



RUSSIA FOREIGN POLICY PAPERS

MOSCOW ON THE MEDITERRANEAN:

Russia and Israel's Relationship

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FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



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COVER: Kobi Gideon, Israel Government Press Office (GPO)

June 2018



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By: Joshua Krasna

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The author would like to thank Anna Borshchevskaya of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy for her helpful comments on this paper.

Executive Summary

The ties between Russia and Israel have evolved as both states developed their individual post-Cold War strategic views and policies. The steady progress that has been made since the restoration of diplomatic relations in 1991—and particularly since Vladimir Putin assumed office in 2000—represents a significant improvement in Israel’s national security environment and an important gain for Russia’s global and regional policy. Bilateral relations are the best they have been since 1991, and perhaps ever.

Since Russia’s 2015 intervention in Syria, each side sees the other as a major player in the region, with the capacity to affect its national security interests. The interests of the two states are only rarely identical, but often are in sync. Even in cases where they are opposed, both sides recognize the importance of the other and make significant efforts to deconflict. As a strong regional power, Israel has the capability to disrupt Moscow’s planned strategic architecture in the Middle East. On the other hand, Russia is closely aligned with Israel’s main rivals in the region, Iran and Syria, and today de facto shares a border with Israel on the Golan Heights; the presence of Russian forces provides a complication and a brake for Israeli activity. Israel hopes that Moscow can restrain its regional clients when their actions threaten its interests.

Russia has increased its footprint in the Middle East by not only developing ties with each major player, but more importantly, by negotiating the divides between them. Having good relations with nearly all of the Middle East’s feuding actors—a feat the United States cannot claim—Russia positions itself as the “indispensable middleman.” Israel, as a small, internationally isolated state, historically has sought good relations with any willing partner. Israel’s foreign policy aims to achieve maximum diversity in diplomatic relationships.

Historical, cultural, and social ties play a role in the Russia-Israel relationship, and there are several key strategic issues on which the two parties disagree. The most significant of these concern Iran, Syria, and Palestine.

Relations between Russia and Iran—especially in military and nuclear spheres—have been a key subject of diplomatic discourse between Jerusalem and Moscow for many years. Russia does not see positive relations with both Israel and Iran as antithetical. Rather, its regional strategy is premised on concurrently fostering beneficial ties with the two strongest powers in the region.

The bilateral relationship unfolds within a defined framework, the boundaries of which are well understood by both sides. It does not seem that the underlying interests that define the dynamics of the bilateral relationship will change significantly. Russia-Israel relations will continue to be characterized by a dichotomy of friendly relations coupled with serious disagreements on many regional issues.



In the early hours of May 10, 2018, a shower of airstrikes struck dozens of Iranian targets in Syria. Israeli officials claimed the strikes were in response to the 20 Iranian rockets launched at the Golan Heights hours earlier. Iranian media called the attacks “unprecedented,” yet this episode is just the latest in a series of open clashes between Israel and Iran in Syria. Less than a week and a half earlier, on April 29, 2018, more than a dozen Iranian soldiers died from a similar Israeli missile assault. Before that, the most recent military clash occurred in the second week of April. This mid-April clash was the first time that Israel openly took credit for attacking Iranian forces located in Syria—the culmination of a clandestine conflict between Israel and Iran. Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, Israel has carried out, without taking credit until April 2018, over one hundred airstrikes against the Hezbollah and Iranian strategic capabilities in Syria. In the wake of these clashes, it appears that Moscow has been persuaded that Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria must be distanced from the border with Israel—in exchange apparently for Israeli acquiescence for the return of Bashar al-Assad’s regime forces to these areas. Putin has also called for a removal of all foreign troops from Syria once the Assad regime is in full control of the country.¹

Amidst this tension, the role of the conflict’s third major power—Russia—has come up. Having communications with both sides, Russia has the potential to act as a mediator. To assess the role that Russia may play in the standoff, it is important to understand Moscow’s interests in the region and relationships with both sides. While the Russia-Iran partnership has been covered at great depth, Moscow’s relationship with Israel demands more attention. How have these relations fared three years into Russia’s entrance in the Syrian Civil War?

Despite their opposing roles in the conflict, Russia and Israel enjoy what one expert calls a “somewhat underrated special relationship.”² This relationship steadily has improved since its formal restoration in 1991 (it was cut off after the Six Day War in 1967). While it is based primarily on shared economic and political ties, shared strategic interests have grown in recent years. Since Russia’s 2015 intervention in Syria, each side sees the other as a major player in the region, with the capacity to affect the other’s national security interests. Therefore, both see close strategic engagement as a must.

This report will begin with an assessment of Russia

and Israel’s main interests, which collectively define the contours of the relationship. It then will proceed to analyze the relationship’s soft components—social, cultural, and historical ties—and concrete components—political, economic, and military ties. Last, the paper will look at the three main policy areas where the two countries disagree, but where they also see the bulk of their strategic dialogue: Iran, Syria, and Palestine.

INTERESTS

The ties between Russia and Israel have evolved as both states developed their individual post-Cold War strategic views and policies. They are a function of interests and, only to a lesser extent, of values and history. The interests of the two states are only rarely identical, but often are in sync. Even in cases where they are opposed, both sides recognize the importance of the other and make significant efforts to deconflict.

Russia

To understand Russia’s interests toward Israel, it is necessary to first grasp Moscow’s broader foreign policy objectives, both regional and global. Russia is a revisionist power: it seeks to redress what it regards as an unfair distribution of power in the U.S.-led world order.³ According to Russia expert Dmitri Trenin, Putin’s main foreign policy objective in recent years has been to return Russia to the “top level of global politics.”⁴ The crisis in Syria and the United States’ unwillingness to intervene meaningfully have provided Russia with an opportunity to advance this objective.

By injecting itself into an international crisis, Russia heralded its return to the global stage. It prevented what Moscow perceives as a U.S. attempt to build influence on its borders through “color revolutions.” A key component of this purported American strategy is Russia’s exclusion from the Middle East. Thus, by successfully countering U.S. objectives in the region, Russia proved itself a major geopolitical player and compelled the United States to recognize it as such.⁵

Russia has further exploited what is widely viewed as

³ Robert Kagan, “Backing into World War III,” *Foreign Policy*, February 6, 2017.

⁴ Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), pp. 135, 52. Some Russian analysts see the Russian return to the Middle East in a broader geopolitical context. They explain that Russia is disappointed with the West, perceives that the West has turned its back on Russia, and understands that it cannot repair relations with it. Therefore, Russia has made a strategic, rather than tactical, turn to the East, including to the Middle East. (Meetings by the author with Russian officials and analysts in 2016 and 2017).

⁵ Several sources interviewed referred to the Russian sense of insult when President Barack Obama called Russia “a regional power.”



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Source: Kodi Gideon, GPO.

a period of American retrenchment from the Middle East. With great vigor, the Kremlin continues to court traditional American allies like Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Its goal is not to pry these states entirely from the United States' orbit. Rather, the Kremlin hopes to amplify cracks in the U.S.' strategic architecture and cajole countries to embrace a more balanced relationship between the two. By improving ties with these states, Moscow also shields itself from becoming too closely associated with support for Shi'is. If exaggerated without a counterweight, Moscow's support for the Muslim minority could hamper its strategy in the region. Perhaps most significantly, Russia's intervention in Syria to protect a client regime threatened by the Arab Spring contrasted sharply with the U.S.' unwillingness to do the same for its allies, most notably Egypt.⁶

Last, Russia successfully countered the destabilizing trends of sectarianism, Islamic radicalism, and terrorism. President Vladimir Putin's "mission accomplished" offers another triumph over Russia's Western adversary as Moscow asserts that the United States catalyzed these trends in its shortsighted destruction of secular (and Russian-affiliated) regimes in Iraq and Libya.⁷ Russia's intervention in Syria eliminated the threat of further regime change in the Middle East and broke the narrative of inevitable jihadi triumphs, which could have caused turmoil in Russia's borderlands.

