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RUSSIA-ISRAEL RELATIONSHIP: IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR *

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Abstract: This article examines the dynamics of the Russian-Israeli relations since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2015. Moscow and Tel Aviv have deep historical ties in the political, military, economic and cultural spheres. Russia's important role in international developments, especially after Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015 has forced Israel to expand relations with Russia due to threats from proxy forces of Iran and Hezbollah in southern Syria (Golan Heights). In this article, we seek to analyze the relations between Russia and Israel in the Syrian civil war and its consequences to the other countries within the context of the current geopolitical changes. Realpolitik-based national interests are key to explain the current level of diplomatic and security relations. Regarding the Syrian civil war, the relations between Russia and Israel warmed. The prospect of Russian policy in Syria deserves further attention for the security interests of Israel. The method in this paper is descriptive-analytical.

Keywords: Israel, Iran, Syria Crisis, Security Interests, Russia

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SURİYE İÇ SAVAŞI PERSPEKTİFİNDEN RUSYA-İSRAİL İLİŞKİLERİ

Öz: Bu makale, 2015 yılında Suriye iç savaşının başlamasından bu yana Rusya-İsrail ilişkilerinin dinamiklerini incelemektedir. Moskova ve Tel Aviv'in siyasi, askeri, ekonomik ve kültürel alanlarda derin tarihi bağları bulunmaktadır, Rusya'nın uluslararası gelişmelerdeki önemli rolü, özellikle Rusya'nın 2015 yılında Suriye iç savaşına müdahalesinin ardından İran ve Hizbullah'ın vekil güçlerinin Suriye'nin güneyindeki (Golan Tepeleri) tehditleri sebebiyle İsrail'i Rusya ile ilişkilerini genişletmeye zorladı. Bu makalede, Suriye iç savaşında Rusya ve İsrail arasındaki ilişkileri ve bunun diğer ülkelere olan sonuçlarını mevcut jeopolitik değişimler bağlamında analiz etmek amaçlanmaktadır. Realpolitik temelli ulusal çıkarlar, diplomatik ve güvenlik ilişkilerinin mevcut seviyesini açıklamak için anahtardır. Suriye iç savaşı bağlamında, Rusya ile İsrail arasındaki ilişkiler ısındı. Suriye'deki Rusya politikasının görünümü, İsrail'in güvenlik çıkarları için daha fazla ilgiyi hak ediyor. Bu makaledeki yöntem betimsel-analitiktir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İsrail, İran, Suriye Krizi, Güvenlik Çıkarları, Rusya

Introduction

After since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought to reestablish Moscow as a superpower. To achieve this, Kremlin has tried to affirm Russian influence in various regions around the world. As such, the Middle East as an important Geo-strategic region has become more important than ever before for Russia. One of the most important countries in the region is Israel and Moscow has sought good relations with this regional power. Such an approach can be analyzed based on Vladimir Putin's foreign policy doctrine that is based on realism. When Russia emerged from the collapsing USSR in December 1991, it inherited a fraught relationship with Israel. Although the Soviet Union had been one of the first countries to recognize Israel in 1948, relations cooled rapidly in the shadow of the Cold War. While the new state of Israel leaned heavily towards the United States, Moscow expanded relations with its Arab neighbors. After October 1991, two countries have successively deepened their relationship on the societal, economic and political levels. Russia's military intervention in the Syria conflict in September 2015 opened a new stage in Russian-Israeli relations as both are now concerned with the questions of order and security in the Middle East.

Moscow and Tel Aviv have been "neighbors" to the Levant since 2015, and the Kremlin is increasingly acting as a security actor for the Hebrew state. Russia also intends to play a role in the Israeli-Palestinian issue but has so far failed to convince Tel Aviv of its centrality, despite its military successes in Syria. Finally, their bilateral relationship has also a significant trade section,

since Israel is one of the few Western sources of technology for Russia after the imposition of sanctions related to the Ukrainian crisis in 2014.¹

