

Putin's Trip to Israel Could Challenge Washington

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Brief Analysis

The Russian leader's visit is expected to provide competition for U.S. diplomatic leadership on issues such as natural gas, Iran, and Syria.

On Monday and Tuesday, President Vladimir Putin will make a "working visit" to Israel at Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's invitation so that he can attend the unveiling of a monument in Netanya marking the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany. Israelis remember that it was the Russians who liberated Auschwitz and most other death camps. In addition, more than a million Israelis originated in parts of the former Soviet Union, and Putin is said to still regard them as Russians. He is also visiting the Palestinian Authority, where he will take part in the official opening of the Russian Scientific and Cultural Center in Bethlehem. He will then go to Jordan, where he will attend the opening of a hospice for Russian Christian pilgrims at a site on the Jordan River revered as the place where Jesus was baptized.

From Moscow's perspective, such events serve to emphasize Russia's links with this part of the Middle East and further justify its diplomatic involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Putin's visit is also an opportunity for Netanyahu to explain Israel's position and develop a working relationship with the man who is likely to be Russia's leader for the foreseeable future.

Moscow also wants something more concrete from Israel: a stake in the development of newly found natural gas reserves in the Mediterranean Sea. Russia has the largest gas reserves in the world and is Europe's main supplier. Yet Israel's relatively small production levels will be boosted next year when a new field comes onstream, and again in 2017 when gas begins to flow from another field partially designated for export. Although exploration companies may need the extra capital that Russian gas giant Gazprom could provide, Israel will not want its export opportunities constrained by Moscow, which is anxious to preserve its market share. Therefore, the energy dimension of Putin's visit should not be understated: Russia's economy is heavily dependent on oil and gas exports and has been hit hard by recent price drops.

What Israel wants from Russia is equally clear: more pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear program, and continued restraint in arms deals with Tehran, particularly the provision of any missile system that could hamper an Israeli military strike. The fact that the latest nuclear talks were held in Moscow shows Russia's closeness to the Islamic Republic. And the failure of the talks underlines the urgency of the problem for Israel.

The fate of the Syrian regime is presumably near the top of the agenda as well. Israel will likely argue that Russia's support for Damascus only increases the chances of a bad outcome following the inevitable transition of power from Bashar al-Assad. Israel has some leverage in this regard: it will reject an expected Russian request for new drone aircraft.

More broadly, Netanyahu is said to have a good working relationship with Putin, in contrast to both men's lack of ease with President Obama. For example, the awkward body language between Putin and Obama during the G-20 summit in Mexico a few days ago was widely reported.

For the United States, Putin's trip demonstrates that there is competition for diplomatic leadership in the Middle East; in his view, Israel, the Palestinians, and Jordan have options other than Washington. Putin's direct talks with regional leaders will be aimed at forcing them to judge which partnership they prefer on certain issues. Although Washington need not be too worried about this, it should press its partners, particularly Israel, to make sure U.S. perspectives are given due prominence during the discussions.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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