

Israel shoots down Syria drone and Netanyahu set to meet Putin

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Israel shot down a drone that flew in from Syria on Wednesday, the Israeli military said, while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu flew to Moscow to for talks with Damascus's biggest ally about a Syrian advance near the volatile frontier.

A Patriot missile launched to intercept the drone, which set off air-defence sirens on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and nearby Jordanian border, the military said in a statement. It was the second such incident in the area in as many months.

The drone "infiltrated the Israeli border from Syria", the Israeli military statement said, without immediately elaborating on whether the shoot-down took place over the Golan. Israel captured much of the strategic plateau in the 1967 war with Syria and annexed it in a move not recognised internationally.

An Israeli security source said police were scouring the Sea of Galilee, at the Golan foothills in northern Israel, for possible debris.

Israel has been on high alert as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces advance against rebels near the Golan and Jordan. Israel worries that he could deploy troops or allow his Iranian and Hezbollah allies to set up emplacements near Israeli lines.

Russia is Assad's big-power backer in the 7-year-old civil war. Netanyahu travelled to Moscow on Wednesday for talks with President Vladimir Putin, who in the past has turned a blind eye to Israeli strikes on Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria while making clear Russia does not want Assad's rule endangered.

"We will discuss Syria, we will discuss Iran, we will discuss Israel's security needs," Netanyahu told reporters before departing. "I very much appreciate the direct, unmediated and excellent contact that I have with the Russian president."

Israel has threatened to open fire at any Syrian government forces that try to deploy in a demilitarised Golan buffer zone set up under a 1974 U.N.-monitored armistice.

But on Tuesday, Israel also signalled openness to eventual ties with Syria under Assad, a tacit acknowledgement that he was re-consolidating power as he beats back the rebels.

Under Assad family rule, Syria held direct negotiations with Israel in the United States in 2000 and indirect talks mediated by Turkey in 2008, discussions predicated on a full or partial return of the Golan.

Netanyahu's government has made clear it would not now cede the plateau and has been lobbying for U.S. recognition of Israel's claim of sovereignty there.

On June 24, Israel's military said it launched a Patriot missile at an incoming drone from Syria, which turned away unscathed. A Syrian commander said the drone was engaged in local operations.