Israel is closely allied with the United States – the country which Russian leader Vladimir Putin regards as Russia's greatest adversary. Russia cooperates closely with Iran – the country that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu regards as an existential threat to the Jewish state. Especially since the rise of Putin at the turn of the century, Russia and Israel have developed close, friendly relations. They cooperate extensively in the economic, military and intelligence spheres. In addition to their government-to-government relationship, there is also a strong societal connection between the two countries because the fact that over a million Russian-speaking Jews immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union and large numbers of Russian tourists visit Israel every year (including over 550,000 in 2016).² There are, of course, some serious disagreements between Russia and Israel – including over Moscow's relations with Tehran. Russia and Israel, however, have pursued good relations with each other despite these divergences. Despite these divergences, the common fear from radical Islamist movements in the region, good personal relations between leaders and willingness to maintain bilateral cooperation bring actors to intensify relations.).³ Therefore, in this article, the relations between Russia and Israel in the Syrian civil war are examined with reference to other influential actors of the Syrian crisis.

1. Moscow- Tel Aviv Realpolitik

Russia and Israel share important aspects in their strategic cultures. Both pursue decisive interest-led realpolitik. Free of value-driven concerns, they have no difficulty to pursue pragmatic and selective co-operation when shared interests exist, even if normative differences persist. Both states exhibit a siege mentality, and both are guided by the primacy of security and primarily military understanding of power. This enables to understand and accept each other's security-oriented interests and largely refrain from criticizing the other's actions as long as these do not clash with their own security needs. The shared perception of the Islamist terrorism threat since the beginning of the

¹ Igor Delanoë, "Russia-Israel: Syria, a new structural challenge of Israeli-Russian relations," *Observatoire of Arab-Muslim World and Sahel*, April 11, 2019, p.3, <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/programmes/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/publications/en/201916.pdf>

² Mark N. Katz, "Russia and Israel: An Improbable Friendship," in *Russia's Return to the Middle East, building Sandcastles?*, Ed. Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru, chaillot Papers, N° 146, (European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 2018), 103.

³ Mark N. Katz, "Russia and Israel", 103.

century has strengthened further relations and cooperation between Russia and Israel.⁴

Russia understands the importance of Israel and therefore seeks to strengthen cooperation with Israel on a growing range of issues, such as the pursuit of common interests in the Middle East. At present, however, Russia's current relations with Israel are based on a good level of reciprocal pragmatism, as well as boasting a significant improvement in the depth of its political, military and trade cooperation over the past few years. Russia's direct involvement in Syria (since 2015) has added a new layer of communication, coordination and cooperation to Russian-Israeli military relations; Despite its multilateral foreign policy, Russia has sought to maintain a balance of power between influential actors in the Middle East, especially the Syrian crisis such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and considered itself as a powerful mediator and regional leader against American unilateralism.⁵

In recent years, the number of the bilateral visits at the highest level between the two countries have been increasing. In fact, the Israeli leader, Binyamin Netanyahu, has visited Moscow eleven times in his fourth term in office, including the January 2020 meeting, while Putin has visited Tel Aviv twice between 2012 and 2020. Apart from a resurgence in the political relationship, Russia and Israel have also decided to improve their economic ties despite the volume of trade has so far remained modest. Russian exports to Israel were at USD 1.9 billion in 2018. It exports a number of products to Israel including crude petroleum, precious metals and stones, food products, chemical products etc.⁶ Russian imports from Israel stood at USD 764 million in 2018 with products such as electrical machinery and equipment, edible vegetables, pesticides, plastics etc. In 2015, Russia and Israel signed a military cooperation pact, to step up military and technological cooperation. Moscow also purchased a package of drones from Israel for USD 300 million. The presence of a large Russian diaspora in Israel has helped forge a special bond, with more than 17% of Israel's population being Russian-speakers.⁷

⁴ Lidia Averbukh and Margarete Klein, "Russia-Israel Relationship Transformed by Syria Conflict: Political Interests Overshadow Social and Economic Ties," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, NO.37, September, 2018, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2018C37_avk_kle.pdf

⁵ Zvi Magen, "Russia and the Challenges of a Changing Middle East: A View from Israel," in *Russia and Israel in the Changing Middle East*, Ed. Zvi Magen and Vitaly Naumkin, (Institute for National Security Studies, 2013), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/172130/Memorandum129_2013.pdf

⁶ Pritish Gupta, "Russia and Israel: Towards a pragmatic partnership," *Observer Research Foundation*, Mar 05, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russia-and-israel-towards-a-pragmatic-partnership-61949/>

