

Russia and the Taming of the Israelis

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Russia's unexpected decision to supply Syria with S-300 surface-to-air missile systems and to integrate Syria's air defence within the Russian command calls for a quick reassessment of our views. It turned out that Russia is able to learn and respond in an unanticipated way. Yes, in the immediate aftermath of the Il-20 downing, the Russian reaction had been weak. The Russians agreed with Israelis that the plane had been hit by a Syrian S-200 missile. They provided the Israeli military with an opportunity to offer and defend their version of events, while Putin spoke of a "tragic chain of events", apparently exculpating his Israeli partner.

I must admit I had thought that the Russians would accept the Israeli explanations, and the case would rest. This was the view of pro-Kremlin writers and bloggers, and they often know the mind of the Russian authorities. These guys and gals do not get their instructions directly from the Kremlin, nor do they have a consistent view of Russian interests nor an opinion of their own; usually they try to guess what the Kremlin will do next and build a defence line for it. If you watch them, you'll get an idea of what the expectation.

They took a rather pro-Israeli line. Whoever called for a stronger response to the Israeli provocation, was called an "anti-Semite firebrand". This is not as deadly a marker in Russia as it is in the West, but it still is not a great compliment, either. Some pro-Kremlin writers blamed the Syrians; so did the liberal opposition to Putin. Julia Latynina, the pet Russian writer of Western liberals, a Putin nemesis, a recipient of the Defender of Freedom Award, with hundreds of references in the *Guardian* and the [New York Times](#), called the Syrians - "apes". (The Russian anti-Putin liberals are racist beyond belief but they love Jews).

A pro-Kremlin English-language writer said that the Iranians (sic!) were to be blamed; perhaps they pushed the button and destroyed the Il. And Syrians surely were guilty as hell. He also ferociously attacked the experts who spoke of Israeli responsibility and called them "antisemites". The chief editors of the Russian semi-official media apparently thought Putin wanted to forget about the whole business of the downed Il-20 as fast as possible. They promptly erased it from their agenda. Incredibly, on the next day the Russian media was practically free from any reference to the disaster. Only the hard old men of the opposition grumbled in their marginal online journals: "We are lost," "Putin obeys his oligarchs," "The Jewish lobby in Moscow won", "Putin cares more of his Jewish friends than of the Russian soldiers". But they were premature.

In Israel, the Ministry of Defence people rubbed their hands and said: We bombed all, we are bombing and we shall bomb as we find fit. They advised the Russians to blame Syria and accept the Israeli version of events. Israeli social networks rejoiced. But their joy was premature, too.

The first signal of something amiss was sent when the Russians refused to receive an Israeli high-level delegation in Moscow. Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defence Minister Lieberman proposed to fly to Moscow personally, but they were rebuffed. Only a military delegation led by the Israel Air Force Commander Maj. Gen. Amikam Norkin was allowed to come and present their version. It was found wanting. The Russian Ministry of Defence produced ample evidence that the Israelis knowingly caused the loss of the plane with all hands. Netanyahu had made a person-to-person call to President Putin, it was of no avail.

Apparently Putin was upset on a personal level with the Israeli attack. He is known for hating betrayal. He considered Netanyahu to be almost a personal friend, and the downing of the plane by this erstwhile friend grieved him a lot, so people close to the Kremlin intuit. There are less personal interpretations. In the same time the ruling (Putin's) party United Russia suffered humiliating defeats in governors' elections. 70% to 30% the incumbents were voted out, and representatives of strongly anti-Western coalition of Nationalists and Communists conquered those three districts. In the Armed Forces, the idea of letting bygones be bygones was rejected out of hand. The army demanded a stronger response.

Putin is the most pro-Western ruler Russia is likely to have; his successor will probably be more rigid to Western demands, while pro-Western elements ("liberals") have a snowball-in-hell chance to come to power in Russia via the election booth. That's why Putin has to watch his step to keep in line with his base, as any ruler does. He didn't want to spoil relations with Israel, but freedom of action had to be denied to the Israeli Air Force.

There was a lull when the disaster of the downed plane completely disappeared from media, Russian or Western. It was not mentioned by the *New York Times*, it was not mentioned by the Russian newspapers. And after that, unexpectedly, the Russian Defence Minister Mr Shoygu made his announcement. Russia responded adequately, closing the sky over Syria, or at least over Western Syria, and activating its powerful GPS-jamming system off the Syrian coast. Israel has lost its right to bomb Syria at will.

The Russians said it will take them two weeks to deliver, install and make the system operative. I have heard that the system of up to eight S-300 had already been delivered by massive airlift a few days ago, with cargo planes landing in Syria every few minutes. Probably two weeks will be needed to install and activate the system.

