

# The Maturing of Israeli-Russian Relations

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**The two countries will likely continue to cooperate, especially on the economic and military fronts, but Putin's assertive anti-Westernism could still pose problems for Israel in Syria and elsewhere.**

October 2016 will mark 25 years since Russia and Israel officially restored diplomatic relations after the Soviet Union severed them in 1967 following the Six Day War. New Israeli Ambassador to Russia Zvi Heifetz said in November 2015 that Russia and Israel plan to mark this anniversary "at the highest possible level," as reported by the Interfax news agency. For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the same month, "We are satisfied with our constructive partnership with Israel. Relations between our states have reached a high level."

Indeed, Putin pursued improved ties with Israel since he came into office in March 2000 and the two countries have significantly improved ties on a number of fronts. Russian and Israeli officials hold meetings and telephone conversations on a regular basis and maintain multiple open channels of communication. The two countries have an agreement on visa-free tourist travel for their citizens. Israel is home to over a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union, which bolsters Russia's ties to Israel. Russian is the third most popular language in Israel after Hebrew and English. Economic relations between the two countries have especially improved, exceeding \$3 billion in 2014, a figure slightly higher than Russia's trade with Egypt the same year. Military relations improved as well. Indeed, in late 2015, according to press reports, Israel sold ten search drones to Russia, despite Israel's concerns about Russia's military and political ties to Iran.

Yet complexities remain. Putin wants to be seen as a key player throughout the Middle East, and Israel matters in the region. Putin's regional policy, however, is primarily driven by zero-sum anti-Westernism to position Russia as a counterweight to the West in the region and, more broadly, to divide and weaken Western institutions. Israel, unlike Russia, is a pro-Western democracy. Moscow's growing aggression in the former Soviet Union, especially in Ukraine,

and increasing influence in the Middle East in the context of Western retreat from the region, complicates Russia-Israeli relations.

## IMPROVED RELATIONS

Upon coming into office in March 2000, Putin sought to bring Russia back as an important actor in the Middle East and worked with everyone in the region, whether traditional friend or foe. He based this policy on his definition of Russia's interests, from a purely pragmatic standpoint. This policy included improved ties with Israel following deterioration of ties in the late 1990s under Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister Yevgeniy Primakov, who was decidedly more pro-Arab. As Professor Mark Katz wrote in *Middle East Quarterly* in the winter of 2005, "Putin neither seeks to please Washington nor to accommodate any domestic political imperative. Rather, Moscow's new Middle East policy results from Putin's personal calculation of Russian interests, one that does not find many other takers in his own government."

Several factors drove Putin's policy toward Israel, particularly in his early years in office. One was the struggle with the breakaway republic of Chechnya in the North Caucasus, a struggle which began in the early 1990s, originally as a secular separatist movement that grew increasingly radical Islamist in nature in no small part due to Moscow's heavy-handed policies and egregious human rights abuses. Putin has drawn parallels between Russia's and Israel's respective struggles against terrorism. Over the years, he has made this very comparison in meetings with many top Israeli officials. Ariel Sharon, a Russian speaker who formed a close personal bond with Putin, in November 2003 called the Russian leader "a true friend of Israel," as reported by TSG IntelBrief. Israel was among the few countries that did not criticize Putin over his actions in Chechnya.

Another driver in Putin's Israel policy involved his emphasis on developing economic ties in the Middle East. He has correspondingly pursued trade with Israel, such as high-tech trade in areas including nanotechnology. Overall, Russia-Israel trade grew to \$1 billion annually by 2005 and more than tripled this amount by 2014, to approximately \$3.5 billion. This figure is slightly higher than Russian-Egyptian trade in the same year. Over one million Russian-speakers from Russia live in Israel, which matters to the Kremlin. In terms of Russia's domestic considerations, Putin also had to balance Russia's policy toward Israel given Russia's large Muslim and small Jewish population, the persistence of anti-Semitism, and the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment and concerns about terrorism.

