

The real problem with the S-300 in Syria: Russia's embrace of the axis of evil

A breaking news item was published yesterday which furthers the discussion concerning the deployment of the Russian S-300 air defence system in Syria. ImageSat International, an Israeli company which operates the EROS-A and EROS-B imaging satellites and which in this instance has used imagery from the French Pleiades satellites, has identified the location of some of the S-300 launchers and associated systems.¹ This specific location highlights the crux of the problem presented by the system's deployment to Syria. It is not the system itself, but rather Russia's close embrace of what President George W. Bush termed the "axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world", that is the real problem.² The S-300 system, which will be imminently transferred to Syrian operators, is located 1.3 kilometres (less than a mile) away from a Russian-operated S-400 system.³ The Russian S-400 was positioned in the area between April and July 2017, during a previous round of intensified Russian activity in Syria.⁴

As observed in the previous post on this blog this week, the S-300 system can be observed from space relatively easily and ImageSat's findings are yet another demonstration of this fact.⁵ Image 1 below also shows that the S-300's launchers and other equipment are currently located in groups of vehicles in close proximity to one another, presenting a convenient target for air attack. Given the close proximity of the Russian S-400, it might be difficult for any attacker to distinguish between the S-400 and the ostensibly Syrian S-300PM-2, especially since the systems are very similar in all respects. It is therefore possible that any attack on the Syrian system will involve an attack on the S-400 as well, whether intentional or otherwise. Therefore, the Russians have put themselves in a position of, at best, close observers of any forthcoming events or, at worst, direct participants. As shown by Image 2 below, this situation may be difficult to contain, since the theoretical maximum range of both the S-300 and S-400 is 250 kilometres (155 miles) and covers all of Lebanon, northern Cyprus and the Israeli Golan Heights. Given that a variety of civilian flights operate in this airspace, there is a considerable danger that they might be shot down. The situation is rendered more acute by the fact that the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has already warned civilian traffic that

¹ For EROS, see – eoPortal - Earth Observation Directory & News. *EROS-B (Earth Remote Observation Satellite-B)*. Retrieved October 25, 2018, from <https://directory.eoportal.org/web/eoportal/satellite-missions/e/eros-b>; For Pleiades, see – Centre national d'études spatiales (CNES). *Pleiades – In Depth – Events Archive*. Retrieved October 25, 2018, from <https://pleiades.cnes.fr/en/PLEIADES/index.htm>

² Washington Post. (2002, January 29). *Text of President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm>

³ Composite video and satellite images of S-300 location – ImageSat International. (2018, October 24). *New Syrian S-300 Deployment near Masyaf*. Retrieved from <https://www.imagesatintl.com/new-syrian-s-300-deployment-near-masyaf/>; Associated article in the Israeli Haaretz Newspaper – Kubovich, Y. (2018, October 24). *Satellite Images Show Deployment of S-300 Missiles in Northern Syria*. *Haaretz*. Retrieved from <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/premium-satellite-images-show-deployment-of-s-300-missiles-in-northern-syria-1.6592320>; Google Maps location of previously existing Russian S-400 site at 35°10'11.6" N, 36°15'21.3" E [https://www.google.com/maps/place/35°10'11.6"N+36°15'21.3"E/](https://www.google.com/maps/place/35°10'11.6); Google Maps location of new Syrian S-300 site identified by ImageSat International at 35°10'29.404" N, 36°15'10.404" E – [https://www.google.com/maps/place/35°10'29.4"N+36°15'10.4"E/](https://www.google.com/maps/place/35°10'29.4)

⁴ Binnie, J. (2018, January 24). *Russian defence minister confirms second S-400 in Syria*. *Jane's 360*. Retrieved from <https://www.janes.com/article/77313/russian-defence-minister-confirms-second-s-400-in-syria>

⁵ See previous post on this blog at <https://airlandbattle.wordpress.com/2018/10/23/russias-s-300-in-syria-dangerous-but-limited>

<https://airlandbattle.wordpress.com/2018/10/25/the-real-problem-with-the-s-300-syria-russia>

the navigation systems of commercial flights might be badly disrupted by the electronic warfare jammers that Russia has deployed along the Syrian coast.⁶

The specific area where the air defence missile sites are located, Masyaf and its environs, has already become notorious during the course of the Syrian civil war. In September 2017, Israel was reported to have bombed a facility of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre (SSRC) in the area, associated with the production of both chemical weapons and surface-to-surface missiles.⁷ Eleven months later, Aziz Asbar, an important SSRC engineer, was killed in the same general area, and the Syrian regime blamed Israel.⁸ It appears that Russia is helping Syria to operate the S-300 in an extremely sensitive area, where further Israeli military action is overwhelmingly likely.