Moscow's desire to become a major player in the Middle East comes as no surprise. The region is critical to three key sectors of the Russian economy: the petroleum, defense, and nuclear industries. In energy, the Middle East is both a major competitor, as the world's largest oil producing region, and a necessary partner in controlling prices and developing gas projects. In the defense and nuclear industries, the Middle East is a crucial market. There has been a steady rise in Russian arms sales to Middle Eastern countries since 2011, accounting for 36 percent of Russian defense deliveries in 2015.⁸ Moscow is dominant in the financing and building of reactors in Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan, and Rosatom opened a regional office in Dubai in 2016.⁹

In recent years, Russia has increased its footprint in the Middle East by not only developing ties with each major player, but also more importantly, by negotiating the divides between them. By having good relations with nearly all of the Middle East's feuding actors—a feat the United States cannot claim—Russia positions itself as the "indispensable middleman."¹⁰ Its relations

⁶ James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, Sarah Grand-Clement, *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, RAND Perspectives, 2017.

⁷ Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, *From Oil to Nuclear Energy? The Development of Civilian Nuclear Programs in the Middle East*, Memorandum No. 155, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, June 2016.

¹⁰ As Dmitry Adamsky notes, in war games conducted in the last few years by leading Israeli think tanks that simulated military conflicts with Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria, Russia emerged as a pivotal broker with a unique ability to escalate or de-escalate confrontations. Dmitry Adamsky, "Putin's Damascus Steal," *Foreign Affairs*, September 16, 2015.

⁶ Yuval Weber, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Multiple Drivers, Uncertain Outcomes," Black Sea Strategy Papers, Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 30, 2017.

⁷ Trenin, pp. 40-41, 48-49.



with Israel, for instance, offer geostrategic leverage vis-à-vis the Arab states and Iran. Russia can use its influence to restrain Israel and de-escalate a situation in the aftermath of a clash. A prime example of this maneuvering is the February 2018 incident in which Syrian air defense shot down an Israeli fighter plane as it conducted a retaliatory air raid against Iranian positions in Syria; President Putin is reported to have convinced Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to refrain from further escalation.¹¹ Because regional actors see Russia's close ties with Israel as interest-based, rather than value-based, they do not bear the same cost for Russia as they do for the U.S. Fostering a strong relationship with Israel, then, only helps Russia in its push for regional relevance.

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea and resulting standoff with the West, the Russia-Israel relationship has acquired global significance. Good relations with Israel grant Russia a degree of international legitimacy. They represent a small crack in the wall of Western resistance to the Kremlin's foreign policy. Israeli diplomats note that Russia sees Israel as a possible bridge to the West—and particularly to the United States—due to Israel's strong relations with both sides. They report that Israel has been used on occasion to pass messages discreetly between Russia and the West. At the same time, Russia's ties with Israel are seen in Moscow as a "finger in the Americans' eye." According to Israeli government analysts, Russian officials note with satisfaction that Netanyahu visits Moscow more often than he visits Washington. Furthermore, in the Obama years, Netanyahu had a better relationship with Putin than with Obama.¹²

On a regional level, Russia's relationship with Israel has higher stakes. As a strong regional power, Israel can disrupt Moscow's planned strategic architecture in the Middle East. Russia's intervention in Syria created a *de facto* frontier between Russian and Israeli forces on the Golan Heights. To protect its regional interests, Russia thus needs to neutralize the Israeli threat. Moscow has chosen to fulfill this objective not by coercion, but through close engagement.

Last, Israel's importance to Moscow derives partly from the Russian view that strong relations with the global Jewish community help to provide international influence and a backchannel to the U.S. political system. According to senior Israeli diplomats, the "Jewish card" is afforded significant consideration in Russian policy circles. A recent Israeli press report quotes a senior Jewish-Russian official, who has had many conversations with Putin:

¹¹ Joost Hiltermann, "Who Can Prevent a War Between Israel and Iran? Russia," *New York Times*, May 3, 2018; and Ronen Bergman, "The Middle East's Coming War," *New York Times*, February 12, 2018.

¹² Personal interview with author, February 2018.

Putin has spent decades analyzing why the Soviet Union collapsed. He is convinced that one of the mistakes of the Soviet leadership was to have made enemies of the Jews. Not only did that work against the U.S.S.R. on the global stage, but it caused Russian Jews to hate their country. And Putin believes the two million Jews who emigrated to Israel and the West when the Soviet Union collapsed were a strategic loss for Russia.¹³

Russians historically have viewed Jews as a powerful force worldwide. While this view could be a remnant of anti-Semitic tropes regarding the outsized economic and political influence of Jews, such a policy also can help protect the Russian regime from charges of anti-Semitism.¹⁴

Israel

Israel, as a small, internationally isolated state, historically has sought good relations with any willing partner. While Israel's isolation has decreased substantially over the years and the state has become a strong regional player, this default foreign policy approach remains.

In this context, Israel's relationship with Russia is even more significant than with most other states. For most of Israel's first forty years of existence, the Soviet Union was the main patron of its enemies. The USSR also posed a national security threat in its own right: the two countries clashed militarily in 1970 during the Soviet Union's "Operation Kavkaz" to support Egypt in the War of Attrition. Thus, the bilateral progress that has been made since the restoration of diplomatic relations in 1991—and particularly since Vladimir Putin assumed office in 2000—represents a significant improvement in Israel's national security environment.

On a broader scale, Israel's foreign policy aims to achieve

¹³ Anshel Pfeffer, "Analysis: Is Vladimir Putin an Anti-Semite or Philo-Semite? Depends on His Agenda," *Haaretz*, March 12, 2018.

¹⁴ Anna Borshchevskaya notes that in this, as in other things, Putin is driven by pragmatism rather than emotion: "If you treat the Jews well, from his perspective, that plays well in the West." As she notes, if you think like a KGB officer who observed the passage of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, it was the power of Western Jewish elites that drove Western decision-making. On the other hand, she notes that Putin is whipping up nationalism and ethnic hatred in his campaign against the Ukraine and strengthening the Orthodox Church as a key component of constructing Russia's conservative nationalist identity. The anti-cosmopolitanism and anti-Westernism being fostered by the regime could, in her view, turn ultimately against the Jews.



Russian President Vladimir Putin lights a menorah. Source: Kremlin.ru

maximum diversity in diplomatic relationships.¹⁵ This strategy derives partly from growing Western—and particularly European—criticism of Israel. Due to this criticism, Israel feels that its international legitimacy is diminishing. The dissonance between the Israeli and American administrations under Barack Obama's presidency also helped prompt Israel's diversification efforts. To a certain extent, Israel hoped to show the U.S. that it had other options. While it has remained clear that Israel's strategic relationship with the U.S. is irreplaceable, Israeli policymakers have realized that their foreign policy—particularly foreign economic policy—is too Western-centric.

In addition, diversification advances a key goal of Prime Minister Netanyahu: positioning Israel as a major international power, possessing unique technological capabilities, and enjoying robust partnerships with the world's existing and rising powers. Israel's leadership sees its future in developing new strategic relationships—based on mutual economic interests and technological partnership—outside the Western milieu. Accordingly, over the past decade, Israel has focused significantly on improving relations with India, Brazil, China, and Russia.

With Russia in particular, Israel hopes that Moscow can restrain its regional clients when their actions threaten its interests. Just as Moscow uses Israel as a bridge

to communicate discreetly with the West, Israel sees Russia as an instrument to send backchannel messages to unfriendly neighbors. This hope, however, has remained mostly unfulfilled, at least until very recently. Russia rarely responds to Israeli requests to rein in Iran or Syria—although Russia does appear tolerant toward Israeli retaliation against these actors.

Last, the presence of a large Jewish community in Russia is of particular interest to Israel. A key tenet of Israeli foreign policy is the protection of Jews worldwide. The Jewish community in Russia is currently flourishing and experiences tolerance from the regime. However, Israeli observers note that this attitude could change. Russia remains one of the major sources of immigration to Israel: today, about a third of immigrants to Israel each year—roughly 7,000 to 8,000 people—come from Russia. It is thus important for Israel to maintain positive relations with Russia to best influence the experience of Russia's Jewish citizens.

VALUES: “SOFT” COMPONENTS IN THE RELATIONSHIP

There is disagreement among analysts about what role historical, cultural, and social ties play in the Russia-Israel relationship. While some Israeli diplomats, officials, and analysts disregard them entirely, arguing that the relationship is entirely interest-based, most afford them some degree of significance. Zeev Khanin, chief scientist at Israel's Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, notes that “as a phenomenon and symbol, Russia has a very important place in Israeli social consciousness. . . . Russian cultural elements, world views and ways of life became in many ways what is often called the ‘Israeli

¹⁵ See, Eran Lerman, “Israel’s Remarkable Diplomatic Achievements in 2017,” Jerusalem Institute of Strategic Studies, January 1, 2018. <http://jiss.org.il/en/lerman-israels-remarkable-diplomatic-achievements-in-2017/>.



