Can Putin Broker Peace in Syria? (Op-ed)

Russia's compromises in Syria could prove to be a ticking time bomb.

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Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

Until recently, Victory Day was a celebration that saw crowds of foreign dignitaries flock to Moscow to stand side by side with Russia's World War II veterans and political elite. But this year attracted just two world leaders: Serbian President Alexander Vucic and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

Both leaders visited Moscow on May 9 to attend the Victory Day parade on Red Square, lay wreaths beneath the Unknown Soldier and hold meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin who was inaugurated as the president for the fourth time just two days before.

But for Netanyahu, who even donned the St. George ribbon during the military procession,

commemorating the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany was not the only item on his to-do list.

National holidays

Even though most European countries commemorate the end of World War II on May 8, in July last year, the Israeli Knesset passed a bill making Victory Day a national holiday on May 9.

The fact that Israel chose to align their commemoration with Russia is an important illustration of the bonds between Netanyahu and Putin and their nations. Even though this week's celebration in Israel was the first of its kind, Netanyahu opted to travel to Moscow.

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Sitting beside Putin and a Russian World War II veteran who took part in the liberation of Auschwitz, Netanyahu watched a parade of Russian military hardware whose next destination might be a battlefield in the Middle East.

Ties that bind

Netanyahu's visit came just hours after U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to pull out of Iranian nuclear deal, a move which was closely followed by a series of Israeli airstrikes targeting Iranian positions in Syria.

Rather than commemorating Victory Day, it's more likely that the Israeli prime minister went to Moscow to discuss in person with Putin Russia's pending delivery of S-300 air defense systems to Damascus. The sale of the military hardware will have been one agenda item in a broader discussion about both countries' code of conduct in Syria.

After the U.S. missile attack on Syria in April, Russia decided to go ahead with deliveries of S-300 air defense systems to Middle East countries, including Syria. Moscow's decision will have met with concern in Israel. Indeed, in 2010, it was exactly Tel Aviv's security considerations that led Russia to cancel deliveries of S-300s to Damascus.

Although it had seemed unlikely that Netanyahu could have again convinced Putin not to go ahead with S-300 deliveries, reports on Friday suggested he had done just that. Nevertheless, this issue has certainly become another Kremlin bargaining chip with Tel Aviv.

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After just 10-hours in Moscow, it looks like Netanyahu got what he wanted. Russia won't limit Israeli action in Syria. Most likely the arrangement has also come at a price for Netanyahu, who is likely to have to follow strict rules. He will have to make sure that Moscow is informed well in advance of any Israeli strike on Syria and that Russian military personnel or infrastructure are not hit.

This arrangement would allow Moscow to minimize damage from potential strikes on Syrian and Iranian targets by having an opportunity to inform its allies ahead of Israeli attacks. At the same time, it gives Kremlin an extra leverage over its partners in Syria.

As evidence of this, the night after Netanyahu met with Putin saw another round of escalation in Syria. Israel launched what is said was its largest attack on Iranian targets in Syria in years, if not decades.

Israeli jets hit dozens of intelligence sites and arms depots and other military targets believed to be operated by Iranian forces. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) say that the main goal of the attack was to eliminate the Iranian infrastructure, not manpower. Moreover, an IDF spokesperson also made clear that the Russians were informed prior to the Israeli attack.

Reaching a threshold

Everyone benefits. Israel retains its ability to attack targets in Syria, demonstrating its resolute approach towards Iran. What's more, it is able to do that without spoiling ties with Moscow. Russia can still side with Syria and Iran, plus it gets additional leverage over them in the form of information on impending Israeli strikes.

The bottom line is that Russia will continue to respect Israeli security concerns and won't limit its strikes on Syria. At the same time, however, Tel Aviv will have to placate Moscow by choosing its targets in Syria responsibly and informing Russia in advance.

This approach, however, comes with certain limitations, which both parties are quickly realizing. Israeli security directly depends on Iran's decreased presence in Syria, while Russia's success in Syria comes hand in hand with Iran's.

Moscow and Tel Aviv will need to be on the constant lookout for compromises. In the end, Russia can't allow Israel to start a direct military confrontation with Iran, which is a part of Moscow's calculus in Syria, and Israel can't accept the unlimited growth of Iranian influence in Syria, as it threatens its national security.

But these two policies are mutually exclusive. And that poses a question. To what extent are Russia and Israel ready to pursue their current interests in Syria? So far they have managed to compromise, but there is no guarantee that this will be the case forever.

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