Now in Israel the response was of two kinds. The hot heads said Israel is not worried by S-300; they know how to deal with it, and if necessary, Israeli commandos will come and sabotage the system just in time for a massive air attack by Israeli bombers. Sensible people said Israel should try to repair relations with the Russian military. The Russians did a lot of what the Israelis asked them for, including removal of Iranian forces from the vicinity of Israeli borders (rather, armistice lines). A thorough investigation of the air disaster may uncover the mistakes and convince the Russians that they aren't likely to occur again.

Netanyahu sounded like he was trying to minimise the strife with the Russians. After meeting with President Trump in New York, he said that he came with specific requests "and I received everything I wanted from him [Trump]. Our goal is to preserve the connection with Russia and on the other hand to defend Israel's security against these threats."

So, for good or bad, Israel is not going to break relations with Russia, and Russia is not going to go further, beyond sealing Syria's sky for Israeli raids. If Israeli leadership will keep its

fingers away from Syria, things may cool down. Otherwise, the results will be quite unpredictable.

In Israel, there aren't many people at the top, apart of Netanyahu and Lieberman, who cherish their country's involvement with Russia. For Israelis, Putin is one of many unsavoury leaders from Idi Amin to Orban their country has to play ball with. Russia is not popular with ordinary Israelis who prefer America or Germany. A lot of Israelis will be pleased with breakup of this connection. Immediately after the Russian decision had been announced, Haaretz had made its feelings clear: "In recent years, Russia has been caught lying or spreading disinformation about its role in a number of incidents, the most recent being its involvement in the U.S. presidential elections, the poisoning of the former Russian agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Britain, and the invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine. So it's hard to believe that anyone but Syria and Iran will adopt the Russian version of last week's events." This is not a way one's partner is usually described.

More conspiratorially minded Israelis opined that beyond downing of the Il, there was an Air Force plot against Netanyahu and Lieberman who are unpopular within the top echelon of IDF. Others say it was an American Secret Service plot to undermine Russian-Israeli connection.

For otherwise, why did the Israelis do that? Were they just careless and brutal, as is their wont? They didn't give a damn about the Russians, and considered them a lesser breed, whose life is of little importance. This is a possible reading, quite consistent with their general attitude to strangers considered to be [children of a lesser God](#).

On the other hand, it is possible that the whole Israeli raid had been staged to down the reconnaissance plane and to leave the Russians without its real-time intelligence data. In 1967, the Israelis bombed and sunk the *USS Liberty*, an electronic spy ship, the then equivalent of Il-20, for they did not want to have foreign eyes and ears in the area. But then, there was an ongoing full-scale war between Israel and Egypt, and the *USS Liberty* had been attacked just before the planned Israeli invasion of the Syrian Golan Heights.

Could it be that Israelis expected an attack by France, England and the US upon Syria on that night, an attack that did not materialise thanks to the Russian-Turkish agreement on Idlib? There was a British plane and a French frigate in the vicinity, and a whole lot of American ships.

The agreement on Idlib was a very important event, though Il-20 displaced it out of our collective memory. Putin and Erdogan reached a working compromise, thus avoiding almost unavoidable large scale hostilities. The White Helmets had already prepared a film with staged chemical attack upon Syrian children, but the agreement had made the attack improbable in the first place. It is possible that the American coalition assault had been postponed in the last moment, when the Russian plane had been already downed.

However, all is well that ends well. Russian decision to create practically a no-fly zone is a good decision, good for all. It is good for Russians as they learned that their Commander-in-Chief can make strong decisions. It is good for Syria, as they will suffer less of the Israeli bombardments. And it is really good for Israel, as this naughty child, a spoiled brat, a darling of America had to be forbidden to bother neighbouring children. The automatic missile defence system will provide a threat of spanking. The kid had been told that he is not allowed to kill neighbours. With its excessive aggressiveness multiplied by impunity, Israel

has been spoiled, as anybody would. With this block, Israel can still become a *mensch*, and for this chance, thank you, Russia.

Will Tel-Aviv use this chance? The US will try to frustrate the Russian taming of Israel. John Bolton and Mike Pompeo already declared that no one may interfere with Israel's divine right to freely bomb Syria. Will the Israeli lobby in America be able to neutralise Moscow's decision and unhinge Israeli soul once again? Will they convince Putin to postpone his decision like they did in April, and a few years ago? I do not think so.

We can congratulate the leadership of Russia on the consistent, justified and well-balanced decision that may yet tame the Jewish shrew.

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