Zionist ethos.”¹⁶

The most significant socio-cultural element in the relationship is Israel’s large Russian-speaking population. About one million individuals—roughly 12 percent of Israel’s total population and 16 percent of its electorate—speak Russian as a first language.¹⁷ After Hebrew and Arabic, Russian is the third most widely spoken first language in Israel. Israel also has the world’s third-largest Russian-speaking minority population outside the former Soviet Union. As a proportion of the total population, it is the largest.¹⁸ Many Israelis of Russian origin are still engaged with developments in Russia, have enduring family ties there, and consume Russian-language media, including re-broadcasts from Moscow.¹⁹

The Russian government views this large community as part of the Russian diaspora. These “compatriots abroad”—defined variably by language and ethnicity—are both a significant interest to Moscow and an important foreign policy instrument.²⁰ President Putin spoke of Israel’s special status to Russia during a 2016 meeting the Israeli president in Moscow:

Russia and Israel have developed a special relationship primarily because one and a half million [sic] Israeli citizens come from the former Soviet Union, they speak the Russian language, are the bearers of Russian culture, Russian mentality. They maintain relations with their relatives and friends in Russia, and this makes interstate relations very special.²¹

Russia expert Cliff Kupchan argues that Putin feels an ethnic bond with Russians living abroad and a responsibility to protect them. This feeling is especially strong for Russians in Israel by virtue of their large

¹⁶ Vladimir (Zeev) Khanin, “The Social Aspect of Israeli-Russian Relations: A View from Jerusalem” in Zvi Magen and Vitaly Naumkin, eds., *Russia and Israel in the Changing Middle East: Conference Proceedings*, INSS Memorandum no. 129, July 2013, p. 66.

¹⁷ Many of these individuals, while Russian speakers, are from other countries of the former Soviet Union.

¹⁸ Robert Coalson, “Putin Pledges to Protect All Ethnic Russians Anywhere. So, Where Are They?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 10, 2014.

¹⁹ A significant proportion of Russian-born Israelis (estimated at over one hundred thousand) vote in Russian elections, at polling stations set up by the Russian government for this purpose.

²⁰ It is important to distinguish between the diaspora in the Near Abroad, which Russia on occasion seeks to weaponize in service of Russian irredentism, and Russia’s more complex relationship to what Mikhail Suslov terms “global Russians,” who left Russia by choice. Mikhail Suslov, “‘Russian World’: Russia’s Policy Towards its Diaspora,” *Russia.Nei.Visions*, no. 103, Ifri, July 2017.

²¹ “Putin Says He Plans to Meet Israeli Prime Minister Soon,” *TASS*, March 16, 2016.



Bilingual signs in Haifa, Israel. Source: Wikimedia Commons

numbers.²² At the same time, Moscow also views Israel’s Russian-speaking community as a tool to influence Israeli politics.²³

The Russian government has gone out of its way to ingratiate itself with Israel’s Russian diaspora. In January 2018, Putin signed a presidential decree to award pensions (of token value, roughly \$17 per month) to Russian World War II veterans living in Israel. Israel, as the only country outside of the former Soviet bloc to celebrate May 9 as Victory Day, is the first external state to receive this recognition. Just a year and a half earlier, in June 2016, the Russian government also extended pensions to the 100,000 Israelis who left the Soviet Union before 1992 and therefore lost their Russian citizenship. Despite the pension’s mostly symbolic value (approximately \$200 a month), Israel’s Russian speakers—many of whom are elderly—were delighted by the news.²⁴ That Russia provided these pensions to Israelis, even though it lacks the funds to pay its own elderly pensioners, highlights the utilitarian value Moscow places in currying favor with the diaspora.

That said, the diaspora plays a less significant role in policy than would be expected. Former Israeli Ambassador to Russia Zvi Magen notes that when Moscow first restored diplomatic relations at the height of post-Soviet emigration to Israel, it thought

²² Personal interview with author, April 2018.

²³ An interesting question is to what extent Russia manipulates or weaponizes its diaspora in Israel for political influence or subversion, as it has done in other states. It certainly does not do so openly, and the issue is not discussed in the Israeli discourse, even by the losing side in recent elections. This may also be a function of the distance of Israel from Russia’s borders, the lack of a significant Russian agenda regarding Israeli politics, extreme Israeli patriotism of much of the Russian-speaking public, as well as the extreme sensitivity by the authorities and media towards being seen as stigmatizing a large portion of the Jewish population. The security services do of course monitor Russian intelligence activity in Israel.

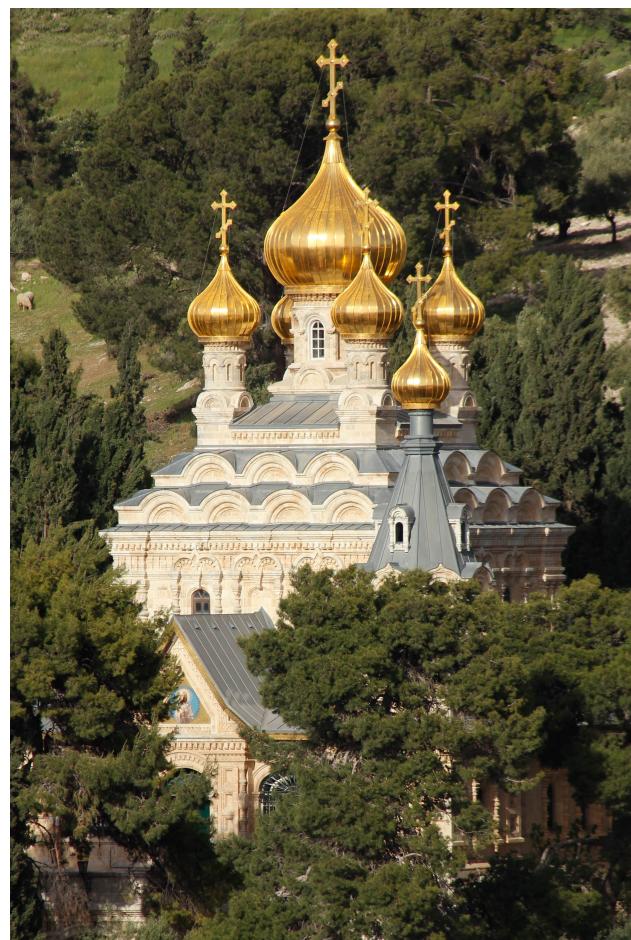
²⁴ “Russia to Pay to \$83M to Israeli Pensioners in 2017,” *Moscow Times*, June 8, 2016.

the diaspora would be quite important as a pro-Russian interest group. Yet, while linguistic, cultural, and historical connections certainly exist, they have not translated into pro-Russia political heft. Moscow has since learned that while this population is not hostile to Russia, it is not a significant tool either. As a senior Israeli diplomat notes, “Moscow affords importance, but not centrality, to the issue of the Russian diaspora.”²⁵

One interesting perspective holds that the sizable Russian diaspora in Israel, as well as the large number of Russians who visit the country, has enhanced acceptance of Israeli narratives within Russia, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the threat of radical Islam. Abetted by Russia’s own experience with Islamic terrorism, pro-Israeli attitudes in Russia have risen over the past decades.²⁶

A second area of socio-cultural importance is Russia’s historical connection to the Holy Land. Of course, during Soviet times, Moscow ignored the state’s religious history. Today, however, Moscow stresses Russia’s long-standing interests in the Holy Land—and particularly in Jerusalem—as a means of creating continuity from tsarist rule. As official Russian nationalism has become increasingly conservative over the course of Putin’s third term, Russian Orthodox connections to the birthplace of Christianity have gained considerable significance. One example is the St. Sergius convent house in the Russian Compound in Jerusalem. The house, which originally belonged to the tsar’s family, was returned by the Israeli government to Russian sovereignty in 2008.

