

Edge of Conflict: Iran's Actions Putting Russia In 'Delicate Position'

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John T. Huddy



Experts say Iran is trying to provoke Israel, United States, threatening to throw region into conflict

Iran celebrated the 39th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution with a massive rally in Tehran's Azadi (Freedom) Square, a day after Israel's air force shot down an Iranian drone and an Israeli F-16 crashed amid Syrian anti-aircraft fire, drawing the countries closer to a potential conflict.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani did not mention Saturday's incident, instead telling the crowd of several hundred thousand people, including those burning American and Israeli flags, that, "They (the U.S. and Israel) wanted to create tension in the region...they wanted to divide Iraq, Syria.... They wanted to create long-term chaos in Lebanon but...but with our help their policies failed."

Rouhani warned that his country was ready to uphold security in the region and called on other countries to cooperate.

The question is which countries will cooperate with Iran?

Dr. Emmanuel Navon, an international relations professor and fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Security Studies told The Media Line that Iran has put its ally, Russia, and its President Vladimir Putin, into a "delicate position."

"Putin's actions will be critical. He does have the ability to rein in the Iranians," Dr. Navon said. "I don't think (Putin) wants to be dragged into a conflict."

Russia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement Saturday calling on "all sides involved to show restraint and avoid all acts that could lead to complicating the situation further."

"It is absolutely unacceptable to create threats to the lives and security of Russian soldiers that are in the Syrian Arab Republic on the invitation of the legal government to assist in the fight against terrorism," the statement added.

Russia is allied with Iran and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, fighting alongside Syria's military in the ongoing war and supplying it with weapons, including the anti-aircraft missiles fired at Israeli fighter jets. It's unclear if any Russian troops were injured in the exchange.

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that six members of the "regime, its allies of Syrian and non-Syrian nationalities" were killed in the Israeli airstrikes but didn't elaborate further.

Dr. Navon said Iran is not only testing Israel's resolve, but that of Russia and the United States.

"I think the Iranians and their allies are overplaying their luck after their victory over the Islamic State," Dr. Navon contended to The Media Line. "They're feeling invincible."

Iran denied that Israel shot down one of its drones, while Syria's military said the drone had not violated Israeli airspace, but instead was gathering intelligence on ISIS positions in Syria.

Prof. Meir Litvak of The Alliance Center for Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University believes that by denying its drone was shot down Iran may be trying to do two things. First, to prevent a further escalation of violence, and second, to send a message to Israel that it should stop bombing Iranian targets in Syria and intercepting the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

"Israel has to walk a fine line to not go to a full-scale conflict," Prof. Litvak explained to The Media Line. "In the past few months there have been quite a few statements from the leaders of the Shia militias in Syria that they want to open a new front against Israel. I think Iran is interested in expanding the front against Israel in the Golan Heights using its proxies."

Iran may indeed be trying to use Hezbollah and its other proxies to draw Israel into a "low-intensity conflict" by purposely crossing its "red lines" by launching drones into Israel and attacking Israeli forces.

Prof. Litvak also suggested another possibility; namely, that Iran is not a monolithic entity and that "there is a certain internal game going on in Iran. Some may be pushing a tougher line against Israel, while others are not. The hardliners [may be] trying to provoke Israel and Rouhani is not happy about it."

Some also speculate that Iran and Syria may have been trying to draw Israeli fighter jets deeper into Syrian airspace as a trap. There's agreement that if the Israeli F-16 pilots who survived their downing in Israeli territory had instead been killed or captured by Syrian or Iranian forces, the story would have been much different.

The Israeli military said the F-16 that crashed was one of the planes sent to attack targets in Syria in response to the drone incursion. Israel's military said it hit eight Syrian targets, including several air defense batteries, and four Iranian positions described as part of "Iran's military

entrenchment in Syria”.

Brig. Gen. Tomer Bar said the Israeli airstrike Saturday morning was the “biggest and most significant attack the air force has conducted against Syrian air defenses” since the first Lebanon War in 1982.

Officials with the U.S. State Department and Pentagon said Washington fully supports Israel’s right to defend itself, while warning against Iran’s efforts to destabilize the Middle East.