This is happening in a context when Russian official rhetoric has become very erratic and descended into open accusations of a Western armed conspiracy against Russia. The latest example is particularly appalling and of direct relevance to the S-300 deployment. A Russian general has accused the United States of using “a proper Poseidon-8 equipped with modern technology” to direct a drone attack against the Russian Humayyim airbase in Syria, which is located just 40 kilometres (25 miles) north-west of the S-400 and S-300 positions.⁹ The Russian general in question is Colonel-General Alexander Fomin, a deputy of the Russian Minister of Defence for international defence cooperation.¹⁰ When such senior officials make lurid and patently false accusations, the similarity between the current Russian regime and its Iranian and Syrian collaborators becomes all too clear.

⁶ Binnie, J. (2018, October 11). Pilots warned of jamming threat in Eastern Med. *Jane's 360*. Retrieved from <https://www.janes.com/article/83748/pilots-warned-of-jamming-threat-in-eastern-med>

⁷ BBC News (2017, September 7). 'Israeli jets hit Syria's Masyaf chemical site' - reports. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41184867>

⁸ Sly, L. (2018, August 7). Syria accuses Israel's Mossad of assassinating top rocket scientist. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/syria-accuses-israels-mossad-of-assassinating-top-rocket-scientist/2018/08/07/29d68441-1399-48eb-b10e-105036182db6_story.html

⁹ Michael, T. (2018, October 25). Russian airbase in Syria attacked by 13 US drones, Kremlin claims. *The Sun*. Retrieved from <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/7579097/russian-airbase-syria-attacked-us-drones/>

¹⁰ BBC News Russian (2018, October 25). *The Russian Ministry of Defence has accused the Americans of coordinating a drone attack on Humayyim*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-45975410>

Image 1: S-300 Launchers near Masyaf
(ImageSat International)

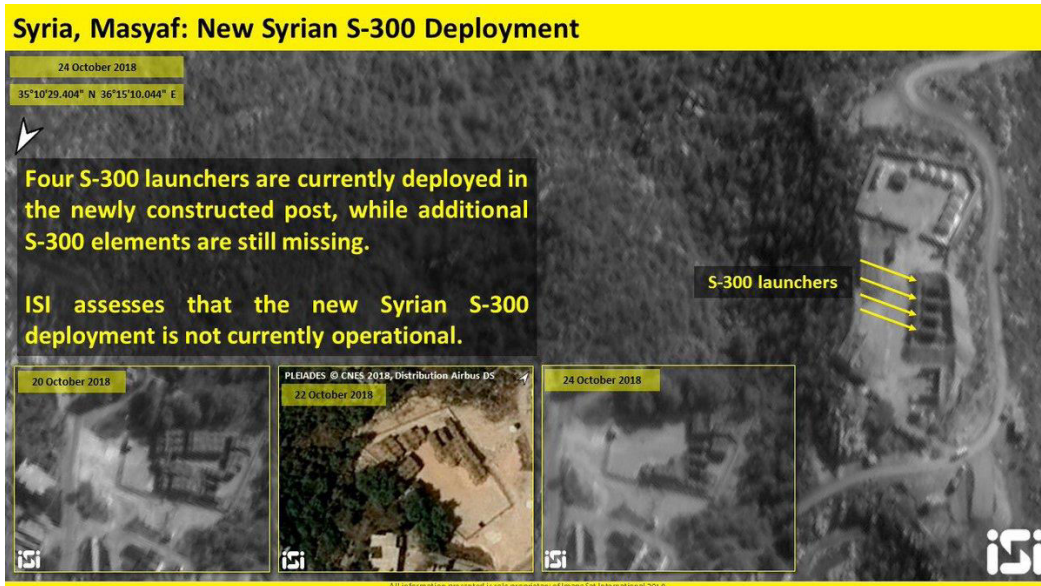


Image 2: S-300 Maximum Range from Masyaf, covering all Lebanon and the Israeli Golan Heights
(ImageSat International)