An interesting question, and one that divides analysts, is to what extent personality influences the current bilateral relationship.²⁷ Presently strong relations between Russia and Israel are often attributed to Putin. The Russian president is said to like Jews after having positive relationships with Jewish authority



Church of Mary Magdalene in Jerusalem, the burial site of Grand Duchess Maria Feodorovna Romanova. Source: Muataz Egbarin, Wikimedia Commons.

figures (adult neighbors and teachers) in his youth.²⁸ Some Russian analysts claim that while Putin admires Israel for its perseverance in the face of adversity, many in the Russian foreign policy establishment and security services are inclined to favor Israel’s Arab neighbors and Iran.²⁹ Maxim Suchkov of the Russian International Affairs Council, a state think tank, says “the current friendly relations between Russia and Israel are a deviation from the norm.”³⁰ If the current good relationship with Israel is solely based on Putin’s whims, then the strong bilateral relationship may not survive past Putin’s reign.

Observers also point to the personal chemistry between

²⁵ Zeev Khanin in 2013 examined the attitude of Israel’s Russian-speaking population towards Israel’s relations with Russia. Only four percent of his sample agreed with the statement that “it is better for Israel to abandon the unilateral orientation toward the United States and to begin to seek other strategic partners, including Russia.” He found that between one-quarter to one-third of Russian-speaking Israelis believe that “the interests of Russia will always be mainly with the Arab world, and therefore Russia will never be a loyal friend of Israel.” However, the most commonly held opinion among close to half his respondents is that “it is preferable for Israel to strengthen and expand its relations with the Russian Federation, although not at the expense of existing relations with the United States.” Khanin, “The Social Aspect of Israeli-Russian Relations: A View from Jerusalem,” p. 75.

²⁶ Tatyana Nosenko, “Special Attitudes in Russia to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” in Zvi Magen and Tatyana Karasova, eds., *Russian and Israeli Outlooks on Current Developments in the Middle East*, INSS Memorandum no. 147, June 2015, p. 54.

²⁷ See, Ruth Eglash, “Israel and Russia: BFFs? Netanyahu’s Building ‘Bromance’ with Putin,” *Washington Post*, June 8, 2016.

²⁸ An amusing and perhaps illuminating episode: in December 2017, Putin’s former high school German teacher, Mina Berliner, died in Israel at the age of 96. Berliner had reached out to her former pupil during his visit in 2005, and he supported her financially thereafter, including ordering the purchase of an apartment for her in Tel Aviv. Upon her death, the Russian Embassy in Tel Aviv arranged the funeral. She willed her apartment to the Russian embassy. “Putin Inherits High School Teacher’s Apartment in Central Tel Aviv,” *JTA*, Feb 7, 2018.

²⁹ Personal meetings with author, 2016 and 2017.

³⁰ Yaroslav Trofimov, “Israel Caught in U.S.-Russia Rift Over Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2018.



PM Netanyahu and President Putin participate in the Immortal Regiment Parade on May 9, 2018. Source: Kremlin.ru

Putin and Netanyahu. The two have met seven times since September 2015 and speak often ("dozens of times," according to senior Israeli diplomats) on the phone. They are each one of the other's most frequent foreign interlocutors. One former Israeli diplomat in Moscow claims that "Putin has a soft spot for Jews and for the State of Israel. . . . He appreciates strength and directness, and therefore likes Netanyahu."³¹ He describes the current period as "a congruence of interests and a congruence of leaders." Kupchan agrees, saying "both Netanyahu and Putin like 'real men,' and therefore there is an affinity between them." Kupchan notes, however, that the importance of the personal relationship should not be overestimated. Putin has had positive relations with previous Israeli prime ministers; if Russian interests prescribe, then this trend likely will continue with future leaders.³² Other experts are even more skeptical. They don't believe in the "chemistry" between Putin and Netanyahu or in Putin's affinity for Jews.³³ That said, analysts do note that Putin shows little

³¹ This reflects another social aspect of the bilateral relationship: the Russian appreciation for what former Israeli diplomats call Israelis' frankness, determination and willingness to "look them in the eye." Trenin (pp. 89-90) notes that "for the military and security services, Israel has become a model of efficiency, determination, national solidarity, social cohesion, and a willingness to persevere and move forward against all odds. . . . Russian and Israeli politicians and generals share a no-nonsense, hard-nosed Realpolitick-based view of the world."

³² Personal interview with author, April 2018.

³³ Journalist Anshel Pfeffer for instance, stated in an email exchange with the author that he is unsure "how much 'chemistry' between Netanyahu and Putin is critical. They have an effective connection and they talk a lot, but as far as I know, this was also true between Putin and other Israeli leaders (Olmert, Sharon, Barak, Peres)". Magen said similar points in an interview with him.

sign of anti-Semitism, despite his recent statements that Jews may have hacked the U.S. elections.³⁴

One last socio-cultural element of the relationship worth noting is the domestic weight of several Russian-speaking Israeli politicians. Russian-speakers are an important electoral group in Israeli politics—particularly when it comes to Netanyahu's conservative agenda, as they dependably lean right. There are two figures worth mentioning. The first is Avigdor Lieberman, current Minister of Defense and head of the Betenu Party, which derives support primarily from immigrants from the former Soviet Union. During his tenures as Foreign Minister—2009-2012 and 2013-2015—Lieberman made a strategic partnership between Israel and Russia one of his highest priorities.³⁵

The second individual is Ze'ev Elkin from Netanyahu's Likud Party. Despite his mundane official positions as Minister for the Environment and Minister for Jerusalem Affairs, he is a key player in Israeli politics. Elkin serves as Netanyahu's personal translator and attends all "tête-à-tête" meetings with Putin. In May 2014, at Netanyahu's appointment, Elkin became Chairman of the Combined (Interministerial) Committee, which coordinates the efforts of all ministries regarding Russia.

BILATERAL RELATIONS

Bilateral relations between the two countries are quite warm, and encompass a range of issues. According to a senior Israeli diplomat, bilateral relations are the best they have been since 1991, and perhaps ever. Below will be an examination of the main areas of bilateral cooperation and engagement.

Political

After the Soviet Union restored diplomatic relations in October 1991, Israel scarcely had a positive agenda for the relationship. Israel primarily aimed to facilitate Jewish emigration and ensure that Russia did not play a negative role in the Middle East. Russia, on the other

³⁴ Pfeffer, "Is Vladimir Putin an Anti-Semitic?" At the same time, a degree of anti-Semitism exists in Putin's regime. For instance, Russian propaganda channel RT routinely hosts Holocaust deniers, and senior members of Putin's United Russia party periodically make anti-Semitic comments. Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharchova said in November 2016, "If you want to know what will happen in America, who do you have to talk to? You have to talk to the Jews, naturally." <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-government-spokeswoman-trump-won-thanks-to-jews/28124518.html>.

³⁵ Khanin, "The Social Aspect of..." p. 67. Three days after the rigged Duma election in late 2011, Lieberman was the first foreign politician to congratulate Putin on his party's victory. "Vladimir Putin and the Holy Land," *The Economist*, March 16, 2013.



President Putin meeting Soviet war veterans in Israel in 2005. Source: Wikimedia Commons

hand, strove to become part of the West and saw Israel as a channel to do so. Over time, the relationship has deepened and expanded. As neither country premises the relationship on ideology, ties to Russia are not a partisan issue in Israel.

In the view of a senior Israeli diplomat, Russia's intervention in Syria actually has improved the relationship. Officials witness the closeness between Putin and Netanyahu and emulate it at lower levels. Almost every ministry has a relationship with its Russian counterpart, with frequent ministerial visits in both Jerusalem and Moscow. The Israel National Security Staff regularly engages with its Russian partners to discuss strategic issues.

Russia's wars in Chechnya and the ensuing fight against Islamic terrorism are seen, and presented publicly by both governments, as a crucial factor in its close relationship with Israel. Perhaps due to parallels between Russia's conflict in Chechnya and its own struggles with the Palestinians, Israel refrained from criticizing Russia's scorched-earth operations. The parallel also resonated strongly in Russia and helped build sympathy for Israel's struggle. Ultimately, both populations felt that they were confronted with a similar enemy.³⁶ As Prime Minister Netanyahu described in his March 2017 visit to Moscow:

One of the things that unites us is our common fight against radical Islamic

terrorism. Substantial progress has been made over the last year in fighting radical Sunni Islamic terrorism led by ISIS and Al-Qaeda, and Russia has made a great contribution to this result and this progress. Of course, we do not want to see Shia Islamic terrorism led by Iran step in to replace Sunni Islamic terrorism.³⁷

From the Russian perspective, there have been two recent high points in the bilateral political relationship. First, Israel abstained during the March 2014 UN General Assembly vote to condemn the Russian invasion of Crimea and affirm Ukraine's territorial integrity. Then, Israel decided not to join U.S. and European economic sanctions against Russia. As Israeli journalist Anshel Pfeffer notes, Israel rarely criticizes the Putin regime in public.³⁸ Defense Minister Lieberman recently commented on these actions after an Israeli attack on Iranian targets in Syria caused observers to question the state of relations with Russia. Lieberman opined:

In the past decades, we have created special relations with Russia, while are very efficient and transparent. . . . We appreciate our relations with Russia very much. Even when our close partners pressured us, as in the case of sanctions against Russia, we did not

³⁶ Mark N. Katz, "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy," *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2005. Anna Borshchevskaya notes that it is important to remember that in reality, the terrorist threat Israel faces is very different from Russia's and that Moscow often makes instrumental use of the terrorist threat to stress its shared interests with Western powers.

