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**Delivery of the S-300 Aerial Defense Systems to Iran:
Signaling a Change in Russia's Middle East Policy**
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On April 13, 2015, Russia announced the release and upcoming delivery of the advanced S-300 aerial defense systems to Iran. The shipment had been held up for the last six years, even though Russia contended that these systems were meant for defensive rather than offensive purposes and despite the fact that Iran had already paid for them. The delay was the result of a request by the US and Israel to withhold the systems from Iran while Western powers tried to persuade Iran to abandon its military nuclear program, both through negotiations and the threat of military action against its nuclear infrastructures.

If the S-300 are considered defensive systems, their delivery does not represent a violation of the international sanctions imposed on Iran. However, the broader context of this development is the struggle between Russia and the West in general, and the United States in particular, for influence in light of the expansion of NATO into East European nations, the issue of the deployment of US anti-ballistic defense systems in Eastern Europe, and above all, the conflict in Ukraine and the subsequent economic sanctions imposed against Russia. The sanctions are specifically aimed at Russia's senior government and economic elements and are viewed by Moscow as an attempt to undermine internal stability and governance. It appears that this is the background to Russia's decision to extend its conflict with the United States and the West to the Middle East.

Increased Russian Activity in the Middle East

Beyond its announcement about the delivery of the S-300 systems to Iran, Russia has in recent months increased its Middle East activity. The visits by Russia's Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu to Tehran in January 2015 and President Vladimir Putin to Egypt the following month; the Russian supply of weapons to Egypt; the visit by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to Moscow in April 2015 to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian political process; Russian-Jordanian contacts about the supply of nuclear energy reactors to Jordan; Russia's involvement in Syria, manifested in part by working

toward a solution that would leave the Bashar Assad regime in place; and the recent invitation to senior Saudi Arabian officials to visit Moscow are all evidence of this heightened activity.

As announced by Russia's Deputy Minister of Defense Anatoly Antonov, the official explanation for the release of the aerial defense systems purchased by Iran is that Iran demanded its money back as the systems had not been delivered. Given Russia's economic difficulties due to Western sanctions, it cannot pay the penalty of some \$4 billion demanded by Iran (although the deal itself was for only \$1 billion). But the considerations guiding the leadership in Moscow were much broader, and included the concern that a final agreement on the nuclear issue would bring Iran closer to the United States, whereas Russia would like to see Iran move closer to Moscow. The April 2, 2015 publication by the P5+1 of the principles of the nuclear agreement thus served as a convenient opportunity for Russia to announce the imminent delivery of the systems and be the first of the nations of the world to act toward a lifting of the sanctions on Iran and perhaps even promote energy, security, and economic deals with Iran.

Russia's policy on the Middle East is ostensibly neutral, but in practice Russia tends to support the Iranian-led axis, i.e., Syria and Iraq as well as Yemen, as it calls for non-intervention of Arab armies against the Houthis. In Moscow, some have ascribed responsibility for the spread of Sunni Salafist terrorism in the Middle East and around the globe, including Russia, to the camp of Sunni Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Russia is playing a double game in the region: on the one hand, its leaders support the Iranian axis, but at the same time it is trying to forge closer relations with the leading Sunni states – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, the Gulf principalities, and Jordan – as well as Israel.

Indeed, Moscow is playing a complex game with regard to Israel. In recent years, the two have forged closer relations, manifested in Russia's withholding the S-300 aerial defense systems from Iran and Syria, as well as in the silent agreement whereby neither Moscow nor Jerusalem would intervene in any conflict involving one of them and a third party. Therefore, Israel maintained a neutral stance on Russia's policy in Crimea and Ukraine, and Russia – until recently – avoided challenging Israel on the Palestinian issue, even during Operation Protective Edge. Nonetheless, Russia has not balked at damaging Israeli interests when its influence in the Middle East has been at stake, especially when there is a question of defying the United States.

Still, the intention to deliver the advanced S-300 aerial defense systems to Iran should not be viewed as a policy directed specifically against Israel. It is therefore likely that Russia will attempt to allay Israeli concerns via political dialogue and compensate it by promoting economic projects. After all, Russia views Israel as an important player in the

Middle East, essential to stability in the region, jumpstarting the political process with the Palestinians, and stopping the spread of radical Islamic terrorism.

Recommendations

Israel cannot ignore the recent development, but it must also avoid creating a serious crisis with Russia. Therefore Israel would do well to signal Moscow that it intends to reexamine a host of issues relating to Russia, including Israel's "neutrality" on the Ukraine crisis; potential arms deals between Israel and Russia's neighbors, something Israel has so far avoided because of Russian opposition; the Russian initiative regarding the political process with the Palestinians, especially if it is not coordinated with the United States; a balancing of Russian interests regarding the supply of natural gas to the nations in the Middle East and Europe; and support for the Sunni Arab states in fighting the Iranian axis and its proxies in the Middle East.

While sending these signals, Israel must avoid a breakdown in relations with Russia and continue its political and strategic dialogue. In that context, it should demand that Russia continue its embargo of advanced surface-to-air missiles to Syria (as these could easily fall into Hizbollah hands) and expand it to include shore-to-sea missiles and advanced high trajectory systems. The supply schedule of the S-300 systems to Iran should also be reexamined, certainly if no written agreement on the nuclear issue is achieved between the West and Iran. In addition, Israel should demand that Iran's nuclear intentions be examined, especially the implementation of the commitment to reduce the stockpiles of enriched uranium, with IAEA supervision of the Parchin facility allowed before the systems are delivered.

