

Russia to send newer, S-300 missile defense systems to Syria

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Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov told Russian news agencies that supplying S-300 to Syria is Russia's "own right" and expressed confidence that this would not hurt ties with Israel.

Syria's skies, where regional and international powers back different parties in the conflict, are increasingly crowded. (Photo: Creative Commons)

Moscow: Russia announced Monday it will supply Syria's government with more modern, S-300 missile defense systems after last week's downing of a Russian plane by Syria, a friendly fire incident that sent regional tensions over the war-torn country soaring.

The Russian military's reconnaissance Il-20 was shot down by the Syrian government missile defense systems responding to an Israeli airstrike. All 15 people on board were killed. Russia laid the blame on Israel, saying Israeli fighter jets had pushed the plane into Syria's line of fire.

Syria's skies, where regional and international powers back different parties in the conflict, are increasingly crowded.

Shortly before the downing, Israeli strikes had hit targets inside Syria, reportedly preventing an arms shipment to the Iranian-backed militant Hezbollah group.

Russia launched its campaign in Syria to support President Bashar Assad in 2015, and though the involvement turned the tide of war in favor of Syrian government forces, Moscow has tried to play a careful balancing act, maintaining good ties both with Iran and Israel. For its part, Israel is wary of Iran's growing influence in Syria.

President Vladimir Putin initially struck a reconciliatory note, blaming the downing on a "chain of tragic, fatal circumstances." But the Russian military came out on Sunday, renewing the accusations against Israel.

Russian officials said Syria's outdated S-200 systems weren't sophisticated enough to identify the Russian plane as a friendly one.

Monday's statement from Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Russia will send the S-300 missile defense systems to Damascus within the next two weeks. Earlier in the war, Russia suspended a supply of S-300s, which Israel feared Syria could use against it.

Shoigu said Russia is now going to go ahead with the shipment because "the situation has changed, and it's not our fault." He also said that Russia would start to electronically jam aircraft flying in to attack targets in Syria.

"We are convinced that these measures will calm down some hotheads and keep them from careless actions which pose a threat to our troops," Shoigu said.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov told Russian news agencies that supplying S-300 to Syria is Russia's "own right" and expressed confidence that this would not hurt ties with Israel.

The Kremlin said Russia's decision was not targeted against anyone and only serves to protect Russian troops in

Syria. Spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that recent findings by the Russian military showed an Israeli jet â€œdeliberatelyâ€• pushed the Russian Il-20 into the line of fire, enabling its downing.

Russiaâ€™s stepped-up role in Syria enabled Assadâ€™s forces, which had been losing ground to the armed opposition, to gain the upper hand and reclaim significant territory held by the rebels.

In recent months, the government recaptured many areas that were controlled by the opposition.

The downing of the plane came just hours after Russia announced it had reached a deal with Turkey to avert a Russian-backed Syrian government offensive against the northwestern province of Idlib, one of the last areas still in rebel hands.

Idlib, controlled by a mix of radical groups and Turkey-backed armed opposition, overlooks the Syrian coast where Russia military and air bases are located, and have reportedly come under rebel fire.

Shortly after Moscowâ€™s announcement, the Syrian presidentâ€™s office said Assad received a call from Putin and that the two discussed the latest developments, including the Idlib deal and the delivery of S-300s.

According to the statement, Putin reiterated that Russia holds Israel responsible for the downing of the plane. The Russian president also informed Assad of the S-300 delivery, it said. Assad expressed his condolences for the deaths of the Russian airmen, saying they were â€œcarrying out noble mission, fighting terrorism in Syria.â€•

The Kremlin said the two leaders discussed working toward â€œachieving a lasting normalization in Syria and restoration of its sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.â€•

Meanwhile, Syrian state TV said insurgents shelled Monday a government-controlled crossing east of Idlib that was reportedly prepared to allow civilians to leave Idlib.

Concerns are rising in Idlib over the details of the deal and how it will be implemented. The province is home to some 3 million Syrians, half of them displaced by violence in other parts of the country.

Hard-line armed groups have rejected the deal, saying it aims to strip the opposition of weapons and is a victory for Assadâ€™s government.

On Sunday, tribal leaders and prominent local figures meeting in Idlib said they distrusted Russian mediation, citing Russiaâ€™s previous cease-fire violations. The conference called on armed groups not to leave the front lines in Syria or hand over their weapons.

- AP