³⁷ "PM Netanyahu Meets with Russian President Putin," Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 9, 2017, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2017/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-meets-with-Russian-President-Putin-9-March-2017.aspx>.

³⁸ Personal communication to author, April 9, 2018.

join them. . . . A lot of countries have recently expelled Russian diplomats: Israel did not join this action. . . . We take Russia's interest into account and we hope that Russia will take into account our interests here in the Middle East. We expect Russia's understanding and support when it comes to our vital interests.³⁹

Russia has scratched Israel's back, too. In 2014, Moscow not only declined to criticize Israel's military operation in Gaza, but Putin even expressed understanding for Israel's actions.⁴⁰ Moscow also recognized West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in April 2017, albeit while stating that Palestine's future capital will be in East Jerusalem and that it had no intention of moving its embassy out of Tel Aviv.⁴¹ A key factor in this positive political relationship is Israel's fairly low expectations of Russian support in international forums. Israel understands that for the foreseeable future, Russia will not come to its aid in the UN Security Council against the position of the Arab states.

Economic

Economic relations between Israel and Russia are positive, though neither side is a major trade partner of the other. Russia accounts for approximately two percent of Israeli trade, and Israel for half a percent of Russia's. Despite the relatively small scale of this economic relationship, Israel is important for Russia's political economy due to its rejection of Western sanctions. Of its closest allies, Israel is unique in having imposed zero limitations on bilateral economic relations, nor any personal sanctions on Russian citizens.⁴² As Russia grows increasingly economically isolated from the West, Israel has been negotiating a Free Trade Zone with the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union. However, given the current international climate, the viability of such an arrangement is questionable.

The total value of yearly mutual trade amounts to roughly three billion dollars. Israel exports predominantly agricultural products (35 percent of the total), agricultural machinery, and smaller technologies. It imports raw diamonds (finished diamonds are Israel's

³⁹ Interview to Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, quoted in "We Did Not Join Sanctions, Help Us in the Middle East," *Israel Hayom*, May 4, 2018.

⁴⁰ "President Putin: I Support Israel," *COLlive*, July 9, 2014; and Karina Piser, "Pragmatism Guides Israel-Russia Ties, but Netanyahu Should be Wary," *World Politics Review*, November 17, 2016.

⁴¹ Anna Borshchevskaya, "Putin's Self-Serving Israel Agenda," *Foreign Affairs*, April 13, 2017.

⁴² There are, however, many Israeli companies, especially in the financial sector, who are deterred by the possibility of running awry of sanctions, especially U.S. sanctions, and therefore have reduced their activity in Russia since 2014.

largest export) and oil. In the past two years, Russia has become Israel's number one source of crude oil.⁴³

Trade between Russia and Israel almost tripled from 2000 to 2015, when momentum faltered and mutual trade volume fell by almost a third. The Russian economic crisis and decline in the ruble spurred this drop, decreasing Russian imports from Israel. Trade has since rebounded, growing 25 percent (\$380 million) year-over-year in the first half of 2017—back to pre-crisis levels.⁴⁴ Since 2012, Israel has developed a trade deficit with Russia. In 2017, the deficit was reported at \$250 million, an increase of over 300 percent from 2016.⁴⁵ Israel's increase in oil imports from Russia, coupled with a decline in Israeli exports, explains this phenomenon: the value of oil products imported from Russia rose from \$270 million in 2012 to slightly over \$1 billion in 2017.

In recent years, Russia has become an important market for Israeli agriculture. Farming exports to European countries—particularly of crops grown in the West Bank and the Jordan Valley—have declined due to anti-settlement activism and legislation. Simultaneously, Russia sizably decreased agricultural imports from Western Europe and the U.S. in response to sanctions. The rapid decline in the ruble in 2014, then, caused great losses to Israeli vegetable farmers, who were exporting over 70 percent of their products to Russia.⁴⁶

Russian experts such as Sergey Oulin and Andrey V. Fedorchenko attribute the low level of bilateral economic cooperation largely to what they term "cultural" differences. Chief among these are Israeli notions about the difficulties of doing business and the low levels of technological development in Russia.⁴⁷ While the Russians would like to increase research and development cooperation with Israel, they claim that the lack R&D progress and continued dependence on raw material trade stems from Israeli security concerns.⁴⁸

⁴³ Personal interview by author with senior Israeli official, February 2017.

⁴⁴ Ran Dagoni, "Israel's Trade with Russia Booming," *Globes*, October 1, 2017.

⁴⁵ <http://www.worldstopexports.com/israels-top-trading-partners/>.

⁴⁶ David Rafaeli, "In the Wake of the Crisis in Russia: Israel's Agricultural Exports are on the Brink of Collapse," *Calcalist*, December 16, 2014 [in Hebrew].

⁴⁷ Sergey Oulin, "The Role of Business in Russian-Israeli Economic and Trade Relations," in Zvi Magen and Tatyana Karasova, eds. *Russian and Israeli Outlooks on Current Developments in the Middle East*, INSS Memorandum no. 147, June 2015, p. 64.

⁴⁸ Andrey V. Fedorchenko, "Hindrances to Russian Hi-tech Export to Israel and Ways to Overcome Them," in Zvi Magen and Tatyana Karasova, eds. *Russian and Israeli Outlooks on Current Developments in the Middle East*, INSS Memorandum no. 147, June 2015, pp. 68-70.

An extremely important aspect of the economic relationship is tourism. After the United States, Russia is the second largest source of tourists to Israel. Approximately 400,000 Russians visit Israel annually, with eight or nine direct flights daily. Before the 2014 economic crisis, this number even reached 600,000. Several factors contribute to high Russian tourist rates: the cancellation of visa requirements for Russians in 2008, the sizable community of Russian Orthodox religious tourists, and the decline in tourism to Turkey and Egypt due to political clashes and security concerns. Russian tourists report that they feel at home in Israel due to the ubiquity of Russian language and culture.

An area of potential economic cooperation—but also a possible source of tension—is gas production in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia is making significant strides to enter the energy market in the Middle East.⁴⁹ Russian oil giant Rosneft is a significant stakeholder in Egypt's Zohr gas field, a competitor of Israel's Leviathan and Tamar fields. Israel recently signed a major gas agreement with Egypt to resuscitate Egypt's moribund liquid natural gas plants. It remains to be seen whether this action will affect Russian attempts to enter the Eastern Mediterranean gas market (in the past, Russia expressed interest in developing Israel's gas sector, but was rebuffed), or whether Eastern Mediterranean—including Israeli—gas threatens to displace Russian gas in Europe.

Military

Of all areas, the military aspect of the bilateral relationship is the least developed. The most significant military cooperation between the two countries is a coordination and de-escalation apparatus created in 2015 after the Russian intervention in Syria. The prospect of clashes between the two air forces functioning in limited airspace compelled Israel to increase coordination efforts. Russian sources report that the apparatus consists of an operational hotline between the Russian air force command at Khmeimim in Syria and the Israel Air Force operations center in Tel Aviv. The hotline is used to exchange urgent information and to schedule military-to-military meetings between senior officers. There is also direct communication between the Russian and Israeli deputy chiefs of staff and regular communication at multiple levels of the respective military establishments.⁵⁰ The apparatus, however, does not seem to encompass any military cooperation beyond ensuring a separation of forces and determining operational “rules of the game.” According to former Israeli diplomats, Russian officials give this coordination mechanism great weight. They



Russian assembled IAI Searcher II UAV. Source: Defenseblog.com

aggrandize the ties as “military cooperation,” likely as a response to NATO’s ban on military-to-military ties (though Israel is not a NATO member, it is defined by the U.S. as a Major Non-NATO Ally). Israel for its part is extremely discreet about the ties. The United States is reportedly aware of the apparatus and approves of its purpose.

