

The Stakes Couldn't be Higher Between Israel, Russia, Iran and Syria

Just a single day had passed since Gary Koren, Israel's new ambassador to Russia, presented his credentials to President Vladimir Putin before the Israeli diplomat was called in by the Russian government for a "clarification" meeting.

The unusual diplomatic event occurred after the Israeli Air Force struck a target deep in northern Syria—likely a target involving weapons destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon. On their return flight, the jets were targeted by the Bashar al-Assad regime's surface-to-air SA-5 missiles, which missed their targets. But as the Syrian missiles fell back to the ground, they were picked up by Israeli air defense radars. One of the Syrian missiles was projected to fall on Israeli territory, and in the middle of the night March 17, residents of the Jordan Valley awoke to a sound they were not used to hearing: air raid sirens.

Israel fired an Arrow 2 interceptor missile to shoot down the threatening Syrian missile, the Arrow system's first-ever operational use, and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman later issued a stern warning to the Assad regime, saying a repeat attempt to fire on Israeli jets would result in the destruction of Syria's air defense batteries.

At this point, in Moscow, Koren was invited by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov for a meeting, during which Bogdanov reportedly expressed "concern" over recent developments.

Such is the convoluted, high-stakes game of chess being played between Israel, Russia and Syria in the region. But what does it all mean?

The meeting between Israel's Koren and Russia's Bogdanov should not be seen in too dramatic a light, said Zvi Magen, the former Israeli ambassador to Russia and a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

"Suddenly, Russia and Syria learned that Israel has good interception abilities. The Russians conducted a diplomatic maneuver and went for the most minor of options. They called in our ambassador, and we do not know what was said. I attended these kinds of events. This is a way for a state to send a message," Magen told , describing it as a "relatively modest" way to do so.

"It is clear that Moscow wanted to send a message, saying, 'Take our interests into account,'" Magen added.

Soon after Koren was summoned, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed Israel would continue to take action against threats to its security in Syria.

"We attack if we have information and the operational feasibility," said Netanyahu.

"This is a diplomatic battle, and Israel is not compromising," Magen said. "Under the table, it is possible that messages are being exchanged about where each side's red lines are. Russia is trying to be the central mediator, working with the Iranians, with the Israelis and with other regional powers."

Since joining an Iranian-led coalition to rescue the Assad regime, mainly through air power, in September 2015, Russia's Mideast role jumped up several notches in importance.

Although Russia is fighting on the same side as Israel's worst enemies, Moscow and Jerusalem effectively communicate and consider one another's interests, while ensuring military deconfliction in Syria's skies.

"Russia is without doubt a very dominant element in the Middle East. It is the only one that can simultaneously speak to all of the quarreling parties and it can certainly fulfill, if it wishes, a restraining role," Prof. Uzi Rabi, director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, told .

"Israel must continue to take a decisive position—verbally and through actions—and to hold on to its two big no's—no to the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah, and no to the Iranian presence in the Syrian Golan. ... To that end, Israel must maintain a continuous dialogue with Russia, mainly to clarify what is and is not acceptable, so that the agreements in these issues will be formulated, rather than created through unfortunate accidents," Rabi added.

Magen said it is impossible to separate Israel's security interests in Syria from the full picture of actors active in the war-torn state.

By getting involved in Syria, Magen explained, Russia added a new global power dimension to a situation already defined by multiple wars: the civil war between rebel organizations and the Assad regime, and the war in desert areas against Islamic State.

A third conflict involves heavyweight regional actors—Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, and Israel—each pursuing their interests in Syria, with a clear alignment of Israeli-Sunni-Gulf interests.

The Syrian Civil War, Magen said, is "approaching an end" thanks to Russia's "smart use of limited power, which got the rebels to agree to negotiate. Separately, Islamic State is being pushed aside."

Russia is now pushing to create a federal entity in Syria, and is trying to provide each regional power—including Israel—with a portion of influence designed to fulfill their key

interests, Magen argued. For example, Russia is likely seeking to meet the Israeli and Jordanian interest in creating an Iranian-free zone in southern Syria, although Moscow cannot eject the Iranians from all of Syria.

At the same time, Russia is trying to meet the interests of Iran and Turkey, while keenly waiting for the Trump administration to formulate its own position on Syria, Magen said.

Israel's regional military prowess means Russia has no choice but to take Israeli interests into account, Magen believes. Israel can act as "the great spoiler" of Russia's plans if Jerusalem's interests are not cared for, he said.

"Russia will continue to work hard to implement a solution," said Magen, "and wait for the U.S. to clarify its position."
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