⁷ Pritish Gupta, "Russia and Israel"

In an overcrowded Middle East, the relationship between Moscow and Tel Aviv has been centered on 'co-operation' especially in the Syrian civil war. The gradual US retrenchment has allowed Russia to step in and fill the vacuum as a regional power broker even though US remains a pre-eminent player in the region. Moscow wants to convey the message to the Middle Eastern states that it is a reliable ally that believes in multilateral engagement to resolve disputes. Given its proximity to the region, Russia remains concerned about instability in the Middle East and its impact on national security. The Syrian civil war has created an opportunity for Russia to be viewed as a trusted player in the region. When Russia has established its military presence in Syria, Israel finds it critical to counter the challenges posed by Iran and other non-state actors in Syria. In this context, Israel remains an important regional actor for Russia. Two countries have strategic interests that bring them act together in the Middle East. As a result, despite some of their divergences on Iran and Hezbollah, they try to focus on their common interests.

Having presented itself as a reliable player in the region, Russia has engaged with both Israel and Iran, marking a highlight of Putin's foreign policy maneuvers. Russia has been able to accomplish this by following a pragmatic policy that does not engage in alliance relationships. Israel too has wanted to diversify its foreign partnerships and has broadened its reach while remaining committed to its alliance with the US. Russia and Israel are to continue their entente based on their pragmatic policies. Incrementalism adopted by both Russia and Israel in their foreign policy approach is yielding the desired results, making the Russia-Israel relationship a classic example of 'realpolitik'.⁸

2. The Syrian Conflict: A Platform for Cooperation

In addition to social relations and economic cooperation, the prospect of reviewing Russia's policy in Syria to pay more attention to Israel's security interests has been another important criterion. Military intervention in Syria in September 2015 opened a new phase in Russia's Middle East policy in general and Moscow's relations with Israel in particular. Relations with Israel now require greater coordination and are characterized by greater fragility. The conflict dynamic in Syria and the associated questions of regional order and security represent a stress test for the Russian-Israeli relationship.

Russia's intervention in Syria created a need for both sides to avoid unintentional military clashes by establishing functioning communication channels and dependable arrangements. To this end, the two armed forces set up a de-conflicting mechanism in autumn 2015. It is embedded in a format of frequent high-level discussions between the Russian president and the

⁸ Gupta, "Russia and Israel".

Israeli prime minister, as well as between the defence ministers and intelligence service chiefs. The mechanism permitted Israel to conduct air strikes on Hezbollah positions and convoys without interference by Russian air defence. The Israeli leadership's assurance that Israel is interested only in the threat from pro-Iranian forces – and not in toppling Assad – was crucial for Moscow's consent to the arrangement. Unlike the Russian-Turkish relationship, which was plunged into deep crisis by the shooting down of a Russian warplane in November 2015, Russian-Israeli relations long remained unproblematic even as both operated militarily in Syria. However, as the conflict intensified, the de-conflicting mechanism came under pressure. Israel's threat perception and strategy changed after Assad and his allies recaptured large parts of Syria. Netanyahu's government is now concerned that Tehran is establishing a permanent military presence in Syria, especially along the border to Israel. In order to prevent this, Israel seems to have shifted from a policy of containing pro-Iranian forces through isolated air strikes to one of driving its forces out of Syria by military means, and greatly expanded its air strikes on Syrian territory from February 2018. In November 2017 Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was still describing the presence of Iranian fighters in Syria as legitimate, at a meeting with Assad on 17 May 2018 Putin called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria after "the launch of an active phase of a political process" – with the exception of Russia which is there at the invitation of the Syrian regime. Both developments suggest a partial recalibration of Russia's policy on Syria, with greater willingness to take account of Israeli security interests. This reflects the priority placed by the Russian leadership on safeguarding its own armed forces in Syria: In the event of an escalation, Israel would be capable of significantly complicating the military situation for Russia. Moscow also expects Israel's cooperation when it comes to shaping a new Syrian political order.⁹