Finally, Putin has sought a Russian role in the Middle East peace process, guided by hopes of replacing the West and of simply appearing important. Indeed, under Putin, Russia has grown increasingly assertive, seeking to make its imprint on the peace process since joining the Quartet more than a decade ago. In June 2012, Putin traveled to Israel, nine months before Barak Obama made his first visit as U.S. president. Meeting with Israeli president Shimon Peres in Jerusalem, Putin said, "It is in Russia's national interest to provide peace and tranquility in the Middle East, peace and tranquility to the Israeli people. It is not by accident that the Soviet Union was among the initiators and supported the creation of the state of Israel," according to a Kremlin transcript. Putin here conveniently left out Stalin's quick policy reversal after Israel had aligned with the West.

## REMAINING DIFFERENCES AND COMPLEXITIES

Despite improvements in the bilateral relationship, significant differences remain. In March 2006, Hamas leaders came to Moscow at Putin's invitation. Putin denied that Hamas was a terrorist organization. Other major difficulties for Israel have included Moscow's support for Iran's nuclear program and arms trade with Syria -- arms that could fall into the possession of Hezbollah. Indeed, Moscow continued to support Iran's nuclear program despite Western and Israeli concerns that this policy will aid Iran in developing a nuclear weapon.

Russia's most recent involvement in Syria following the Iran deal is likely to further complicate the situation for Israel. In 2010, following pressure from the West and Israel, Moscow froze (but did not cancel) an \$800 million

contract with Iran for a sale of the S-300 air defense system that could help shoot down American or Israeli warplanes in the event of a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. In exchange, Israel had refrained from criticizing Russia's actions in the near abroad; for instance, publically, Israel remained neutral on the Ukraine crisis and did not sell weapons to Kyiv. Yet Moscow and Iran have now revived talks of selling these weapons. In February of this year, after sanctions against Iran had been lifted, Iranian and Russian officials announced plans for an \$8 billion arms deal, which, according to the *Washington Free Beacon*, includes the sale of S-300s, as well as Sukhoi-30 jets, comparable to American F-15E fighter bombers. State Department spokesman Mark Toner said transferring the Sukhoi-30s requires UN Security Council authorization and that the U.S. will "raise the matter with Russia," as reported by AP.

Earlier, Israel expressed alarm over the P5+1 nuclear agreement reached in July of this year with Iran while Putin praised the agreement. Netanyahu had been very outspoken about it, maintaining that Israel is not bound by this deal, and Israel will always defend itself.

Putin's Syria intervention further complicates the situation for Israel. Netanyahu met with Putin in Moscow on September 21, 2015. The meeting appeared to alleviate some Israeli concerns about Russia's Syria intervention. After the meeting Netanyahu said, "In Syria, I've defined my goals. They're to protect the security of my people and my country. Russia has different goals. But they shouldn't clash."

Yet recent strikes in southern Syria could signal greater problems for Israel if Hezbollah and Iran intensify the ground campaign there. These events again highlight the need for Western powers to attend to the needs of their regional allies, lest they be driven toward Russia. At the same time, Russia's preservation of Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime strengthens Iran's influence in the region, which is problematic for Israel. From this perspective, Assad's removal would help address Israel's security concerns.

## CONCLUSION

Israel continues to see Russia as an important player in the Middle East, and ultimately neither side would want to create a serious bilateral crisis. Western retreat from the Middle East is especially problematic for Israel in this context, as it reduces Israel's options. Indeed, for Netanyahu, in the context of strained relations with President Obama it is especially important to create a better understanding with Putin, to reduce the possibility of accidental military clashes in Syria, and improve mutual understanding more broadly in order to maintain balanced ties.

Russia and Israel will likely continue to cooperate, especially on the economic and military fronts. Indeed, according to Russian and Israeli press reports in February of this year, the two countries plan on signing a free trade zone agreement. Yet ultimately, Putin cares more about politics than anything else -- sticking a finger in the eye of the West and, more broadly, weakening the West. Indeed, helping Assad increase refugee flows into Europe allows him to do just that. Putin's assertion of influence in the Middle East in general, and especially in Syria, while the West is retreating, raises questions for Israel and suggests it has to walk a fine line in an increasingly complicated and unstable region.

*Anna Borshchetskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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