

An Unintended Syria Air Clash Could Pull Biden Into Conflict Involving Russia, Israel



The conflict in Syria has seen the convergence of multiple, sometimes opposing forces in the skies over a near-decade-long civil war that today threatens to draw the United States' foreign policy resources back into the quagmire, one in which its closest ally, Israel, and a leading rival, Russia, are among those operating in dangerous proximity.

The sudden roar of jets and missile blasts have become an all too common feature of Syria's ongoing war, and last week's attacks across the country's southwest served as an explosive reminder of the war's lingering violence. The airstrikes, which were unclaimed but widely blamed on Israel, targeted positions near the Golan Heights and Damascus International Airport, where Israel has accused Iran-linked elements of storing and transporting weapons.

While the attacks were intended to cause harm on the ground, one senior U.S. intelligence official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, raised concerns about the sheer volume of air traffic caused by Israel's semi-secret bombing campaign while the Russian and Syrian air forces carry out their own missions.

The official told *Newsweek* that, at the time, "the U.S. observed a significant increase in military air activity over Syria, including forces from Israel and Russia in addition to Syrian aircraft."

The increased traffic made a mishap more likely, the official said.

"The airspace was saturated above daily norms," the official said, "presenting an elevated opportunity of miscalculation or perhaps the misidentification of targets by all entities."

The U.S. operates in Syria today as part of a multinational coalition tasked with the defeat of the Islamic State militant group (ISIS) in the country's northeast. Russia and Syria also target ISIS in other parts of the country, along with other

insurgent forces, some backed by Turkey. Iran supports this latter campaign on the ground, but its partnered militias are viewed as a threat and targeted by Israel.

The complex lines of control are blurred and have led to reports of up to 170 reported aviation and unmanned aerial vehicle incidents involving at least seven nations as well as non-state actors. On the ground in Syria, some worry a misunderstanding could always be mere moments away.

“About the crowded airspace over Syria, it’s always been a concern, notably after the U.S. stepped in Syria,” a Syrian source who asked to remain anonymous told *Newsweek*.

With so many countries operating in Syrian airspace, the chances of something going wrong are high, this source said.

And then add missiles to the mix.

“Now where Russia and the U.S. and Turkey and France, not to mention Israel, are all operating over/near Syria accidents are always possible,” the source added, “especially when the case involves air defense missiles. Once the missile is launched, there’s no turning back.”



A Russian Sukhoi Su-27 plane flies over Binnish during pro-government forces airstrikes on rebel-held areas surrounding the government-controlled town of Saraqeb, in the northwestern Idlib province on March 4, 2020. Russian and Syrian warplanes occasionally share the skies with Israeli forces targeting suspected Iran-linked positions and Syrian air defense sites. MUHAMMAD HAJ KADOUR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

There have already been a number of lethal, high-profile miscalculations, such as Syria’s accidental downing of a Russian spy plane during an Israeli raid in 2018. Others, such as the U.S. shoot-down of a Syrian jet allegedly flying over territory held by the Pentagon-backed Syrian Democratic Forces the year prior, were deliberate escalations.

The Israeli and Syrian armed forces have also shot down one another’s warplanes.

As yet, there have been no clashes between Israeli and Russian aircraft. But with an increased number of forays into Syria by Israel, such an incident cannot be ruled out.

To prevent this, the two countries have a coordination mechanism on Syria, the details of which are difficult to discern, especially given Moscow's close ties to Damascus and strategic partnership with Tehran. At the same time, Russia has expressed its criticism of Israeli operations in the country.

"It is hard to deny that such actions further destabilize the complicated regional situation," Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova told reporters amid an intensification of Israeli strikes in December.

Israel rarely discusses the specifics of its Syria operations, but an Israeli military official told *Newsweek* that the country's communications with Russia have mitigated the risk to both sides.

"We do indeed have a deconfliction mechanism with the Russian military which facilitates our freedom of action while minimizing the risk of friction with Russian troops, and promotes mutual safety," the Israeli military official said. "So far, it has been very effective and withstood challenging circumstances in a very dense battlespace."

Newsweek also spoke last month with an Israeli security official who discussed the challenges of target selection in Syria given the ambiguity surrounding the conflict there, where local troops, Iranian personnel, fighters of the Iran-backed Lebanese Shiite Muslim Hezbollah movement, and sometimes Russian forces are operating.

