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Iranian teams train on S-300 interceptors at Russian bases

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S-300 effective against air or missile attack

While joining the US in backing a softened UN Security Council sanctions package against Iran, Tuesday, May 18, Moscow is reported by **DEBKAFfile's** military sources as surreptitiously training Iranian Revolutionary Guards crews at Russian bases to operate the advanced S-300 interceptor-missile systems, which are capable of fending off a potential US or Israel attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. UN sources disclose that the new sanctions motion - in its present diluted form - does not expressly forbid the consignment of this weapon to Iran.

Moscow is withholding them from Tehran for now, keeping the promise prime minister Vladimir Putin gave President Barack Obama. But if and when the weapons are delivered, Iran will have trained crews ready to operate them.

In their push to develop military ties with Iran and its allies, the Russians earlier this month also agreed to sell Syria MiG-29 fighter jets, Pantsyr short-range air defense systems and armored vehicles in a major arms transaction.

Washington and Jerusalem have known about the presence of IRGC S-300 missile crews at Russian training bases since early May. But when Israeli president Shimon Peres raised the issue during his talks with President Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow on May 9, he was told sharply that neither Israel nor any other government is entitled to tell Russia to whom it may give military assistance.

And when US diplomats in New York and Moscow were instructed to ask their opposite numbers whether the training program augured the shipment of the interceptors to Iran, notwithstanding Putin's promise, they were greeted with deafening silence.

On May 11, the White House was worried enough to send the president's nuclear adviser to tell reporters: "The United States has made clear to Russia that delivering a promised advance air defense system to Iran would have serious implications on US-Russian relations."

This was the sternest admonition for Moscow to be heard ever from an Obama spokesman. This time, the Russians responded with equal abrasiveness. Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, who was with President Medvedev in Ankara at the time, shot back: Moscow needs "no advice from across the ocean" about the sale of the S-300.

These less-than-diplomatic exchanges aside, the fact remains that Moscow's consent to start training Iranian missile crews has strengthened Tehran's hopes of the interceptors' early delivery. The Iranians are even more encouraged by the success of the Russian-Chinese bid to delete from the UN sanctions draft any substantial expansion of the standing international arms embargo that might apply to the sophisticated S-300 anti-missile, anti-air system.

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