For a long time, Russia and Israel avoided clashes in Syria, where their interests overlap. After Moscow introduced its forces into Syrian territory in 2015, it took into account Israeli interests related to the security of the Jewish state. Israel appreciated Russia's position and tried to make the best of the situation by avoiding clashes of Russian-Israeli interests in Syria. Moreover, Israel used Russia's military intervention in Syria to reach military and political understanding with Moscow, knowing full well that Russia will play an influential role in the region only if it can find a balance between the interests of its allies on the one hand and Israel as a regional power on the other.

However, it is no secret that Israel has recently gone too far in pursuing its interests in Syria, which has led the Russian side to regard Tel Aviv’s behavior there as irresponsible. Let’s recall the beginning of the year when the Israeli side launched several missile strikes against Syria, including against an Iranian military facility near a Russian military outpost, causing some damage to Russia. At the same time, the coordination introduced earlier between Israeli and Russian forces did not work efficiently: Tel Aviv informed Moscow of the strike only minutes before it struck, which prevented Moscow from withdrawing its forces from the area, thus endangering them.

According to many experts, Israel has made a step too far too far in defending its interests in Syria, which has sharpened Moscow's attitude against such actions. Eventually, Russia got fed up with this, and in the last raid, the Israeli missiles were met by Russian-made anti-aircraft systems, shooting down seven of the eight missiles.

For example, last week, Israel carried out three airstrikes in central and northern Syria - all three relatively close to Russian military forces. On July 22, however, the Israeli Air Force failed in its latest airstrike attempt against Syria, launching an attack against what it perceived as an Iran base in Al-Qusayr in Homs Governorate. The F-16s made run over the target from Lebanon (northeast of Beirut) and fired Delilah cruise missiles and SPIKE-1000 guided bombs produced by Israel’s Rafael. But this time, the Syrian air defense squads with the Russian Buk SAMs entered
the fray. They succeeded in completely repelling the attack of the Israeli aggressor and successfully intercepted the best bombs and missiles Israel could produce.

Note that this is Israel’s second failure in the last week: On July 20, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) attacked As-Safir in the Aleppo Governorate, and Russian air defense systems destroyed the missiles.

In this context, the leading Israeli media express various speculations about the consequences of such actions in the Syrian sky. Nevertheless, admitting that Russia has decided to protect the Syrian sky from Israel could be Moscow’s response to the recent increase in Israeli raids against Iranian and Hezbollah sites in northern and central Syria.

Israeli journalists do not exclude the possibility that such steps may be carried out with the consent of the United States. They link such assumptions to the negotiations between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden. Russia has always been calculating its reactions in the past because Tel Aviv coordinates all its actions with Washington. However, judging by current contacts with the American side, the impression in Tel Aviv is that Moscow has received confirmation that Washington does not like the ongoing Israeli raids. The American news portal Washington Free Beacon says that the Biden administration is walking back the United States' historic recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the contested Golan Heights region, previously announced by Donald Trump, because of its importance to Israel's security.

The fact that Russia has abandoned its tacit neutrality with regard to Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) air operations in Syria was recently reported by the Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, which also reported that Moscow would supply the Syrian government with more advanced military hardware so that it will be able to repel Israeli cross-border attacks and close the Syrian sky from its air force.

Note that in recent years the Israel Defense Force has been striking at various parts of the country freely, leading researchers to believe the version about the alleged gentlemen’s agreements between Russia and Israel on this matter. However, after the Israeli side continued to ignore the agreements with Russia on Syria, Moscow began to support the Syrian forces more actively, almost completely repelling the Israeli attacks on the Arab Republic. According to some analysts, it was a warning to the Israeli side that after the first missiles were destroyed, the Israeli planes would be shot down as well, as the Israeli and Arab media directly hinted.

It is well known that the IDF used US intelligence and close US-Israeli military cooperation to plan its airstrikes against Syrian territory. However, we should not forget that Moscow too enjoys close cooperation with Damascus. And, given the integration of Syrian air defense systems with Russian air defenses, Russia is free to provide the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) with information that allows it to repel Israeli strikes and shoot down Israeli planes. In addition, it is no secret that US interests may also be affected by Russia’s strengthening of the SAA’s air defense capabilities: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and US Air Force planes regularly appear over the Syrian Arab Republic’s territory, violating Syrian sovereignty.

The new Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, Vassily Nebenzia, speaking at the UN Security Council, has repeatedly stated that Russia condemns the airstrikes that Israel is carrying out on the territory of Syria. According to the diplomat, this complicates the situation in the country and affects the overall situation in the region.

Today Israel is in a very difficult situation in this regard. It is well known that Israel had already gone through a major crisis in relations with Russia in September 2018, when the Syrian air defense mistakenly shot down a Russian Il-20 ELINT transport-reconnaissance plane with fifteen Russian servicemen on board while the Syrian troops were tracking multiple missiles flying over Latakia. Moreover, in this incident, the Israeli planes that struck the Syrian territory, leaving the scene, deliberately put the Russian aircraft in harm’s way, ignoring the fact that it was carrying a lot of people on board. Moscow vigorously accused Tel Aviv at the time and has long criticized Tel Aviv’s behavior in Syria. Eventually, Israel was able to restore relations, but with great effort.

Recent events indicate that Russia’s discontent over the Israeli strikes on Syria has resumed, and the crisis in relations between the two countries could become very acute. Moscow has run out of patience, and will not allow Israel or anyone else ruin what it has accomplished in Syria.

Today the Arab world is moving steadily toward recognition of the Assad government, not only in Iraq and Egypt but also in the Gulf countries. Many other interested parties want Syria to return to its normal state. Accordingly, the airstrikes being carried out by all kinds of foreign countries against this stricken country to cease finally. This requires the United States and Israel to stop their airstrikes and Turkey to destabilize northern Syria.
Vladimir Platov, expert on the Middle East, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.