There are no joint exercises between the two militaries and no military training. The minimal military visits encompass non-sensitive services and occasional Israeli cooperation in multi-participant military exhibitions or competitions.

In the military-industrial field, defense trade is currently insignificant in both volume and quality. In 2009, there were two deals for the Russian purchase of Israeli UAVs from the Israel Aerospace Industries, totaling \$100 million. This purchase was followed by a second, \$400 million deal, in which UAVs of several different types⁵¹ were assembled in Russia from 2010-2012.⁵² Allegedly, the Russian military was impressed by the Israeli-made UAVs that Georgia operated in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. By purchasing similar drones, Russia hoped to close the technological gap revealed in the conflict. Other reports cited the deal as a quid pro quo for Russian forbearance on advanced arms sales to Iran and Syria.⁵³ In 2014-15, the two parties negotiated another deal, but it fell through, allegedly due to American sensitivities about the use of the drones in

⁴⁹ See, Nicholas Trickett, “Why Putin’s Oil Maneuvers Will Keep Russia in the Middle East,” *The Monkey Cage, Washington Post*, April 5, 2018.

⁵⁰ “The Russian army will continue to buy Israeli-developed drones,” *Vedomosti*, September 3, 2015.

⁵³ Yaakov Katz and Amir Bohbot, “How Israel Sold Russia Drones to Stop Missiles From Reaching Iran,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 3, 2017.

⁵¹ Israel, Hezbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Crisis Croup Middle East Report no. 182, February 8, 2018, p. 7.



President Putin with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

Source: Kremlin.ru

Ukraine.⁵⁴ Cooperation on drone technology has since ceased, and there have been no significant military sales. The very limited amount of military exports from Israel to Russia (several tens of millions of dollars per year) comprises of non-lethal, low-tech items.

CONTENTIOUS ISSUES BETWEEN ISRAEL AND RUSSIA

As noted in the previous section, the bilateral relationship between Israel and Russia is positive. However, there are several key strategic issues on which the two parties disagree. The most significant of these concern Iran, Syria, and Palestine. Israel largely “fences off” these issues to protect the bilateral relationship. It seems to recognize that as the smaller partner, it has more to lose from a downturn in relations. Yet, while these issues paradoxically deepen the relationship by necessitating frequent coordination and, if necessary, de-confliction, they are also among the main obstacles to further progress.

Iran

Russia has a complex relationship with Iran. It is the Islamic state’s most significant “protector,” and the two cooperate on many issues of shared interest. Yet, they are not allies. Iran is an anti-Western force, a fact which coincides with and promotes Russian interests. The Iranian-led anti-American camp in the Middle East strengthens Russia’s influence in the region through the classic “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” mentality. While analysts have predicted a Russia-Iran split for years, the reality is that they have proven adept at setting aside differences in favor of common goals.

On the other hand, in Russia’s borderlands along the Middle East, Iran is a rival that could threaten Moscow’s

protective structure of pro-Russian states. Moreover, to the extent that Iran and its clients perpetuate instability in the Middle East—a situation that Russia could tolerate when it was only marginally involved in the region—the relationship has become less productive. Russia has started to build a new regional strategic architecture, which attempts to encompass traditional American allies. These new partners all view Iran with dread.

Relations between Russia and Iran—especially in military and nuclear spheres—have been a key subject of diplomatic discourse between Jerusalem and Moscow for many years. Russia does not see positive relations with both Israel and Iran as antithetical. Rather, its regional strategy is premised on concurrently fostering beneficial ties with the two strongest powers in the region.

As a member of the UN Security Council and the P5+1—the group that negotiated the Iran nuclear deal—Russia became a target of Israeli attempts at persuasion in the lead up to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action’s (JCPOA) announcement. In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, Israel, while understanding that Russia remains committed to the Agreement, places importance on making its concerns known to Moscow.⁵⁵ The Israelis often approach their Russian counterparts about what they saw as Russia’s destabilizing arms sales to Iran and Syria. Israel expressed particular concern about the possibility of Russian arms reaching Hezbollah. Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, and especially since Russia’s intervention in 2015, Israel has attempted to use Russia to pass warnings to Iran. It takes pains to show Russia how much the Iranian (and Hezbollah) presence in Syria contradicts Moscow’s long-term interests. These attempts account for the bulk of high-level contacts between Jerusalem and Moscow.

Yet, Russia rarely has been willing to act as a middleman between Israel and Iran. Israeli analysts note that Russia approaches Israel’s requests in a pragmatic manner: if they serve Russian interests, the Russians accept.⁵⁶ One former Israeli diplomat explains that Russians “don’t understand why we are so frightened of the Iranians.” Instead, they see Israel’s appeals as weakness and a lack of understanding of the strategic balance between the two countries.⁵⁷ Russia always has been skeptical about Israel’s alarmism towards

⁵⁴ There is obviously a possibility that the Russians have already gathered sufficient knowledge to continue the production process autonomously. Juliusz Sabak, “Israeli Drones Will No Longer be Manufactured in Russia: USA-Imposed Embargo,” *Defence24.com*, April 21, 2016.

⁵⁵ “Putin’s Stock Rises as ‘Go-to’ Mediator Between Israel, Iran,” *Al-Monitor*, May 14, 2018.

⁵⁶ Personal meeting with author, February 2018.

⁵⁷ Personal meeting with author, February 2018.



Presidents Putin and Assad at Khmeimim Air Base in Syria in 2017.
Source: military.ru

Iran's nuclear program,⁵⁸ and several Israeli diplomats note that Russia sometimes views requests to prevent arms transfers within the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis with amusement. Moscow argues that as such a powerful regional player, Israel is too easily distressed by simple tactical developments.⁵⁹ A Russian diplomat is quoted as querying why Russia should grant priority to Israel's concerns over Syria's: "Sometimes Israel thinks that all it has to do is make demands and everyone else will comply: It doesn't work like that."⁶⁰ Of course, Moscow has no interest in exposing the extent of its ability to control the movement of its arms between clients in Iran and Syria and militant groups like Hezbollah. Such evidence would only result in increased international criticism and pressure.

Syria

While Iran is Israel's main strategic concern and the top issue on Jerusalem's agenda with Moscow, Israel's unease recently has most been expressed in the context of the Syrian Civil War.

Iran and Russia are cooperating in Syria to prop up the regime and destroy Sunni radicals, yet their interests are not identical—especially now that the regime appears secure. Mark Galeotti of the Institute of International Relations Prague opines that one of Russia's main drivers for intervening in Syria was to prevent the

⁵⁸ Russia doesn't fear an Iranian nuclear program as such; As Victor Mizin, Soviet and then-Russian diplomat on arms-control and non-proliferation issues wrote, while "certain people in Russia pay lip service to the politically correct notion that proliferation is dangerous," Moscow rejects the Western term "rogue states." Deployed ballistic missiles would not threaten Russian troops stationed abroad as they do American troops, and unlike in the West, Russia has no domestic lobbies to pressure the government. Richard Speier, Robert Gallucci, Robbie Sabel, and Viktor Mizin, "Iran-Russia Missile Cooperation," section "The Russian View," *Proliferation Brief*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, vol. 3, no. 22, July 25, 2000.

⁵⁹ Personal meetings with the author, 2017 and February 2018.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group, *Israel, Hezbollah and Iran...*, p. 12.

state from becoming an Iranian vassal. In his view, Moscow and Tehran are frenemies, at best—both are happy to marginalize the U.S., yet they also are fierce competitors for influence in the Middle East and South Caucasus.⁶¹ Russia is especially not interested in Iran causing tension on Syria's borders with Israel. Doing so would provoke Israeli reaction and thus endanger Moscow's relatively bloodless achievement in Syria.

As Russia's intervention in Syria created a *de facto* border between the Russian and Israeli militaries, there is a shared interest that incidents not occur between the forces operating in and around Syria. One Israeli military officer noted in interviews that ten days before the Russian intervention, Netanyahu and the Chief of IDF General Staff visited Moscow. He explained, "Israel found itself with a new neighbor which it needs to learn and understand, to coordinate with and to be able to express its concerns to."⁶² Israel understands that Russia is in Syria to stay, as evidenced by Russian base agreements for Hmeimim and Tartus. Russia will therefore continue as an important player for the foreseeable future. Russia, too, is compelled to find a way to live with their "new neighbors." Israel is the strongest neighbor that could affect Russian interests in Syria. Engagement with the Israelis is then crucial.

