily invested militarily, financially and politically since the 1950s, since it is the only state which gave it permanent access to its naval facilities, permitting a Russian naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. From the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Russia has provided the Assad regime the political and military support for its survival, and more so since its direct military intervention in September 2015.

Iran, its partner Hezbollah and the Shia militias under its control were necessary allies on the ground to take advantage of the Russian massive air power and intelligence capabilities, which ensured the survival and lately the stabilization of the Assad regime.

However, Iran's hegemonic ambitions, its overwhelming military, economic and political presence in Syria and its aggressive strategy vis-à-vis Israel, go contrary to the Russian plan to find an international political solution, a *Pax Russia* in Syria.

According to Fedor Lukyanov, Chief Editor of the magazine "Russia in Global Politics", Chairman of the Presidium of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, Moscow has to carefully calculate the pluses and minuses of upgrading its strategic partnership with Tehran, which carries the main burden of support for al-Assad's regime. Conversations between Russians and Iranians are always interesting, although never easy as

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Aryeh Dayan, "The Communists Who Saved the Jewish State," *Haaretz*, May 9, 2006.

²⁹ Pesach Malovany, *Soviet involvement in the Yom Kippur War on the Syrian front*.

the two countries have their own strategic culture, rooted in the past. The interests of Russia and Iran are far from being the same, remarks Lukyanov. (RussianCouncil.ru, April 9).³⁰

In contrast to the Russian menacing rhetoric until the end of April, as cited at the opening of this article, since the beginning of May there is an astonishing change in Russia's behavior towards the Israeli strikes against Iranian military assets in Syria.

Prime Minister Netanyahu was invited to a highly symbolic Russian national event, the Immortal Regiment March, alongside President Putin and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, part of the May 9 Victory Day celebrations, the first time foreign leaders have joined the event in Moscow. The three carried portraits of heroes who had taken part in World War II against the Nazis.

During his meeting with President Putin in Moscow, Prime Minister Netanyahu stressed "Israel's obligation and right to defend itself against Iranian aggression, from Syrian territory...as part of their strategy to destroy the state of Israel."³¹

The night before the visit and the night after his return from Moscow, the IAF staged the most powerful air attacks against Iranian targets on Syrian territory.

Russian reaction to the strikes was muted. "Moscow is concerned about the growing tensions and hopes that all parties will show restraint and resort exclusively to political and diplomatic means to solve all existing problems," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. Foreign Minister Lavrov said that the Russians have "emphasized the need for avoiding any mutually provoking moves." Both Iran and Israel, Lavrov said, "have assured us that there are no such intentions. Nevertheless, such incidents do occur."³²

Russia apparently did not activate its own sophisticated air defense systems inside Syria during the Israeli air strikes. According to Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz, Moscow's failure to become involved or even to issue a strong statement of criticism toward Israel was "a tacit message to the Iranians that Russia is not in their pocket" in Syria.³³

In spite of previous information that Russia is expected to provide Assad with S-300 anti-aircraft defense systems, Vladimir Kozhin, an aide to President Putin, declared that there are no talks about supplying Syria with the advanced system and does not think they are needed. Kozhin's comments, made so soon after Netanyahu's Moscow talks with Putin, suggest the Israeli leader's lobbying efforts have, for the time being, paid off.³⁴

It can be assumed also the Russians are aware that, like in the past, Israeli experts can find technological solutions to the advanced Russian air defense systems and use them in case of supreme strategic needs.

Israel has respected Russia's intervention in Syria for the stabilization of the torn civil war country, although the bloody Assad regime is not the cup of tea of its leadership or people.

³⁰ Cited in Pavel K. Baev, "US Again Calls Russia's Bluff on Syria," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 16, 2018, Vol.: 15 Iss.57, URL: <http://jamestown.org/program/us-again-calls-russias-bluff-on-syria/>

³¹ Isabel Kershner, "Iran Fires Rockets Into Golan Heights From Syria, Israelis Say," *New York Times*, May 9, 2018.

³² Loveday Morris, Ruth Eglash and Louisa Loveluck, "Israel launches massive military strike against Iranian targets in Syria," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2018.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Noa Landau and Reuters, "After Netanyahu Visit, Russia 'Not in Talks' With Syria to Supply S-300 System," *Haaretz*, May 11, 2018.

The Iranian entrenchment in Syria, on Israel's northern border, assisted by Hezbollah and its proxy Shia militias, is the red line Israel will not accept.

Russia must therefore decide if it wants to defend Iran base itself in Syria, and possibly pay the price, like it did in the past by allying itself to the Arab radicals or remain neutral in face of Israel's decision not to permit such a situation.

At least the alliance with the radical leftist Arab governments had some common ideological goals; what about the alliance with an Islamist theocratic regime which has the tendency of proselytism and expansion, including towards Central Asia?

President Putin met with Syrian President Bashar Assad in the southern Russian city of Sochi on May 17. He told Assad that a political settlement in Syria should encourage foreign countries to withdraw their troops from Syria. Putin's envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentyev, said the Russian leader was referring to Iranian forces.

Tehran appeared to reject that idea, saying its forces will remain in Syria and continue fighting "terrorism" at the request of the Syrian government. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi stated that no one can force Tehran to do anything it doesn't desire to do. "Our presence in Syria has been based on a request by the Syrian government and Iran will continue its support as long as the Syrian government wants," he said.³⁵

Several days later, on May 23, 2018, Alexander Lavrentiev was in Damascus to meet Assad and other top Syrian officials. Also present at the meeting were Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, his deputy Faisal Mekdad, and top Assad adviser Buthaina Shaaban. Lavrentiev relayed Putin's congratulations to Assad on the capital's recapture and told journalists the withdrawal of foreign troops should be done "as a whole" and include both Iranians and allied Lebanese militia Hezbollah. But Faisal Mekdad shot back, saying those fighters were in Syria to fight terrorism. "This topic is not even on the agenda for discussion," he told RIA.³⁶

Undoubtedly President Putin has understood during his frequent meetings with Netanyahu that Israel will not back off in face of the Iranian strategic threat. It seems that the Russian leadership also understands its political constraints and military limitations in face of the Israeli determination to defend its most vital strategic interests, as it did in the past when confronted with major threats from its neighbors. Russia must also take in consideration that any military clash with Israel presents the risk of a direct conflict with the present American administration, which naturally would support Israel in face of such a challenge.

Time will say how the latest signs of change in the Russian strategy in Syria, the balancing between the vested Russian interests, the needs of the complex alliance with Iran and the constraints of the Israeli determination to defend its own vital interest, are durable and if they will convince Tehran to withdraw or minimize its military presence there.

³⁵ Bassem Mroue / AP, "Syrian Military Declares Victory Over Islamic State in Capital," *Time*, May 21, 2018.

³⁶ Agence France Presse, Assad meets Russia envoy, hails 'partners in victories', *The Daily Star*, May. 23, 2018.