



Russian Military Deployment out of Iran Airforce Base Ends Abruptly

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The [Russian deployment to Shahid Nojeh base in Hamadan in Iran](#) has ended shortly after it began. The Russians have confirmed that all the Russian aircraft that were briefly stationed at the base have returned to Russia.

Officially the reason is that the mission the aircraft undertook is over. Unofficially the international media has seized on some words of Iranian Defence Minister Brigadier-General Hossein Dehghan [spoken on Sunday](#) as providing the explanation

“Russians are interested to show they are a superpower that can influence security trends. On the other hand, they are willing to show they have been influential in the Syrian operation to be able to negotiate with the US and secure their share of Syria’s political future. Of course, there is a kind of show-off and discourteousness in this regard.”

These words have been interpreted to mean that the Iranians were incensed by Russian bragging at the use by their aircraft of the Shahid Nojeh air base in Iran, which they found somehow “discourteous”.

That is extremely unlikely and in fact it makes no sense. The first media reports of Russian aircraft using the base did not come from Russia; they seem to have come from the [Al-Masdar News agency](#) in the Middle East. There have been some suggestions that Al-Masdar is an Israeli project. However it appears to be based in Lebanon and seems to take a pro-government line in the Syrian war. That suggests it obtained its information about the deployment from sources in Syria or Iran.

The Russians did inform the US of the deployment before it took place, as they are required by agreements they made with the US last autumn to do. It would in fact have been completely impossible to keep the deployment secret from the US given the sheer size of some of the aircraft involved (especially the TU22M3s) and the blanket US satellite surveillance of Iran which constantly takes place. In fact it took no time for satellite photos of the deployment to be made public, as they were bound to be.

The simple fact is that the deployment was bound to become public knowledge within hours of it taking place and it is absurd to think that the Iranians could have thought otherwise or could have seriously imagined that the Russians wouldn’t comment on it or would try to downplay it.

In fact Brigadier-General Dehghan's words look like they are being misreported. They do not properly speaking read like a complaint about the Russians "showing off" about their deployment to the Shahid Nojeh base. Rather they read more like a complaint about the Russians' habit of negotiating with the US in order to "secure their share of Syria political future". The Iranians have made [no secret about their unhappiness](#) about the discussions the Russians continuously have with the US over Syria. Brigadier-General Dehghan's comments simply appear to be a restatement of this.

Why then has the deployment ended so quickly? The short answer is we don't know, just as (despite what the international media has been telling us) we don't actually know that it was the Iranians who ended the deployment.

It could be that the decision to end the deployment was taken by the Russians. Despite what some have said use of the Shahid Nojeh base is not crucial to the Russian air campaign in Syria. TU22M3 bombers can reach anywhere in Syria with full loads flying from their bases in southern Russia.

The 4 SU34 fighter bombers that were briefly deployed to Shahid Nojeh base [did benefit from the substantially shorter distance to their targets](#) in Syria. However they could have been deployed even more effectively if they had been sent to the Russian base in Syria at Khmeimim, which if shortening flight times really was so important would have been the obvious thing to do.

It is possible that the Russians became concerned that what was intended [primarily as a political statement of support for Iran](#) was drawing a stronger international reaction than they might have anticipated. The US vigorously criticised the deployment, which cannot have come as a surprise to the Russians and which they must have anticipated.

However of more concern to the Russians may have been private criticism of the deployment coming from Israel and Saudi Arabia, two countries strongly hostile to Iran with which Russia is however anxious to maintain good relations.

The other possibility is that the decision to end the deployment was indeed taken by Iran. As [I discussed previously](#), the Russian deployment to Shahid Nojeh base was not uncontroversial in Iran, with some criticism of the deployment being made in the Iranian parliament the Majlis.

It could be that this swayed the Iranian authorities into reversing their decision to grant the Russians use of the base. Or it could be that the Iranians are annoyed about private discussions between the US and the Russians that are underway, as Brigadier-General Dehghan's words might suggest.

This episode does however underscore an important point: Russia and Iran are partners who are in the process of [forging closer relations with each other](#), and they are working closely with each other in Syria. However they are not allies and their relationship is not trouble-free. On the contrary, as [I have discussed previously](#), their relationship is historically complicated, and has been marked by long periods of outright hostility. This makes frictions and disagreements inevitable and it looks like we have just witnessed one.

This spat is unlikely however to result in any significant or long term cooling of relations. Despite Iranian resentment at Russia's negotiating strategy in Syria the Iranians

know perfectly well that without Russia's help the Syrian government which Iran supports and in which it has invested so much would long since have fallen.

Indeed Iranian commentators and officials [have actually said as much](#). With Iran's relations with the US and the West still very fraught, it still makes sense for Iran to forge closer relations with Russia and the Eurasian powers, and there is no sign of any second thoughts in Tehran about that.

The Russians for their part still seem to be committed to forging a close relationship with Iran, which is obviously in their interest, and they too know that they need the help of Iran if they are to achieve their objectives in Syria.

If only for these reasons both the Iranians and the Russians have been careful to leave open the possibility of future Russian deployments to Shahid Nojeh base, and the Russians have even been hinting that they are in private talks with the Iranians for the use of other Iranian facilities for their Syrian campaign as well. It is not impossible that once this dispute (whatever its cause) has been smoothed over that we will be seeing Russian aircraft in Iran again.

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