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Moscow's smoke screen obscures Assad's next Syrian war moves

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Russian MiG-29M2 fighter-bomber

On minute, Russian spokesmen declare that Moscow is only filling standing contracts with Syria for the sale of weapons, i.e. – S-300 anti-air missiles; the next, that delivery will take place only in the second quarter of 2014 (ahead of Syria's presidential election). Then, after those spokesmen previously declared that Russia would only fill outstanding arms contracts, Serge Korotkov, head of the MiG company came out with the news Friday, May 31, that a Syrian

delegation was in Moscow to discuss "a new contract" for the sale of "more than 10" MiG-29 M/M2 fighters.

According to debkaf's military sources, this Russian fighter-bomber is designed to operate in complex electronic jamming environments. It is therefore just what the Syrian army lacks for overcoming the Israeli Air Force's ability to disable Syria's Russian-made electronic warfare systems.

Moscow is therefore offering to provide Bashar Assad and his air force with a key resource for delivering on the statement he made in a TV interview Thursday, May 30: "We have informed all foreign parties that we will retaliate against any future Israeli attack."

Our military and Russian sources say that the conflicting Russian statements on weapons sales to Damascus have two motives:

1. To lay down a smoke screen for concealing the true nature and volume of the military equipment Moscow is shipping to Assad and his army by airlift. Its transports land and unload their freight at various Syrian airfields, including Aleppo and Latakia. Without the Russian and Iranian air corridors, the Syrian army would soon run out of the ammunition, spare parts and fuel, needed day to day for keeping up its war on the rebels.
2. To spread a fog fraught with Russian menace for scaring Israel, the United States, Britain, France and Turkey off any thought of military intervention in the Syrian conflict.

This too is the frame of mind Moscow is seeking to generate for June 5 when representatives of Russia, the US and the United Nations meet to prepare the ground for the Geneva conference which had been called to hammer out a political settlement of the Syrian war.

Moscow is determined to browbeat Washington into accepting Iran's participation.

Only the UN has so far named its representatives to the preliminary meeting. They are special envoy for Syria, the Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, and the Deputy Secretary General, US Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman.

Some weeks ago, Brahimi was on the point of resigning his mission. He changed his mind when he saw Assad was gaining the upper hand in the way and the Obama administration unwilling to stop him except by cooperating with Moscow in calling an international conference for setting limits on Assad's triumph.

The Algerian diplomat became convinced that without Moscow and Iran's attendance, the conference is condemned to fail.

Most probably, therefore, the preparatory meeting will be preoccupied with settling the

argument over Iran's participation. Already, behind closed doors, Moscow, Washington and Tehran have closed the gap between them and bargaining over the format of Tehran's attendance, whether as a separate delegation or part of the Syrian team? And will Hizballah be asked or not?

The Russians are confident they come to the event with the strongest hand. Their delegates will lead a front composed of Iran, Syria and Hizballah, which is not only united but way ahead on the war front.

In contrast, their American co-sponsors, have not been able to persuade the fractious Syrian opposition or its Gulf patrons, led by Saudi Arabia, to put in an appearance at the conference.

Unless this obstacle can be overcome, the US delegation comes to the conference without Syrian or Arab parties on its side of the table.

Israel can only watch from the sidelines.

President Vladimir Putin and his advisers feel they can safely turn up the heat in the belief that President Barack Obama will have no choice in the final reckoning but to accept the Russian-Iranian proposals for ending the Syrian war, starting with leaving Assad in power. Otherwise, Moscow is indicating that the war will escalate, fueled by the swelling input of Russian arms, and the United States will sink further in Middle East estimation.

Implicit in the Russian stance is that the Syrian war which has already spread to Lebanon thanks to Hizballah's participation in the fighting will next spill over into Israel. Moscow is playing the S-300 missiles and MiG-29 M/M2 warplanes as pieces in its game against Israel too on the Syrian chessboard.

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