

The Path to World War III?

Risky Israeli behavior threatens everyone

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Military Militarization](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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The minimal U.S. press coverage accorded to last Monday's shooting down of a Russian intelligence plane off the coast of Syria is, of course, a reflection both of lack of interest and of Israel's involvement in the incident. If one had read the New York Times or the Washington Post on the morning after the shoot-down or watched the morning network news it would have been easy to miss the story altogether. The corporate media's desire to sustain established foreign policy narratives while also protecting Israel at all costs is as much a feature of American television news as are the once every five minutes commercials from big pharma urging the public to take medications for diseases that no one has ever heard of.

Israel is, of course, [claiming innocence](#), that it was the Syrians who shot down the Russian aircraft while the Israeli jets were legitimately targeting a Syrian army facility "from which weapons-manufacturing systems were supposed to be transferred to Iran and Hezbollah." Seeking to undo some of the damage caused, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu quickly telephoned Russian President Vladimir Putin to express his condolences. He also sent his air force chief to Russia on Thursday to provide a detailed report on what had occurred from the Israeli perspective.

But that story, however it will be spun, is inevitably only part of the tale. The narrative of what occurred is by now well established. The Russian aircraft was returning to base after a mission over the Mediterranean off the Syrian coast monitoring the activities of a French warship and at least one British RAF plane. As a large and relatively slow propeller driven aircraft on a routine intelligence gathering mission, the Ilyushin 20 had no reason to conceal its presence. It was apparently preparing to land at its airbase at Khmeimim in Syria when the incident took place. It may or may not have had its transponder on, which would signal to the Syrian air defenses that it was a "friendly."

Syrian air defenses were on high alert because Israel had attacked targets near Damascus on the previous day. On that occasion a Boeing 747 on the ground that Israel claimed was transporting weapons was the target. One should note in passing that Israeli claims about what it is targeting in Syria are never independently verifiable.

The Israelis for their part were using four F-16 fighter bombers to stage a surprise night attack on several sites near Latakia, close to the airbase being used by the Russians. They came in from the Mediterranean Sea and clearly were using the Russian plane to mask their approach as the Ilyushin 20 would have presented a much larger radar profile for the air

defenses. The radar systems on the F-16s would also have clearly seen the Russian plane.

The Israelis might have been expecting that the Syrians would not fire at all at the incoming planes knowing that one of them at least was being flown by their Russian allies. If that was the expectation, it proved wrong and it was indeed a Syrian S-200 ground to air missile directed by its guidance system to the larger target that brought down the plane and killed its fourteen crew members. The Israelis completed their bombing run and flew back home. There were also reports that the French frigate offshore fired several missiles during the exchange, but they have not been confirmed while the British plane was also reportedly circling out of range though within the general area.

There was also a back story. The Israelis and Russian military had established a hotline, similar to the one that is used with the U.S. command in Syria, precisely intended to avoid incidents like the Ilyushin shoot-down that might escalate into a more major conflict. Israel reportedly used the line but only one minute before the incident took place, leaving no time for the Russian plane to take evasive action.

The Russian Ministry of Defense was irate. It saw the exploitation of the intelligence plane by the Israelis as a deliberate high-risk initiative. [It warned](#)

“We consider these provocative actions by Israel as hostile. Fifteen Russian military service members have died because of the irresponsible actions of the Israeli military. This is absolutely contrary to the spirit of the Russian-Israeli partnership. We reserve the right for an adequate response.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin was [more conciliatory](#), saying the incident was a “chain of tragic circumstances.” He contrasted it with the Turkish shoot-down of a Russian warplane in 2015, which was planned and deliberate, noting that Israel had not actually attacked the Ilyushin. Though the Putin comments clearly recognize that his country’s relationship with Israel is delicate to say the least, that does not mean that he will do nothing.

Many Israelis are emigres from Russia and there are close ties between the two countries, but their views on Syria diverge considerably. As much as Putin might like to strike back at Israel in a hard, substantive way, he will likely only upgrade and strengthen the air defenses around Russian troop concentrations and warn that another “surprise” attack will be resisted. Unfortunately, he knows that he is substantially outgunned locally by the U.S., France, Britain and Israel, not to mention Turkey, and a violent response that would escalate the conflict is not in his interest. He has similarly, in cooperation with his Syrian allies, delayed a major attempt to retake terrorist controlled Idlib province, as he works out a formula with Ankara to prevent heavy handed Turkish intervention.

But there is another dimension to the story that the international media has largely chosen to ignore. And that is that Israel is now carrying out almost daily air attacks on Syria, over 200 in the past 18 months, a country with which it is not at war and which has not attacked it or threatened it in any way. It justifies the attacks by claiming that they are directed against Iran or Hezbollah, not at Syria itself. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted that any peace settlement in Syria include the complete removal of Iranians, a demand that has also been repeated by the United States, which is also calling for the end to the Bashar al-Assad government and its replacement by something more “democratic.”

Aggressive war directed at a non-threatening country is the ultimate war crime as defined by the Nuremberg Tribunals that followed after the Second World War, yet the United States and its poodles Britain and France have not so much as squeaked when Israel kills civilians and soldiers in its surprise attacks against targets that it alone frequently claims to be linked to the Iranians. Washington would not be in much of a position to cast the first stone anyway, as it is in Syria illegally, bombs targets regularly, to include two major cruise missile strikes, and, on at least one occasion, set a trap that reportedly [succeeded in killing](#) a large number of Russian mercenaries fighting on the Syrian government side.

And then there is the other dimension of Israeli interference with its neighbors, the secret wars in which it supports the terrorist groups operating in Syria as well as in Iran. The Netanyahu government has armed the terrorists operating in Syria and even treated them in Israeli hospitals when they get wounded. On one occasion when ISIS accidentally fired into Israeli-held territory on the Golan Heights it subsequently apologized. So, if you ask who is supporting terrorism the answer first and foremost should be Israel, but Israel pays no price for doing so because of the protection afforded by Washington, which, by the way, is also protecting terrorists.

There is, of course, an alternative explanation for the Israeli action. Netanyahu might have considered it all a win-win either way, with the Russian plane masking and enabling the Israeli attack without consequence for Israel or, perversely, producing an incident inviting retaliation from Moscow, which would likely lead to a shooting war with the United States after it inevitably steps in to support Israel's government. In either case, the chaos in Syria that Israel desires would continue and even worsen but there would also be the potential danger of a possible expansion of the war as a consequence, making it regional or even broader.

It's the same old story. Israel does risky things like attacking its neighbors because it knows it will pay no price due to Washington's support. The downing of the Russian plane through Israeli contrivance created a situation that could easily have escalated into a war involving Moscow and Washington. What Israel is really thinking when it seeks to create anarchy all around its borders is anyone's guess, but it is, to be sure, in no one's interest to allow the process to continue. It is past time for Donald Trump to fulfill his campaign promise to pull the plug on American engagement in Syria and terminate the seemingly endless cycle of wars in the Middle East.

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