Between Israel and Russia to avoid any confrontation, political and military level consultations allow for the maintenance of the necessary channels of communication and flow of operational information. Despite the coordination, there have been cases of violations of Israeli airspace by Russian planes and unmanned aerial vehicle or Israeli jets being fired upon in Syria by the Russians. A strong reaction from Russia came in mid-March when, after an attack on a Hezbollah convoy and shooting down of a Syrian S-200 missile (targeting Israeli fighter jets) by the Israeli Arrow-2 system, Moscow summoned the Israeli ambassador to the Russian MFA for consultations. Russia remains aware of Israel's interests and military capabilities and is trying to limit, to some extent, the anti-Israeli actions of its Syrian allies. From Israel's

⁹ Averbukh and Klein, "Russia-Israel Relationship," 5-6.

point of view, the cooperation has meant Russia ensured there was no definitive response from Hezbollah or Syria to the Israeli attacks and that the delivery of a Russian S-300 anti-aircraft defense system to Iran was delayed (resumed in early 2016).¹⁰

While the exact size and nature of the military forces which Russia has deployed to Syria remains unclear—just as Moscow’s ultimate endgame remains shrouded in secrecy—the Israelis nonetheless view Russia’s expanded intervention in Syria as a development that could ultimately serve their policy aims. From the Israeli perspective, the increased Russian military presence in Syria will prevent the downfall of the Assad regime, thus prolonging the conflict while simultaneously depleting the resources of the Syrian state and people. As Israeli military analysts predict, it will also turn the Syrian coast—a region they refer to as “Syria Minor”—into a Russian sphere of influence in which Bashar al Assad is kept in power. This fits in to a wider Israeli strategy, declared at the outset of the Syrian revolution, where a weakened Bashar al Assad would remain in power as a titular head of state with whom compromises could be reached. Israeli worries, meanwhile, revolve around Tel Aviv’s continued ability to impose its own “red lines” on the progress of events on the ground in Syria, amidst a notably enlarged Russian military presence in Syria.¹¹

The restrictions which the Israelis placed on Damascus at the outset of the revolution, threatening military intervention if they were violated, included: that the Syrian regime shall not transfer heavy artillery, chemical weapons, advanced air defense systems, long-range surface-to-surface or any anti-ship missiles to Hezbollah or other groups in Lebanon; and that Iranian or Hezbollah forces would not be allowed into the territories adjoining the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and the de-facto armistice line between Syria and Israel. Nevertheless, Israel has welcomed Iranian and Hezbollah armed support for the Syrian regime, viewing this intervention on the part of the Shia partisans as inflaming the sectarian conflict in Syria and the wider Arab Middle East, while ensuring a prolonged conflict in Syria. Such military involvement would also, Israeli military analysts believed, help to tie up Hezbollah and Iran in a war of attrition and thereby deplete their resources. Since 2013, the Israeli military has enforced these “red lines” through no fewer than 10 air strikes

¹⁰ Michal Wojnarowicz, “Israeli-Russian Relations in the Context of the Syrian Civil War,” *Bulletin*, No. 48 (988): 1, 17 May, 2017, https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=23171

¹¹ Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, “Netanyahu’s Moscow Visit Cements Russian-Israeli Cooperation in Syria Policy Analysis Unit,” *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, September, 2015, p.2, https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Russian_Israeli_Cooperation_in_Syria.pdf

carried out against military targets across Damascus and Latakia provinces, to which there was no Syrian response.¹²

While Barack Obama and some other Western leaders sought to embrace the political change represented by the Arab Spring, Putin and Netanyahu both preferred the preservation of the status quo and feared that the overthrow of ruling regimes would unleash forces hostile to both Russia and Israel.¹³ While it had long objected to the Assad regime's cooperation with Iran in aiding the highly anti-Israeli Lebanese Shia movement, Hezbollah, the Israeli government did appreciate that Damascus had maintained peace on the Syrian-Israeli armistice line established after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.¹⁴ Israeli fears that this border would no longer remain calm if the Assad regime was weakened or replaced has made the Netanyahu government more sympathetic to Russian arguments that the Assad regime remaining in power is the least bad alternative for Syria.¹⁵ What has been disturbing for Israel about Syria, though, is the role played there by Iran and Hezbollah. Israel does not want to see these two actors gain predominant influence in Syria and thus be in a better position to attack Israel.¹⁶ However, that being the case, the Russian intervention in Syria that began in 2015 which was so upsetting to the West was actually somewhat reassuring to Israel since Iran and Hezbollah could be more easily restrained by the Russians if they are present in Syria than if they are not. Indeed, as Samuel Ramani noted, 'Putin's March 14 [2016] announcement of a partial Russian military drawdown from Syria surprised the Israeli political establishment, and increased fears of Iranian belligerence.'¹⁷ While it is not clear whether, or what sort, of agreement Israel and Russia may have reached regarding Syria, what is known is that Netanyahu and Putin have consulted extensively about it and Moscow has not stopped Israel from

