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Juggling act

How can Russia maintain good relations with Israel and Syria – both enemies in the civil war?

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In May this year, Israel launched its biggest offensive in Syrian airspace in 45 years, hitting 70 Iranian targets and destroying multiple Syrian anti-aircraft batteries. The strikes were in response to an Iranian rocket attack in the Golan Heights.

In the weeks leading up to that, Israel had carried out dozens of attacks on Iranian targets in Syria. Iran is one of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's biggest backers, and has exploited the chaos of the civil war there to build up a significant military infrastructure.

Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu is determined not to allow a situation whereby Iran could use its bases to attack Israel directly – a country Iran regards as illegitimate. Some analysts predict Iran could also launch an attack from Lebanon through its proxy Hezbollah, which has some 100,000 missiles at its disposal.

Could the increase in tensions lead to full-scale war between Iran and Israel? It's unlikely. Neither Israel nor Hezbollah have any interest in escalating the conflict. In the medium-term, tensions are likely to simmer in Syria, allowing Israel and Iran to articulate the narratives of mutual hostility that define their identity.

However, there's always the danger that an individual incident could lead the situation to spiral out of control.

An increasing burden on Assad

The Iran-Israel conflict is putting pressure on another major player in Syria's civil war: Russia.

So far, Russia has turned a blind eye to Israeli airstrikes on Syria. The

Kremlin has no interest in jeopardising its good relations with Tel Aviv. In the past, Israel carried out only sporadic bombings in line with its objectives on Iran. These were not deemed to pose a substantial threat to the Assad regime that Russia supports.

In fact, Israel's increasing attacks on Iranian targets are, to some extent, in Russia's interest. Iran's growing presence in Syria is becoming an increasing burden on Assad's regime. Although Iran-controlled militias are reinforcing Assad's thinned-out army, Iran's expansion in Syria is guaranteed to elicit a military response from Israel that could increasingly draw the Assad regime into the line of Israeli fire.

Only Russia – given its historical relations and its current significance – has the power to convince the Assad regime of the need for constitutional reform.

Neither is it in Syria's interests to alienate Iran. President Assad has shown great skill in keeping his allies in Tehran and Moscow on side, even playing them off against each other. If he curbs Iran's expansion, he will become more dependent on Russia. That could become problematic if Russia's plans for restructuring the country don't coincide with those of Assad. Syria has consistently rejected Russian attempts at constitutional reform in Syria, as this would reduce Assad's power.

The conflict between Israel and Iran is driving Assad's regime into the arms of Russia. That's exactly what the Kremlin wants, enabling Putin to strengthen his influence in Syria and Russia to maintain good relations with Israel. But equally, this key role requires a commitment which does not fall in line with Russia's plans of withdrawing from Syria in the medium term.

Russia's dilemma

Russia is looking for a way out of a war that's unpopular with its own people, and that is putting an enormous strain on financial resources. Reducing its presence in Syria, however, would risk everything it has achieved there over the two-and-a-half years since it first intervened in the civil war.

Assad's army and the militias loyal to him are often poorly trained and undisciplined. The military balance in Syria would shift against the Assad regime if the Russian air force stopped reducing to rubble any area that revolts against it.

To safeguard its own interests, Russia will have to perform a juggling act,

arbitrating between the Assad regime, the United States, Israel, Turkey and other parties involved in the conflict.

Prospect of diplomacy

Russia's strong position in Syria is proving both a blessing and a curse for Moscow – not only in diplomatic terms but out in the field. Its intervention is no longer limited to airstrikes: Russian commanders and military policemen are being deployed in most regions under Assad's control, and more than 90 Russian soldiers have been killed, according to official figures.

But there are also evident tensions between the two sides: in late May, photos appearing to show Russian military police arresting Assad's own troops for looting went viral on social media.

What does this mean for the prospect of diplomacy? The Syrian president's willingness to share power is essential for containing the war in Syria in the long term and preventing the state from collapsing entirely. Only Russia, due to its historical ties and current influence, has the capacity to convince the Assad regime of the necessity of a corresponding constitutional reform.

It seems sensible to maintain the pressure on Iran's presence in Syria, led by Israel and the United States. If the Syrian president takes Israeli threats seriously and subsequently deems Iran's expansion in Syria too threatening, he will inevitably become more dependent on Russia's firm hand.

Yet it is precisely Russia, the regime's main protector, that is attempting to initiate constitutional reform — not out of philanthropic motives, but because such a reform and an accompanying political process could lay the foundation for a new order in Syria, one that would no longer require a massive Russian presence. And it is Russia that does not necessarily insist on keeping Bashar al-Assad in power, who, as a symbol of repression and a campaign of annihilation against parts of his own population, makes the reconciliation needed for relative peace in Syria impossible.



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