

Russia says Israel must halt its ‘arbitrary’ airstrikes in Syria

After Israeli-Iranian flare-up, Moscow says Syrian territory should not be ‘an arena for settling geopolitical accounts,’ warns of potential for regional chaos.



This December 11, 2017 photo shows Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, and Syrian President Bashar Assad watching troops march at the Hemeimeem air base in Syria. (Mikhail Klimentyev, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP)

Israel should stop its “arbitrary” strikes in Syrian territory, which are against the region’s interests and could spark new chaos, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Wednesday.

The comments by Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova came days after a flare-up between Israel and Iran on the Syrian frontier.

“We have not changed our position on this issue, which is based on the principles of international law,” Zakharova said at a press briefing. “The practice of

arbitrarily launching strikes on the territory of a sovereign state, in this case Syria, should be simply excluded.”

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She warned that such strikes encourage an “atmosphere of hostility in the region” and “do not serve the long-term national interests of any of the Middle Eastern states, including, of course, Israel... We urge everyone to think about the possible consequences of provoking a new round of chaos in the Middle East.”



Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova in Moscow on January 15, 2018. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

She added that Syria should not “become an arena for settling geopolitical accounts.” Israel has said repeatedly that its airstrikes on military and terror targets in the war-ravaged nation are aimed at curbing Iran’s efforts to entrench itself militarily in the country.

On Sunday, Israel reportedly conducted a rare daylight missile attack on Iranian targets in Syria. In response, Iran fired a surface-to-surface missile at the northern Golan Heights, which was intercepted by the Iron Dome missile defense system over the Mount Hermon ski resort, according to the Israel Defense Forces.

Hours later, in the predawn hours of Monday morning, the Israel Air Force launched retaliatory strikes on Iranian targets near Damascus and on the Syrian air defense batteries that fired upon the attacking Israeli fighter jets, the army

said.



An explosion, reportedly during Israeli airstrikes near Damascus on January 21, 2019. (screen capture: YouTube)

Twenty-one people were killed in the Israeli raids in Syria early Monday, 12 of them Iranian fighters, a Britain-based Syrian war monitor said on Tuesday.



A Syrian mobile anti-aircraft battery vehicle as seen through the targeting camera of an incoming Israeli missile, on January 21, 2019. (IDF)

Photographs published by ImageSat Tuesday indicated storehouses and radar systems at Damascus International Airport were destroyed in the strikes.



Satellite images purporting to show damage to Damascus International Airport in January 20 raids by Israel, released by ImageSat International, on January 22,

2019. (ImageSat International)

The IDF said Monday that Iranian troops in Syria launched their missile at the Golan in a “premeditated” attack aimed at deterring Israel from conducting airstrikes against the Islamic Republic’s troops and proxies in Syria.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday said Israel was “committed to fighting... the Iranian army in Syria.”

During a visit to the Shizafon army base in the south of the country, the prime minister told soldiers: “Iran is the main enemy, and has declared its intention to destroy us with nuclear weapons, which we are committed to thwarting... But Iran is also building forces around us, and they have established a front in Lebanon through Hezbollah, and they have established a southern fortress in Gaza, which is maintained by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. And now they wish to build a third fortress in the Golan Heights, based on the establishment of the Iranian military.”

Israel in recent years has carried out hundreds of airstrikes in Syria against targets linked to Iran, which alongside its proxies, and Russia is fighting on behalf of the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad. A number of the strikes have targeted the Damascus airport in a bid to halt weapons transfers from Iran to its militias in Syria and Lebanon. The strikes are coordinated with Russia.

However, the number of airstrikes in Syria attributed to Israel has dropped in recent months, after a Russian military plane was downed by Syrian air defenses during an Israeli attack on Latakia last September, killing all 15 servicemen aboard.

Russia blamed the Israeli military for that incident — a charge rejected by Jerusalem — and has supplied Syria with the advanced S-300 air defense system. The systems were delivered to Syria late last year, but they are not yet believed to be in use, as the Syrian air defense teams still need to be trained to operate them.

Military officials Moscow and Jerusalem have been engaged in talks to restore trust over the incident.

Judah Ari Gross contributed to this report.

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