¹² Amos Harel, For Israel, Syria Red Lines Matter More Than a Hotline to the Kremlin," September 30, 2015, *Haaretz*, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.677183>

¹³ Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, and William Young, "Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition," *RAND*, 2013, p. 2, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR213/RAND_RR213.pdf.

¹⁴ Ian Black, "Israelis watch intently as Syrian rebel forces approach Golan Heights border," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/on-the-middle-east/2015/jun/19/israelis-watch-intently-as-syrian-rebel-forces-approach-golan-heights-border>.

¹⁵ Cnaan Liphshiz, "Can Israel benefit from sheriff Putin policing the Middle East," *The Times of Israel*, October 13, 2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/can-israel-benefit-from-sheriff-putin-policing-the-middle-east/>.

¹⁶ Judah Ari Gross, "Netanyahu: Israel acts to keep game-changing arms away from Hezbollah," *The Times of Israel*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-israel-acts-to-keep-game-changing-arms-away-from-hezbollah/>.

¹⁷ Ramani, Samuel, "Why Russia and Israel are cooperating in Syria," *Huff post*, June 23, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-russia-and-israel-are-cooperating-in-syria_us_576bdb68e4b083e0c0235e15?guccounter=1.

attacking Hezbollah targets in Syria.¹⁸ Indeed, now that Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah have largely defeated Assad's internal opponents, not only has competition heated up between Moscow and Tehran for influence in Damascus, but also Russia has indicated support for Israeli calls for Iranian forces to depart from southern Syria.¹⁹ There are other areas besides Syria in which Russian and Israeli interests either coincide or do not clash.

3. The Iranian factor in Russian-Israeli Relations

Today, when Bashar al-Assad's regime is no longer on the verge of collapsing, Israel has seen one of the worst scenarios it feared materialize: a Syria, saved from collapse by Moscow, but on the way towards reunification under Tehran's influence.²⁰ Although the Jewish state has adopted a withdrawn stance since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the increase in Iran's footprint in Syria is perceived in Tel Aviv as an existential threat that is likely to justify an Israeli military intervention. Israel has established two "red lines" against the backdrop of a growing Iranian presence in the Arab Republic: The Golan and Hezbollah. While the former must be secured from becoming a base for attacks against Israel, the Lebanese militia must be prevented to establish itself there and receive sophisticated equipment that could challenge, even locally, Israel's superiority. Iran, which has drained, trained, paid and armed tens of thousands of Shia militiamen who went to fight in Syria, has also deployed Revolutionary Guard units, and is now reportedly expanding its military infrastructure on Syrian territory and building weapon manufacture factories, particularly for Hezbollah. However, a Syria under Tehran's control is neither in Israel's nor Russia's interest, while Bashar al-Assad does not want to be the puppet of either the Russians or the Iranians.²¹

Russia's tacit acceptance of Israeli air strikes in Syria and its change in rhetoric towards the Iranian military presence reflect a concern that Washington might abandon the restraint it has shown if the Israeli-Iranian conflict were to escalate in Syria. A serious US military intervention could

¹⁸ Amos Harel, "Putin's phone call with Netanyahu put end to Israeli strikes in Syria," *Haaretz*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran/putin-s-call-with-netanyahu-called-time-on-israel-s-syrian-strikes-1.5809118>.

