

ANALYSIS

Russia knows exactly what the fuss is about

By insistently arming Assad, and with increasingly sophisticated air defenses, a disingenuous Moscow risks heating the northern border to boiling point

By DAVID HOROVITZ | May 19, 2013, 12:54 pm |

Sergey Lavrov says he can't understand what all the fuss is about.

In interviews in the last few days, the Russian foreign minister has asserted Moscow's obligation — never mind its right — to honor a contract to supply President Bashar Assad's regime in Syria with advanced S-300 air defense batteries, state-of-the-art systems that can intercept fighter jets and cruise missiles.

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The four-part reasoning Lavrov advances: (1) Russia's arms sales credibility would be shattered were it to renege on the deal; (2) Russia has never made any secret of its various contracts with Assad; (3) these are defensive missile systems, not offensive weapons; and (4) the sales are not in breach of international law or Russia's own ostensibly stringent arms sales regulations.

Lavrov, to put it politely, is being disingenuous. His narrow legalistic reasoning collapses in the face of a grisly reality in which his client, Bashar Assad, has spent the past two years clinging to power by massacring his own people (and the often [extremely unsavory](#) "rebel" forces who have joined the fight to oust the Assad regime). Russia's weapons sales to Assad are enabling that ongoing bloodshed. And supplementing the regime's arsenal with one of the world's most sophisticated air defense systems will make the butcher of Damascus, who has remarkably managed to out-murder even his ruthless father, more impregnable.

The wise and experienced former head of IDF military intelligence, Amos Yadlin, remarked over the weekend that, for all Lavrov's bullish insistence that the S-300 sale will go ahead, he is not convinced that Moscow will actually deliver the missile batteries. Rather, in Yadlin's assessment, the S-300s are just one piece in the complex face-off over Syria now playing out between Moscow and Washington. By insistently maintaining their military support for Assad, said Yadlin, the Russians are saying to the Americans, "We lost Egypt; you took Iraq; and you took Libya. You're not going to touch Syria."

And the Americans, for their part, are publicly upbraiding the Russians for that stance. On Friday, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, slammed Moscow for strengthening Assad via the S-300 and other arms sales. "It's at the very least an unfortunate

decision that will embolden the regime and prolong the suffering, so it's ill-timed and very unfortunate," Dempsey told reporters at the Pentagon.

What we have playing out over Syria, therefore, is a mini-confrontation between the world's only superpower, and its would-be reviving former superpower enemy. Israel's misfortune is to be caught up in the middle.

Unnamed Israeli officials have issued conflicting statements in recent days — we want Assad to stay; the sooner he falls the better; and all manner of formulations in between. The fact is that Israel feels the same moral indignation as any other observer at the sight of this man being permitted to kill this many of his own people for this long. And Israel knows there is every possibility that whoever succeeds him could be more brutal, less pragmatic, and more dangerous to Israel.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Israel has done its utmost to stay out of the Syrian civil war, and would like to continue to do so. The problem is that the route by which Iran supplies weaponry to Hezbollah, its proxy anti-Israel militia, happens to run via Syria. And with Assad's complicity, Iran has turned Hezbollah into the world's best-armed terrorist organization with missiles that can hit, and cause immense damage, to just about any target anywhere in Israel.

Twice this month, and on previous occasions too, Israel has intercepted still more advanced Iranian weaponry on its journey through Syria to south Lebanon. Those hits in Syria have been carried out with high accuracy and low collateral damage. No air defense system is impregnable, but the deployment of S-300s would make such airstrikes far more complex.

With Assad's Syria protected beneath the S-300 umbrella, Iran would be emboldened in its weapons transfers to Hezbollah, a semi-sovereign terror group avowedly committed to Israel's destruction. Israel would feel obliged to find other means to prevent the improvement of Hezbollah's already formidable military capability. And tensions across the already unstable borders between Israel and Syria, and Israel and Lebanon, would be ratcheted up another few deeply worrying notches.

That's why [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly told Russia's President Vladimir Putin](#), when they met for emergency talks about Syria last week, that the delivery of S-300 batteries to Assad "is likely to draw us into a response, and could send the region deteriorating into war." Worryingly, Putin reportedly responded by warning Netanyahu that any further Israeli airstrikes in Syria could have the same result.

All of which, as Sergey Lavrov knows full well, is what the fuss is about.

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