"[The Syrian army] gives [Hezbollah] a lot of space to do what they want, and it makes life a bit uncomfortable," the Israeli security official said at the time. "It's a big problem for us to actually decide who to strike and what to do."

Syria's permanent mission to the United Nations has condemned what it called "acts of aggression perpetrated by Israel" in past statements sent to *Newsweek*.

On the ground, a second Syrian source who requested anonymity described the layout of this stretch of Syria's air activity, where not only military-to-military incidents but those involving military and civilian airlines are "a very common

thing.”

The Syrian government’s aerial operations over its own country are limited. Restricted areas include the autonomous northeast, a U.S.-controlled southeast desert pocket, and a northern border stretch occupied by rebels, jihadis and Turkish troops, the second source said.

Syrian jets also operate along the southern and western borders, as well as off the Mediterranean coast, but this source noted any activity too close to Lebanese or Israeli borders would be met with an Israeli military response.

The second source said the Russians don’t share these limitations—or any, for that matter.

“There are some restrictions beyond our waters, there are some restrictions over Lebanon, over the south,” the second source explained. “While for Russia there are no restrictions at all. They are more free than us.”

This freedom extends to and beyond Syria’s exclusive economic zone as well, where “U.S. spy planes are also flying,” this source said.



An Israeli airstrike strikes “military targets belonging to the Iranian Quds Force & Syrian Armed Forces in Syria” on November 18, 2020, according to the IDF. Israel has accused Syria of allowing Iran and its regional partners to transport advanced weapons and set up forward operating bases in the country. ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES

The U.S. and Russia have their own deconfliction channels, both for air and ground operations in Syria’s northeast, where tensions between the two countries and their respective allies have mounted in recent months. The two countries have largely pursued their campaigns separately, but have had occasional dust-ups, some of which have been violent.

For other parties, however, there is little to no communication at all, greatly increasing the risk to both armed forces and civilians.

“Unlike the case between Russia and the U.S. where a direct line of communication between the two is existing and minor incidents can be easily stopped before escalation,” the first Syrian source told Newsweek, “the aerial clashes between the two adversaries, i.e. Syria and Israel, have always placed the regional civilian flights in danger.”

“Israeli jets flying in a civilian corridor or near a civilian plane and Syrian missiles seeking after a big radar pulse after missing their locked targets or crashing into a house, you name it,” the first source said. “Errors are possible and will always be costly.”

While Moscow’s mission in Syria to save President Bashar al-Assad’s government from a nationwide insurrection has been clear from the start, Washington’s goals have shifted over the course of administrations. Former President Barack Obama initially sought to topple Assad by supporting insurgents but switched to an anti-ISIS mission later carried out by former President Donald Trump, who expressed a desire to withdraw but kept up to 900 troops behind to guard oil and gas sites.

President Joe Biden, who served as Obama’s vice president, has offered no indication of ending U.S. presence in Syria, despite Damascus’ calls for withdrawal. The new U.S. leadership has also not signaled a willingness to become further involved in the conflict.

In a statement sent to Newsweek, a State Department spokesperson detailed three aims of President Joe Biden’s administration in Syria.

First, “The United States is committed to a political settlement in line with UNSCR 2254 to end the conflict in Syria, in close consultation with our allies, partners, and the U.N.,” the spokesperson said.

Second, “We will use the tools at our disposal, including economic pressure, to push for meaningful reform and accountability for the Assad regime,” according to the statement.

Third, “The United States and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS continue to work with our increasingly capable local partners to maintain constant pressure on ISIS remnants in Syria to ensure ISIS’s lasting defeat,” as relayed to Newsweek by the State Department spokesperson.

But U.S. officials have routinely declined to discuss the role in Syria played by Israel, a country the Biden administration has reaffirmed a longstanding pact to defend. Israel went entirely unmentioned in the Pentagon's latest quarterly report to Congress detailing U.S. military missions in Iraq and Syria, despite including references to the other major actors, including Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

Reached for comment by Newsweek, the U.S. Central Command declined to discuss the specifics of air operations over the stretch of the country frequented by Russian and Israeli jets.

"I am going to decline to comment on the air space over Western Syria," a Pentagon spokesperson said.

The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views and editorial stance of the SOHR.

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