¹⁹ Joost Hiltermann, "Russia can keep the peace between Israel and Iran--but following the hostilities over the weekend, does Putin want to?," *The Atlantic*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/israel-syria-iran-hezbollah-putin-assad/553217/>

²⁰ Chuck Freilich, "Syria's Assad Regime Won the Civil War," *Haaretz*, 10 March, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-syria-s-assad-regime-won-the-civil-war-can-it-survive-an-israeli-attack-1.6999227>

²¹ Delanoé, "Russia-Israel," 4.

gravely endanger the military and political gains Russia has achieved to date. The outward convergence with Israel also reflects a growing rivalry between Russia and Iran in Syria. The more Assad regains his grip on power, the more pressing the question of Syria's future political and economic order. The state of the Syrian army offers little grounds to believe that it could soon take over the military tasks hitherto under-taken by pro-Iranian forces. A meaningful weakening of the groups supported by Tehran would therefore automatically demand greater military engagement by Russia – which President Putin would be keen to avoid for domestic political reasons. Moscow has no immediate interest in massively weakening Iran in Syria, nor would it be in any position to do so. However, it appears that Russia is willing to exert a moderating influence on Tehran and Hezbollah and establish a buffer zone in southern Syria. Russia does not share Israel's interest in driving Tehran completely out of Syria and massively weakening Iranian influence in the Middle East as a whole. Moscow's return to the region is predicated above all on its ability to maintain good relations with all parties, especially those that are hostile to one another. Being courted by all sides is what could potentially make Russia the region's most important "go-to-power". For that to occur it requires advantage in all directions. This realpolitik would deter Moscow from siding firmly with Israel.

The defeat of ISIS, the emergence of Russia as the patron of the Assad regime, and President Trump's announcement of the withdrawal of US forces from Syria have affected the policies and alliances of Israel, Iran, the US, and Russia with respect to that country, potentially leading to a wide-scale conflagration. Israel is concerned about Iran's deepening strategic military presence in Syria, which involves the building of military bases and the provisioning of Hezbollah with precision missiles. Over the past two years, and especially since the defeat of ISIS, Israel has led a systematic air campaign against Iranian assets in Syria that Russia, despite its control of the Syrian air space, has done little to stop. Yet as Tel Aviv began to align its military strategy in Syria with that of the US, Moscow apparently signaled its discontent. In February 2018, an Iranian drone penetrated the Israeli airspace. As expected, Israel retaliated by downing the drone and carrying out air strikes across Syria and against the Iranian drone's point of origin. Nevertheless, Israel and Russia continued their coordination, concluding an agreement in late July 2018 according to which the Syrian armed forces redeployed on the Golan Heights. On September 17, Israel carried out air strikes against Iranian-Syrian positions near Russia's Hmeimim air base in Latakia. Syrian regime forces fired back and in the process accidentally downed a Russian surveillance plane, killing all 15 Russian service members aboard. Since Russia would not give up on its investment in the Assad regime, and may well

supply that regime -and Iran -with sophisticated weapons should Moscow find itself painted into a corner, Washington's strategy of ensuring the departure of Iranian forces from Syria entailed the risk of a costly confrontation. Paradoxically, in a surprising shift of policy, President Trump has ordered the withdrawal of US troops from Syria, ending the military campaign against ISIS and removing any barrier to Tehran's military presence in Syria. This has put the onus on checking Iranian power on Israel, whose government has been steadfast in trying to prevent Tehran from entrenching itself in Syria, and has made Israel-Russian coordination in Syria strategically crucial to avert escalatory incidents. At this critical juncture, Tel Aviv has an opportunity to prevent a regional conflagration. Russia needs Iran and Hezbollah to secure and stabilize Syria. Serious challenges lie ahead, including defeating the thousands of Salafi jihadists in Idlib. However, Moscow does not want either Iran or Hezbollah to have undue influence over Syrian politics. To simply put, Syria is a Russian protectorate. This has been transmitted to Tehran, including demands to restrict its military actions from Damascus all the way south to the Golan Heights.²²

For Moscow, cooperation with Israel could, in a paradoxical way, serve as a trump card in its 'game' with Iran. It is a sign that Russia is able to resolve the situation in Syria on its own, without Iran. Furthermore, Russia's partnership with Iran impedes its relations with Arab countries, where, time after time, there are conversations about a proverbial 'Russian-Shiite alliance', complicating Russia's relations with the Sunni-majority Islamic Ummah, especially its Arab members. Today, the Arab world, including the Saudi monarchy, treats Israel with understanding and even with sympathy, insofar as both sides consider Iran to be a common threat. From that point of view, an Israeli-Russian rapprochement can be taken as natural and even advantageous for the Sunni world.²³

Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi met his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, on 26 October 2020 thanking him for working with the Jewish state "on preventing an Iranian entrenchment in Syria." "Israel appreciates the ties and the coordination with the Russian government on preventing an Iranian entrenchment in Syria," Ashkenazi was quoted in the statement as saying, calling for preventing Tehran from arming Hezbollah. Israel unsuccessfully sought to block the sale to Iran of the S-300 system, which analysts say could

²² Robert G. Rabil, "Tending to Israel's Relationship with Russia," *BESA Center*, No. 1,047, December 26, 2018, Pp. 1-2, <https://besacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/1047-Tending-Israels-Relationship-Russia-Rabil-final.pdf>

²³ Alexey Malashenko, "A new stage in Russian-Israeli relations?" *The Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute (DOC Research Institute)*, April 2, 2019, <https://doc-research.org/2019/04/new-stage-russian-israeli-relations/>

impede a potential Israeli strike on Tehran's nuclear facilities, and would likely oppose providing Iran with the S-400. Russia in 2015 deployed the S-400 to Syria, where, along with Iran, it is fighting on behalf of the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. The deployment of the system, which is powerful enough to track the vast majority of Israeli airspace, undercut Israel's aerial superiority in Syria, where it has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets linked to Iran and the Lebanese terror group Hezbollah.²⁴

Russia's neutral acceptance of Israeli airstrikes in Syria and its external convergence reflects growing rivalry between Russia and Iran in Syria, putting pressure on Assad's power and the issue of Syria's future political and economic order. Moscow and Tehran fall under this scenario to compete for economic and political influence. At the same time, the two countries are still militarily interdependent in Syria. Russia's military intervention is largely limited to the air force and its limited ground involvement, so any stabilization of the Assad regime now requires the help of pro-Iranian forces in Syria. However, Russia seems to want to maintain its full influence over Tehran and Hezbollah and establish a buffer zone in southern Syria. Although Moscow has managed to expand its cooperation with Tehran without affecting its relations with Tel Aviv, the Iranian nuclear issue remains a problem or obstacle. Neither country wants Iran to acquire an atomic bomb, but Moscow has maintained its cooperation with the Islamic Republic in the field of civilian nuclear energy and is using it as a card in relations with the West.

Conclusion

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." On the positive side, significant progress has been achieved in the quarter century since relations were renewed. As 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. Even though 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." 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.-

²⁴ TOI staff, "Ashkenazi tells Russian FM Iranian entrenchment in Syria must be prevented," *Times of Israel*, 26 October, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ashkenazi-tells-russian-fm-iranian-entrenchment-in-syria-must-be-prevented/>

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. It remains possible that as the threat to the Syrian regime decreases, Russian 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. 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.⁸⁹As 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.

Therefore, as a conclusion to this discussion, the two main factors that explain the enhanced cooperation of Israel with Russia in the Middle East, and especially over Syria in the current situation, are as follows:

1. Netanyahu believes that Russia can mitigate the threat posed by Bashar al-Assad and his allies, especially Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, to Israel. At this level of cooperation, it seems that the increase in Israeli cooperation with Russia in Syria is a violation of a common logic. Israel's closer ties with Russia will allow Putin to act as a mediator between Israel and its anti-Israel allies. Thus, in a way, this mediating role of foreign policy will be significantly important in mitigating and neutralizing any security threat to Israel.

2. Both Israel and Russia agree on the need for political stability in Syria: Although Netanyahu does not verbally support Assad; recent foreign policy changes show that Israel fears the security consequences of the Sunni revolutionary takeover of Syria. The transition to greater convergence with Russia in the Syrian conflict has been a gradual process rather than a sudden policy change. We see that the power of Bashar al-Assad to remain and the growing presence of ISIS has led Netanyahu to change his approach in Syria to a strategy of closer alliance with Russia. An alliance that may be referred to by the Israelis as a strategic alliance, but seems to be more of a tactical alliance by the Russians, although it can ultimately be assumed that this alliance could lead to a new regional order in the Middle East.

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