Israel may well see the Russian presence in Syria as a brake on Iran and Hezbollah's influence over the Assad regime. Should Russia leave, Israel might face even worse adventurism from Syrian territory. For this reason, Israeli leadership reportedly was concerned by Putin's March 2016 announcement that Russia may begin troop withdrawal.⁶³ (Notably, this plan did not materialize—indeed Russia's presence has only grown since.)

Israel's freedom to maneuver in Syrian airspace has been constrained by the presence of Russian air defense forces and detection capabilities in Syria. That said, Israel is reported⁶⁴ to have conducted numerous aerial assaults against Hezbollah and other Syria targets in the two plus years since the Russian forces arrived. It seems probable that Russian forces detected these attacks; however, they do not appear to have warned their Syrian hosts. Israel has taken the necessary steps to avoid the possibility that Russian personnel might be affected by its operations. Sergey Balmashov of the Kremlin-funded Institute of the Middle East and

⁶¹ Mark Galeotti, "Putin is Playing a Dangerous Game in Syria," *The Atlantic*, February 15, 2018.

⁶² Personal meeting with author, February 2018.

⁶³ Ruth Eglash and William Booth, "Israel Fears Russia's Pullout from Syria Will Leave Dangerous Void," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2016.

⁶⁴ See interview with outgoing IAF Commander Amir Eshel by Amos Harel, "In the Bottom Line, the Air Force Cannot be Stopped," *Haaretz Weekend Supplement*, August 25, 2017 [in Hebrew].

the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) was quoted in 2016 as saying, "As the situation since the end of September 2015 shows, Moscow and Tel Aviv interact quite productively – Israel turned a blind eye to the repeated violations of its air space by Russian combat aircraft,⁶⁵ while Russia wouldn't see the Israeli air force hit the Iranians and Hezbollah. . . . It is a kind of semi-official military technical cooperation."⁶⁶ Russia's predominant concern is simply that Israel's campaign against the Iranian presence in Syria does not harm the stability of the Assad regime.

There are, of course, major areas of disagreement between Russia and Israel regarding the situation in Syria. Chief among them is Israel's concern about Russia's operational reliance on Hezbollah and Iranian-backed Shia militias as "foot soldiers." Israel fears that the involvement of these groups will lead them to play a significant role in Syria's future. Accordingly, Israel was quite displeased by the Russian-brokered establishment of de-escalation zones in Southern Syria in July 2017, despite Russian promises to keep Iranian troops more than 30 km from the Golan Heights border.⁶⁷ Moscow boldly dismissed Israel's concerns.⁶⁸ In the newest phase of the Syrian Civil War, Israel fears the emergence of a strong and legitimized Iranian presence in Syria—either direct or through Shia proxies.

The clash between Israel, Syrian air defense forces, and Iranian targets on February 10, 2018 illustrates the balance that Moscow and Jerusalem strive to achieve in the conflict. It is doubtful that Russia—with advanced radar coverage and embedded advisors in Syrian units—was unaware of Iran's UAV deployment towards Israel or of Syria's preparation to intercept Israel's reaction. Nevertheless, Israeli officials took care not to mention Russia in its statements after the clash. Observers further note that Netanyahu's first call after the incident was to Putin rather than to Trump.⁶⁹ The Russian president reportedly convinced Netanyahu to avoid further escalation. In the aftermath of the clash, Michael Oren, deputy minister for foreign policy and former Israeli ambassador to Washington, claimed that Israel is counting on Putin to keep confrontations with Iran and Syria from spiraling into war. His reasoning: the Trump administration is simply watching from the

⁶⁵ In this context, see, Gili Cohen, "Israeli Defense Minister: Russia Also Violated Our Airspace," *Haaretz*, November 29, 2015; and "Russia Sometimes Breaches Israeli Air Space, Top Defense Official Reveals," *Times of Israel*, November 28, 2015.

⁶⁶ Daniel Schearf, "Russia-Israel Ties Grow with Kremlin's Influence in the Region," *VOA News*, June 7, 2016.

⁶⁷ Zvi Magen, Udi Dekel, and Sima Shine, "Russia in Syria: Between Iran and Israel," *INSS Insight* no. 970, September 3, 2017.

⁶⁸ Barak Ravid, "Days After Netanyahu-Putin Meeting, Russia Threatened to Veto anti-Hezbollah Move Led by Israel and U.S. at UN," *Haaretz*, September 6, 2017.

⁶⁹ Anshel Pfeffer, "Israel Struggles to Draw New Red Lines in Russia's Playground," *Haaretz*, February 10, 2018.



PM Netanyahu and President Putin at the Victory Day Parade, May 2018. Source: Kremlin.ru

sidelines. Oren explained, "America did not ante up in Syria. It's not in the game."⁷⁰

The most recent Syria-related tension between Russia and Israel pertains to the Israeli attack on Iranian targets in the T-4 airfield on April 9, 2018. Russian officials claimed that Israel made no contact with Russia either before or during the strike, despite the presence of Russian advisers at the base. They called the Israeli strike "a dangerous development."⁷¹ Israel's ambassador was summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry, and Putin and Netanyahu spoke immediately after the event. Putin asked Israel to refrain from activities that would destabilize Syria and to respect Syria's sovereignty.⁷² Soon after, the U.S. attacked Syrian chemical weapons facilities on April 13, prompting Russian officials to talk of upgrading Syrian air defense systems by transferring S-300 missiles to the Assad regime. While these missiles are already in Syria, as are S-400s, they are in Russian hands. Russia has not transferred S-300 missiles to the Syrian government for over a decade.⁷³

These events led to an unusually sharp public exchange between Russian and Israeli officials: the former warned of the "catastrophic consequences" of an Israeli attack on Syrian air defense forces, while the Israeli Defense Minister asserted that Israel will respond forcibly to the use of any missiles against Israeli aircraft.⁷⁴ The rhetoric seems to have chilled since. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Russia's ambassador to Israel have

⁷⁰ Jonathan Ferziger and David Wainer, "Israel Says it is Counting on Putin, U.S. 'Isn't in the Game,'" *Bloomberg*, February 11, 2018.

⁷¹ Oren Liebermann, "Why would Israel launch strikes on Syria?" *CNN*, April 10, 2018.

⁷² "Putin and Netanyahu Speak by Phone on Syria," *Reuters*, April 11, 2018.

⁷³ Due to payment issues and perhaps, Israeli requests.

⁷⁴ "We May Hit Russian Systems in Syria, Israel Says After Threats of 'Catastrophic Consequences,'" *Haaretz*, April 24, 2018.

both stated that there are no concrete proposals on supplying Syria with missiles currently under discussion. Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Russian National Security Council, then met separately with his Israeli and Iranian counterparts at the ninth International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues in Sochi on April 24. These meetings led to speculation that Moscow may be mediating between Iran and Israel.⁷⁵ Many believe the only real alternative to Russian mediation is force-based scenarios discussed in Washington and Jerusalem, which have the potential to unleash a large-scale regional war.⁷⁶

On May 9, Netanyahu paid a visit on short notice to Moscow to participate alongside Putin in Victory Day celebrations, which are among the most important days in Putin's contemporary Russian narrative. This visit occurred just hours after the United States announced its withdrawal from the JCPOA and immediately before Iranian forces in Syria launched a retaliatory barrage on the Golan Heights. Israel responded against Iranian forces and Syrian air defense targets forcefully. Netanyahu's visit was aimed at presenting Putin with findings from the Iranian nuclear archive recently obtained by Israeli intelligence and to discuss Iran's activity in Syria. After returning to Israel, Netanyahu stated that he has no reason to believe that Russia will restrict Israel's freedom of action.⁷⁷ An Israeli military spokesman reported that Israel had informed Russia through the bilateral coordination apparatus prior to its response strikes in Syria.⁷⁸

It appears in recent days that Israeli remonstrations about the dangers of Iranian involvement in Syria, and its calibrated escalation of military strikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria, may have achieved desired results. In mid-May, Putin said that all foreign military forces would leave Syria once the Assad regime regained full control of the country: Iranian spokesmen reacted angrily. Foreign Ministry Sergei Lavrov said on May 28 that only Syrian regime forces should be stationed on Syria's border with Israel and Jordan, implying that neither Iran nor Hezbollah should be allowed in the border areas.⁷⁹ Israeli press reports claim that these statements reflect a secret agreement reached between Moscow and Jerusalem.

