

## IL-20 Down – Facts and Prejudice

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On the backdrop of the recent downing of the Russian electronic warfare and early warning aircraft by a Syrian air defense missile, bringing the death of 15 Russian servicemen, the Russian-Israeli-Syrian knot is further tangled to a new and dangerous degree. One we haven't seen since the deep Soviet involvement in the Israeli-Arab affairs in the sixties and the seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The incident was quickly followed by the Russian defense establishment blaming Israel while relying on a single sided presentation and interpretation of the facts. One that serves a narrative Russia had ready for a while, in which Israel's actions endanger the relative stability in and over Syria, the stability Russia had worked so hard to accomplish.

Israel had followed suit, easy to be dragged into an adversarial presentation of facts to prove it had little to do with the shooting-down of the Russian aircraft. "Little" but not "Nothing" as it is hard to argue with the Russian side stating that unless Israel attacked Syrian-Iranian military installations near Latakia the whole ordeal could have been avoided. The same of course could be said about the Iranian effort to establish a stronghold in Syria, but that leads nowhere in solving the crisis between Israel and Russia.

Israel may be right about the facts of the matter, but that is grossly irrelevant to the end of untangling the knot. The Israeli entrenchment around the facts will not solve the crisis but rather bears the potential of further escalating it. Russia is present in Syria pouring-in money, man-and-firepower not for the sake of Syria or the Assad regime. Russia takes this significant effort having one purpose in mind – securing its stance as a global super-power, boldly stating once again 'We Are Back'. The Russian quest towards the image of 'Being Great Again' in the microcosmos of Syria is significantly endangered by the Israeli actions in and over this war-torn state. Sticking to the facts overlooks the Russian interests, its national pride and internal politics. It clearly looks as a case where Israel should rather be smart than right. Widely advertising the extent of Israeli military activity over Syria probably serves the internal political need of the Israeli government, but while doing so it puts the Russian effort in Syria to ridicule, as a wannabe

superpower unable to secure its ally from constant attacks by its neighbor, who happens to be coordinating its activity with Russia. This would hardly be considered as being smart.

It is clear Israel cannot refrain from acting against the Iranian effort to build and fortify its stronghold in Syria, arming Hezbollah with precision rockets and missiles and generally acting towards the goal of 'wiping Israel off the map' as it was repeatedly stated by both political and military leaders of Iran. But while doing so Israel should closely look to not step on Russian toes as Russia is the power present in Syria and Israel can count only on itself in sorting out differences with this present power. This could be largely achieved by taking the discourse with Russia over this incident off the public media and concentrating on direct talks at decision-making levels, having the Israeli interest of curbing the Iranian effort in Syria as a top priority while keeping-in-mind and respecting both the regional and global interests of Russia. Fortunately, these do not include a potential flare-up in the region. It is paramount to restore the tactical coordination between Israel and Russia over Syria as the latter is showing no signs of leaving the area.