

Analysis: Israel's Rare Strike in Syria Is an Explosive Message Delivered Personally to Russia

Hours after Israel's rare strike in Syria, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that, "If anyone tries to hurt us, we'll hurt them." What was defined by the Israeli army as a Syrian provocation in the morning had become a chance to reinforce Israel's red lines by the afternoon.

Monday's unusual incident between Syria and Israel says something about the modern Middle East. Within hours, a routine Israeli surveillance flight over Lebanon had turned into a bombing run 50 kilometers east of Damascus.

Here's the sequence of events according to the laconic statement issued by the Israel Defense Forces Spokesperson's Unit: An Israel Air Force plane was taking pictures in Lebanese airspace when an SA-5 missile was launched at it. The missile didn't threaten the plane, but Israel decided not to let it pass. Two hours later, it attacked the radar of a Syrian anti-aircraft battery and took it out of operation.

Israel believes the Syrian army launched the missile because it feared the IAF planned an offensive strike. Just recently, former IAF commander Amir Eshel told Haaretz that Israel has conducted almost 100 airstrikes in Syria over the last five years against convoys ferrying arms to Hezbollah and other organizations.

Occasionally, these strikes prompt a Syrian response. In March, for instance, the Syrian army fired SA-5 missiles at Israeli fighter planes that were trying to bomb a Hezbollah arms convoy. That incident made waves because Israel, fearing the missiles would land in its territory, intercepted them with its Arrow anti-missile system. But it was preceded by at least three similar cases over the last two years in which Syria fired anti-aircraft missiles at Israeli planes.

The SA-5, developed back in the 1960s, is considered a primitive system, especially compared to the many modern anti-aircraft systems in the region. Its antiquated, horrifically noisy radar can be easily detected by Israeli technology. Thus it's reasonable to assume the IAF knew the Syrians were operating the

system when the morning's surveillance flight took place.

But the SA-5s are almost completely ineffective against Israeli aircraft, which can maneuver to prevent the antiquated radar from locking in on them. Therefore, it's no surprise that all the Syrian missiles thus far have missed their targets, with the Israeli jets having plenty of time to take evasive action and return to base safely.

Though Syria's aerial defense corps has been visibly on edge in recent weeks, defense officials declined to offer a clear explanation for why Israel's response policy had suddenly changed. Why did Israel decide to bomb the Syrian anti-aircraft battery responsible for the launch, even at the price of increased tension along the already sensitive northern border, when in the past, it has responded far more tepidly, and sometimes even purely defensively, such as by firing off an Arrow missile costing millions of shekels?

The answer might lie in what happened eight hours later in Tel Aviv. Accompanied by a police motorcycle escort, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, on his first visit to Israel, entered army headquarters for a meeting with Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman. Israel has waited a long time for Shoigu's official visit, and had planned to use it to demonstrate Iran's efforts to consolidate its position in Syria.

Russia doesn't see eye to eye with Israel about the impact of Iran's activity in the region in general, and Jerusalem is particularly worried over the difference in approach toward Iran's activity in Syria. Israel believes Iran views Syria as a base for long-term strategic and economic influence, whereas Russia believes the Iranians will leave the country once the Syrian civil war ends.

Thus a new item was added to the agenda of Monday's meeting, which was also attended by the army chief of staff and the director of Military Intelligence: an update about the Israeli strike in Syria. Message delivered and received.

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