

Middle East Disaster: Nuclear War Between Russia and Israel Is Possible



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Although unlikely.

Key point: Were the Israelis and Russians to come to blows, or if Moscow were to seriously threaten military force against Israel, could the United States risk a grave loss of prestige by not intervening to back its longtime ally?

Israel remains determined to continue pounding Iranian forces in Syria in a bid to keep Tehran's forces away from Israel's northern border. At the same time, Russia has thousands of troops in Syria that could be caught in the crossfire—or even become belligerents if Moscow tires of its Syrian ally being pummeled.

And if Israel and Russia come to blows, would Israel's big brother—the United States—feel compelled to intervene?

Not that Jerusalem or Moscow are eager for such a fight. “Neither of us desire a military confrontation,” a senior Israel Defense Forces (IDF) official told me during a recent interview in Jerusalem. “It would be detrimental to both sides.”

Yet Israel's policy boils down to this: it will do whatever it sees as necessary to eject Iranian forces from Syria. And if Russia doesn't like it, then that's just the price of ensuring that Syria doesn't become another Iranian rocket base on Israel's border.

Relations between Jerusalem and Moscow are far warmer than during the Cold War. The result is a strange embrace reminiscent of the U.S.-Soviet detente of the 1970s. On the surface, a certain friendliness and desire for cooperation. Yet beneath the smiles is wariness, suspicion and a clash of fundamental interests.

“No one in Israel is confused about who the Russians are and who they are aligned with,” said the IDF official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. “The

Russians are not our allies, to put it mildly. We have one ally, and that is the United States. The Russians are here for totally different objectives. They are supporting a regime [Syria] that has an outspoken goal of annihilating Israel if it only could. They are also part of a coalition that supports Iran.”

Just how easily Israeli military operations can trigger an incident became evident during a September 2018 strike on ammunition depots in western Syria. Anti-aircraft missiles launched by Syrian gunners accidentally shot down a Russian Il-20 surveillance aircraft, killing fifteen people. Israel denies Russian accusations that it deliberately used the Russian plane as cover, or failed to give Moscow sufficient warning of the raid. Yet Russia still blamed Israel for the mishap and retaliated by supplying advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Syria.

Nonetheless, Israel sees value in Russia as a potential restraint on Iran, and a possible lever to get Iranian forces out of Syria. After a February meeting between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Vladimir Putin to mend fences after the Il-20 incident, Israeli officials claimed Putin had agreed that foreign forces should withdraw from Syria. For Moscow, friendly relations with Israel offer more influence in the Middle East even as America may be scaling down its presence in the region.

Still, the Kremlin has denounced Israeli strikes in Syria as “illegitimate.” Syria has been a Russian ally for more than fifty years, and it was Russian airstrikes—along with Iranian and Hezbollah troops—that saved Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s faltering regime from ISIS and other rebel groups. At least 63,000 Russian troops have served in Syria since 2015. Though Putin has promised since 2016 that Russian forces would withdraw, Russia currently retains more than 5,000 troops and private military contractors in Syria, backed by several dozen aircraft and helicopters.

And Russia is in Syria to stay. The Syrian port of Tartus is Russia’s only naval base in the Mediterranean: in 2016, Moscow and Damascus signed a forty-nine-year agreement that allows nuclear-powered Russian warships to operate from there. In addition, Russian aircraft and surface-to-air missiles, including the long-range S-400 air defense system, operate from at least two air bases in western Syria.

Israel can live with the Russians next door—but not the Iranians. Israeli officials

warn of Tehran's plan to station 100,000 Iranian and allied troops in Syria. Hezbollah, with its estimated arsenal of 130,000-plus rockets, already menaces Israel's Lebanon frontier. Syria joining Lebanon as a second Iranian rocket base is the stuff of Israeli nightmares.

"We can - and we intend to - make it as difficult as possible and inflict a price tag that the Iranians aren't willing to pay," the IDF official said. And the Israeli Air Force has been just doing that, attacking "Iranian and Hezbollah targets hundreds of times," Netanyahu announced after a devastating attack on Iranian arms depots near Damascus International Airport in January.

"We continue to implement our plans," the IDF official replied when asked if Russia would deter Israeli raids into Syria. "Our activities suggest that, despite everything, we enjoy significant freedom of action."

But more telling was his one-word response when asked how willing is Israel to fight for that freedom of action.

"Willing."

Which leaves the question: Can Israel target Iran in Syria without triggering a clash with Russia?

There are deconfliction mechanisms in place, including a hotline between the Israeli and Russian militaries. "We are very strict about informing the Russians about our activities and that their operational picture is up to date," said the IDF official. Yet those procedures were not sufficient to avoid a downing of a Russian plane.

Perhaps that ill-fated Il-20 was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Still, it is not hard to imagine a multiplicity of equally fatal scenarios. Russian advisers or technicians caught in an Israeli raid on an Iranian or Syrian installation. An errant Israeli smart bomb that hits a Russian base, or a Russian pilot or anti-aircraft battery spooked by a nearby Israeli raid into opening fire. Or, perhaps Russia will just feel obligated to support the prestige of its Syrian ally and its shaky government. Just how incendiary Syrian skies are for everyone became evident in December 2017, when U.S. F-22 fighters fired flares to warn off two Russian Su-25 attack jets that breached a no-go zone in eastern Syria.

To be clear, the IDF is neither boastful nor belligerent about its capabilities versus Russia, a former superpower with the largest nuclear arsenal on the planet. The IDF official likened Israel to “The Mouse that Roared,” the classic novel of a tiny nation that challenges the United States.

But if Israel resembles any mouse, it’s Mighty Mouse: small, powerful and not afraid to use its fists. In fact, what makes a potential Israel-Russia battle so dangerous is that it is not hypothetical. After the 1967 Six-Day War, Soviet fighters were sent to Egypt. This led to a notorious July 1970 incident when in a well-planned aerial ambush over the Suez Canal, Israeli fighters shot down five Soviet-piloted MiG-21 jets in three minutes.

On the other hand, Russia doesn’t need to fight Israel to hurt Israel. Indeed, the IDF official seemed less concerned about a physical clash between Israeli and Russian forces, and more concerned that Russia could choose to supply advanced weapons—such as anti-aircraft missiles—to Israeli enemies such as Syria and Iran. In the early 1970s, the Soviet Union supplied numerous air defense missiles and guns to Egypt and Syria, which inflicted heavy losses on Israeli planes in the 1973 October War. If it wants to, Russia can make Israeli air operations very expensive.

As always with the Arab-Israeli (or Iranian-Israeli) conflict, the real danger isn’t the regional conflict, but how it might escalate. In the 1973 war, the Soviets threatened to send troops to Egypt unless Israel agreed to a cease-fire. The United States responded by going on nuclear alert.

Were the Israelis and Russians to come to blows, or if Moscow were to seriously threaten military force against Israel, could the United States risk a grave loss of prestige by not intervening to back its longtime ally? Could Russia—whose Syrian intervention is a proud symbol of its reborn military muscle and great power status—not retaliate for another downed Russian plane or a dead Russian soldier?

Which leads to the ultimate question: could tensions between Israel and Russia lead to a clash between American and Russian troops?

In the end, somebody will have to back down. But Iran isn’t about to give up its outpost on Israel’s border, and Russia probably can’t force them to. Then there is Israel, which is grimly determined to stop Iran.

As the IDF official said, “We have proven over more than 70 years as a sovereign state that you don’t push us around.”

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Image: Reuters.

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