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## Syrian-Israeli war of words via Putin edges into Syrian-Hizbullah war of attrition.

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USS Kearsarge which docked in Eilat

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu ended their three-hour meeting in Sochi Tuesday, May 14, at loggerheads on Syria. In fact, Putin warned his guest that Israel and its army, the IDF, were heading for war with Syria in which Russia might well be involved – and not just through the advanced S-300 anti-air missiles supplied to the Assad government. The case Netanyahu and Military Intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi put before Putin and Russian foreign intelligence chief, SVR Director

Mikhail Fradkov, fell on deaf ears.

They found the Russian leader further infuriated by the docking that day at Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat of the *USS Kearsarge*, carrying 1,800 marines and a consignment of 20 V-22 Osprey helicopters which US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel had promised to supply to Israel during his April visit.

Putin viewed the stationing of US forces in the Gulf of Aqaba just two hours away the Israeli-Syrian border for repelling Syrian-Iranian-Hizbullah aggression against Israel or Jordan – signaled by the *Kearsarge's* arrival - as an act of bad faith by Washington. On the one hand, they want us to cooperate for an international conference to end the bloodshed in Syria, while on the other, they deploy military forces, he complained to Netanyahu.

The Israeli prime minister countered with a warning that Israel would continue to strike advanced weapons in Syria that were destined for Hizbullah. And if President Bashar Assad hit back for Israel's May 5 bombardment of weapons stores on Mount Qassioun near Damascus, Israel would intensify its bombardments of Syrian military targets and weapons until Assad was left to fight off rebel assaults empty-handed.

Putin rejected this threat as implausible.

Neither Putin nor Netanyahu put all their cards on the table, but the conversation ended with the Russian leader fully confident that his capabilities for safeguarding Assad were greater than Israel's ability to destroy him.

In the end, Netanyahu and his party arrived home Tuesday evening with a bad feeling. They were certain that Moscow had given Assad the green light to go through with his threat to make the Syrian Golan and the Horan of southern Syria "a front for resistance" – i.e. the platforms for embarking on a war of attrition against northern Israel with the help of a flow of advanced weapons to Hizbullah.

The Syrian ruler is strongly encouraged to adopt this path by Tehran. Hizbullah's leader Hassan Nasrallah has embraced it. And the radical Palestinian leader, Ahmed Jibril, head of the Assad-satellite Popular Front-General Command, has eagerly offered his services.

And indeed, Wednesday, the day after Netanyahu's trip to Sochi, Jibril's group let loose with mortar fire on the Israeli Mt. Hermon ski site, firing from a Syrian army position.

Israeli military sources confirmed later that these were no stray shells from a Syrian-army-rebel battle as in former cases, but a deliberate attack. In Jerusalem, it was taken as a direct consequence of Moscow's account to Assad of the conversation between the Russian and Israeli leaders. They concluded that Assad took it for granted that he was now at liberty to go on the offensive against Israel.

Wednesday night, Netanyahu's office reacted to this deterioration with a swift and strong warning.

Israeli media were informed bluntly that if the Assad chose to retaliate for Israel's air strikes, he would be removed from power.

That same night, "a senior Israeli official" contacted *The New York Times* with a more detailed warning quoted by the paper: "If Syrian President Assad reacts by attacking Israel, or tries to strike Israel through his terrorist proxies, he will risk forfeiting his regime, for Israel will retaliate."

Within hours, early Thursday morning, May 16, Jerusalem had its answer from Damascus.

A Palestinian group calling itself "Martyrs of the Abdel Qader al-Husseini Brigades" (named for the commander of a Palestinian force fighting Israel in its 1948 War of Independence) claimed responsibility for the "rockets" aimed at an Israeli military observation post in the Golan Heights. They were fired in honor of Nakba Day, said the statement released in Damascus "We are not celebrating but avenging the blood of our martyrs."

A video showing the launch was appended.

Palestinian terrorist groups habitually use made-up names when claiming attacks, a practice often followed by al Qaeda, but this one was easily identified by Israel and taken to mean that Assad had begun using what the Israeli official referred to in *The New York Times* as "his terrorist proxies."

Depending on the next move decided on by Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon and Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz, this incident could mark the tipping-point of a slide towards a war confrontation against Israel by Syria, Hizbullah and other Assad proxies.

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