

Diplomatic Crisis Deepens Between Israel, Russia

The goal of deploying advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missiles in Syria would be to shoot down Israel Air Force planes inside Israeli airspace, something that would completely change the face of future conflicts, Israeli diplomatic officials in Jerusalem have told Israel Hayom. The assessment from Jerusalem explains the deepening diplomatic crisis between Israel and Russia over Russia's plan to provide Syria with the fearsome air defense system.

Meanwhile, the *Daily Beast* reported that U.S. President Barack Obama has ordered the Pentagon to prepare plans for a no-fly zone over Syria. The leaked news comes as a response to Russia's statement a day earlier in which it committed to delivering the system to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said on Tuesday that his country would fulfill its contract to supply Assad's regime with the S-300. He said this might "help restrain some hotheads considering a scenario to give an international dimension to this conflict," a statement that was interpreted by officials in Jerusalem as a signal to Israel.

Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon on Tuesday called Russia's plan to supply Syria with the S-300 "a threat."

"I can say that the shipments are not on their way yet," Ya'alon said, adding, "I hope they will not leave, and if, God forbid, they reach Syria, we will know what to do."

Strategic Affairs Minister Yuval Steinitz expressed concern about the planned S-300 sale and said he hoped Russia would cancel the deal.

"We think this behavior, of supplying such arms to Damascus,

to Assad, in this crucial time of terrible civil war, we think that this is totally wrong," Steinitz said.

"This is a kind of encouragement, a kind of support to this brutal regime that is totally wrong, also from a moral point of view. One cannot understand, one cannot justify such behavior."

Steinitz said the S-300 is designed to shoot down planes and missiles at 200-300 kilometer (125-185 mile) ranges. As a result, it could shoot down aircraft deep inside Israel, he said. "Russia says it is a defensive weapon. But this is not true, it is an offensive weapon aimed at taking down Israeli planes over Israeli airspace," Steinitz said Saturday on Channel 2 TV's Meet the Press.

Steinitz pointed out that the S-300 could threaten commercial flights flying in and out of Ben-Gurion International Airport near Tel Aviv.

Israeli officials have not given up on the S-300 deal being cancelled. Analysts said Russia's statements about going ahead with the sale could be a tactic to apply pressure on the U.S. and Israel on other issues, and to better position Russia's allies Syria and Iran ahead of the expected Syria peace summit in Geneva later in the summer.

However, there have been reports, unconfirmed in Israel, that Russian defense officials have travelled to Damascus to train Syrian military forces on how to operate advanced weapons systems.

The provision of weapons to the conflicting sides in Syria has become a wedge issue between Russia and the West. Earlier this week, the European Union lifted its embargo on the sale of weapons to the rebels. Britain and France led the push to lift the embargo.

However, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said that

there are no plans to send arms to the rebels in the near future.

Russia's Ryabkov said that EU's lifting of the embargo reflected "double standards" and called it a "direct blow" to international efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict.

"You cannot declare the wish to stop the bloodshed, on one hand, and continue to pump armaments into Syria, on the other hand," he said.

The U.S. on Tuesday criticized Russia's intention to sell the S-300 to the Assad regime, calling it a "mistake."

"We're talking about a regime that's willing to go to enormous lengths to use massive force against civilians, including Scud missiles and other types of [weapons]," State Department spokesperson Patrick Ventrell said.

According to the Daily Beast report that cited two Obama administration officials, the Pentagon has been ordered to draw up plans to impose a no-fly zone over Syria that would be enforced by the U.S., Britain and France. The report said this was part of a dual-track policy of Obama to both seek a diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict and plan for direct military intervention.

"The White House is still in contemplation mode but the planning is moving forward and it's more advanced than it's ever been," an Obama administration official told The Daily Beast. "All this effort to pressure the regime is part of the overall effort to find a political solution, but what happens if Geneva fails? It's only prudent to plan for other options."

A Pentagon spokesperson responded to the report, saying, "There is no new planning effort underway. The Joint Staff, along with the relevant combatant commanders, continue to conduct prudent planning for a range of possible military

options.”

Also on Tuesday, a White House spokesperson said the Obama administration knew in advance of U.S. Senator John McCain’s secret trip to Syria on Monday to meet with rebel officials. The White House declined to say whether McCain delivered any message to the rebels on behalf of the U.S. government.