⁷⁵ "Will Russia Provide the 'New Kissinger' For Iran-Israel Diplomacy?" *Russia In World Affairs*, May 3, 2018.

⁷⁶ Maxim A. Suchkov, "Russia Acting as Buffer Between Israel, Iran," *Al-Monitor* April, 29, 2018.

⁷⁷ Itamar Eichner, "Netanyahu: There is No Reason to think That Russia Will Restrict our Freedom of Action," *Ynet*, May 9, 2018 [Hebrew].

⁷⁸ "Israel Informed Russia Ahead of Strikes in Syria Following Netanyahu-Putin Meeting," *Moscow Times*, May 10, 2018.

⁷⁹ Raf Sanchez, "Israel Sees an Opportunity to Drive Iran Out of Syria as Russia Looks to Its Own Interests," *The Telegraph*, May 29, 2018; and "Russia: Only Syrian Forces Should be Stationed on Israel Border," *Al-Jazeera*, May 28, 2018.

As part of the agreement, Israel will accept the return of Assad's forces to the border with Israel on the Golan Heights. The Russians will insure that there will be no Iranian and Hezbollah presence in these areas and call for all foreign elements to leave all of Syria. Some reports claim that the agreement includes a clause on Israel's right to continue to take action against Iranian activities in Syria.⁸⁰

The Palestinian Issue

Russia's interest in the Palestinian issue dates to Soviet times when Moscow fostered close ties with Palestinian leadership and sympathy for their narrative. Russia is a member of the moribund Quartet on the Middle East and hopes to play a role—even a purely formal one—in brokering any Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated earlier this year that Moscow seeks to revive Israeli-Palestinian talks as a settlement is only possible through direct dialogue. Reportedly, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas agreed to Russia's proposal for a summit, but Netanyahu rejected the idea.⁸¹

Russia, as noted, recognized West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel eight months before Washington; but unlike Washington, it did so without overly offending Palestinian and Arab sensibilities. Russia hopes to present itself as a more acceptable alternative to the U.S. in Israeli-Palestinian mediation. Most recently, Russia cited the American declaration on Jerusalem as evidence that the U.S. can no longer be an honest broker. To its point, Russia is one of the few international players that retains good relations with both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, as well as with Israel.

That said, Moscow seems to recognize that there is no current possibility of reigniting the peace process, and it therefore does not stress the issue.⁸² Former Ambassador Zvi Magen explains that Russia is not looking for results. Rather, it wants a process to participate in to demonstrate Russia's great power status. Cliff Kupchan also notes that Putin enjoys being in the middle of international processes: "He loves being the honest broker, the go-to guy if you want something."⁸³

⁸⁰ "Israel Source: Russia to Back Israel Against Iran in Syria," *Middle East Monitor*, May 29, 2018; and Alexander Fulbright, "Israel, Russia said to Reach Secret Deal on Pushing Iran Away from Syria's Border," *Times of Israel*, May 28, 2018.

⁸¹ Adnan Abu Amer, "Russia Seeks to Extend Role In Mideast Peace Beyond Syria," *Al-Monitor*, April 17, 2018.

⁸² It is interesting to note that during the tension around the Israeli attack in Syria on April 9, the Russians released a rare and critical Russian pronunciation on Israel's "discriminatory and unacceptable" treatment of Palestinians, in what appears to be an effort to create linkage between Israel's restraint in Syria and Russia's regarding the Palestinian issue.

⁸³ Personal interview with author, April 2018.

Russia currently seems most focused on promoting reconciliation between Hamas and the Fatah ruling party, headed by Abbas. Abbas visited Russia in February to brief Putin on developments in the Palestinian cause. He reportedly is trying to convince Moscow to play a larger role in the Palestinian issue, due to his conviction that the U.S. can no longer fill a mediating role. In March, a Hamas delegation led by political bureau member Mousa Abu Marzouk arrived in Moscow to discuss the future of reconciliation and Russia's role in the region.⁸⁴ It seems that Hamas hopes Russia will pressure Abbas to approach the reconciliation process seriously and practically.⁸⁵

BOUNDARIES OF THE RELATIONSHIP AND FUTURE POTENTIALS

Overall, bilateral relations between Russia and Israel are positive, stemming from a robust area of shared interests. That said, as one senior Israeli diplomat noted, "The relationship can improve a bit more, but there is little room for an additional dramatic increase."⁸⁶ On the positive side, significant progress has been achieved in the quarter century since relations were renewed.

However, it also due to the fact that the bilateral relationship unfolds within a defined framework, the boundaries of which are well understood by both sides.

Israel's most important relationship is with the United States. While Israel may want to diversify ties, it has no interest in replacing its primary strategic partner. Russia recognizes this situation: as one former Israeli diplomat in Moscow commented, "They understand who we sleep next to every night."⁸⁷ While good relations with Russia may serve Israel's interests, they will never be permitted to develop to a level that causes significant unease in Washington. If U.S.-Russia relations continue to deteriorate, the American administration may no longer "allow" one of its closest allies to maintain a positive relationship with Moscow. It is also possible that the Israeli thirst for diversification will diminish somewhat in the Trump—or more accurately, post-Obama—era.

Russia, for its part, will continue to have more significant interests towards Israel's Arab neighbors and Iran than towards Israel. Energy considerations—Russia's most significant economic interests—dictate continued close ties to the Arab producers and Iran. Russia's two other major tools of state power—arms sales

and nuclear assistance—are also much more relevant in the Arab world. Transactions in these areas have grown significantly in recent years, including among pro-Western Arab states. Last, Moscow does not want Iran and Turkey to expand their influence into Russia or the former Soviet states. It must therefore maintain significant engagement with them as a method of containment.

It remains possible that as the threat to the Syrian regime decreases, Russia will recognize the danger of mounting instability spreading from Syria towards Israel and Jordan. This growing potential for regional conflict could lay waste to the many strategic benefits that Russia derived from its intervention there. Moscow may, in turn, more critically assess Iran's prominence in Syrian affairs.⁸⁸ Israeli government analysts argue that Iranian and Russian interests in Syria are beginning to diverge, partly because Moscow's desired regional stability requires that Israel feels confident in its national security environment.⁸⁹

As the Syrian Civil War moves to a new stage, Russia's dialogue with Israel is also evolving, from de-confliction to stabilization methods. The two parties are also discussing ways to address Israel's broader security concerns, especially concerning Iran's influence in the new Syria. Israel's increased willingness to use force against Iranian targets in Syria may be aimed partly at Moscow. "Hold me back, hold me back!" is an Israeli phrase used when one threatens violent or disproportionate behavior in order to compel others to get involved or settle a dispute. Israel's mounting hostility toward Iran may be, *inter alia*, an attempt to convince the Russians to rein in the Iranians by raising the stakes of their fence-sitting. As noted above, this tactic may well be succeeding.

It does not seem that the underlying interests that define the dynamics of the bilateral relationship will change significantly. As Magen notes, "Russia is a strong and positive player; we don't want them as our enemy." As follows, Russia-Israel relations will continue to be characterized by a dichotomy of friendly relations coupled with serious disagreements on many regional issues. 

⁸⁸ A recent statement by the Russian ambassador in Israel is interesting in this context: "Russia constantly takes into account Israel's concerns and interests vis-à-vis preserving its national security. . . . We are, of course, concerned with the state in which the bilateral relations between Israel and Iran are in, in light of mutual threats and rejection by both countries. . . . We must also be concerned with Iran's presence in Syria now. It may lead to a worsening of the situation and a conflagration in the entire Middle East." Itamar Eichner, Alexandra Lukash, and Nir Cohen, "Russian SC chief meets Israeli, Iranian counterparts," *Ynet*, April 25, 2018.

⁸⁹ Personal interviews with the author, February 2018.

⁸⁴ http://twitter.com/mosa_abumarzook/status/979819338575286275.

⁸⁵ Adnan Abu Amer, "Russia Seeks To Extend..."

⁸⁶ Personal interview with author, February 2018.

⁸⁷ Personal interview with author, February 2018.





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