

Report Part Title: Russia and Israel—Best Friends Forever?

Report Title: Russia in the Middle East:

Report Subtitle: Jack of all Trades, Master of None

Report Author(s): Eugene Rumer

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2019)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep21000.8>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to this content.

JSTOR

Russia and Israel—Best Friends Forever?

The most important development in Russia's Middle East policy since the end of the Cold War has been the rapprochement between Russia and Israel. The relationship between the two countries has its own complicated historical baggage. For many years, the Jewish state, whose founders included Jews who had fled persecution in the Russian Empire, had a difficult relationship with the Soviet Union. Joseph Stalin's apparent support for the establishment of the state of Israel in 1947—presumably as a step intended to undermine the UK's position in the Middle East—was accompanied by a vicious anti-Semitic campaign inside the Soviet Union. Stalin's successors actively courted Israel's Arab enemies Syria and Egypt and supplied them with weapons. After the 1967 Six-Day War, in solidarity with its Arab partners, the Soviet Union broke off diplomatic relations with Israel, and "Israeli militarism" became a favorite target of Soviet propaganda.

Diplomatic relations between Russia and Israel were restored only in 1991. However, Russia's anemic foreign policy in the 1990s and the Kremlin's preoccupation with a series of domestic crises and the task of managing the post-Soviet divorce left little room in its foreign policy agenda for rebuilding ties with a country that could be neither a source of financial assistance nor a claimant to the status of a major power.

For Israel, the relationship with Russia in the 1990s revolved around a handful of key national priorities.¹⁶ These included the long-standing issue of ensuring that Russian Jews would be free to emigrate to Israel and protecting the rights of those who remained in Russia; preventing Russia from sharing dangerous technologies with Iran, Iraq, and other enemies of Israel; and generally expanding its circle of international contacts, especially with major powers, to hedge against the ever-present threat of its international isolation. However, Russia's diminished circumstances in the 1990s made it a much less influential actor in the Middle East, where the United States was the dominant economic, military, and diplomatic power in the region.

Major improvements in Russian-Israeli relations occurred at the turn of the century owing to a confluence of several important developments. These included the elevation to leadership of Vladimir Putin and Ariel Sharon in 2000 and 2001 respectively, the emergence of Jews from Russian-speaking countries as an important voting bloc in Israeli domestic politics, and Russia's recovery from its decade of troubles and resumption of a more dynamic foreign policy.

The positive personal relationship between Sharon and Putin appears to have played an important role in Russia's rapprochement with Israel. Sharon visited Russia on several occasions, and Putin visited Israel in 2005. Although much in this relationship and its drivers remains nontransparent, one can surmise several factors motivating it. For Russia, still recovering from the setbacks of the

1990s and seeking to regain its influence in the international arena, Israel was one of the key actors in a highly contested part of the world where Russia had long been a major power. Israel's military muscle would have been an additional source of Russian interest, considering the country's long-standing appreciation and reliance on hard power. One can also speculate that Putin's early attempts to build a cooperative relationship with the United States included a deliberate effort to boost Russian-Israeli ties and use Israel and its political clout in the United States to help shape positive U.S. attitudes toward Russia. Finally, Sharon's and other Israeli leaders' tolerant view of Putin's campaign in Chechnya (which was widely criticized elsewhere for its indiscriminate tactics), as well as the Israeli prime minister's own hardline approach to dealing with Palestinian militias, likely made it easy for the two leaders to find a common language.¹⁷

Sharon's successors have sustained and built on the relationship that Sharon jump-started with Putin. The view that "for Israel Putin is definitely the best person who ever sat in the Kremlin," as expressed by former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, is apparently shared by many in the Israeli leadership, and Israel's ties to Moscow have been steadily improving.¹⁸ The relationship reached its highest point to date during the premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu, who (like his predecessors) took personal ownership of it.

It's Business and It's Personal

On May 9, 2018, Vladimir Putin, newly inaugurated for his fourth term as Russian president after an election written off in the West as neither free nor fair, attended the annual military parade in Red Square to commemorate the seventy-third anniversary of Russian victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. His guest of honor, featured prominently in numerous photographs from the event posted on the Kremlin website, was Netanyahu, the only Western leader in attendance. It was Netanyahu's second visit to Russia in 2018 alone, and his eleventh visit since his reelection in 2013.¹⁹

The two leaders' backgrounds could hardly be more different. One is an Israeli-born, U.S.-educated conservative politician, a twice combat-wounded veteran of an elite special forces unit, who never tires of emphasizing the special bond between the United States and Israel. The other is a KGB veteran proud of his service in the Soviet Union's odious secret police and president of a country with a long history of anti-Semitism, which for decades refused Israel diplomatic recognition and supported its most implacable enemies, and a leader whom the late senator John McCain branded as "an evil man . . . intent on evil deeds, which include the destruction of the liberal world order that the United States has led."²⁰

Putin and Netanyahu might well be expected to disagree on just about every issue of mutual interest. Netanyahu is second to none in his criticism of the nuclear deal with Iran. Putin helped negotiate it,

and Russia is a party to it. Netanyahu refers to Iran as the mortal enemy of the Jewish people and the state of Israel, and talks about the ruling regime in Tehran as the second coming of Hitler's Third Reich. Putin has pursued a "strategic partnership" with Iran.²¹ Putin has partnered with Iran in Syria to save the Assad regime. Netanyahu has warned that Iran's growing presence in Syria poses a grave threat to Israel. Israel is the United States' staunchest ally in the Middle East. Russia is United States' "biggest geopolitical threat," in the words of a 2012 U.S. presidential candidate.²² Yet both Putin and Netanyahu have been targets of international criticism, even ostracism. Both countries have been subjected to international sanctions. Each occupies a unique place in the international system where its influence is disproportionate to the size of its economy or defense budget, and both leaders understand that power and influence are about more than mere economics.

There is indeed more to Russian-Israeli relations, which have steadily improved on Putin's watch. Israeli prime ministers have visited Russia on numerous occasions, and Putin has visited Israel twice, in 2005 and 2012. Russian-Israeli trade grew by 25 percent in 2017, even if it is still a relatively small total amount at about \$2 billion. Israel has been negotiating a free trade agreement with Russia and with the Eurasian Economic Union, an economic bloc widely derided in the West as a tool of Russian neoimperialism. Israel and Russia have had visa-free travel since 2008. When the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other Western countries expelled dozens of Russian diplomats in March 2019 in retaliation for the nerve agent attack on a former Russian spy in Salisbury, England, Israel did not expel any.



Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu observing the Victory Day military parade at Red Square, May 9, 2018 (Photo by Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images).

In welcoming Netanyahu to Moscow in May 2018, Putin spoke about the special significance of World War II for Russia and for Israel, about the Holocaust, and about his gratitude for Netanyahu's visit to Moscow on May 9, when Russians celebrate their victory over fascism in the Great Patriotic War. (The rest of the world commemorates the end of the war in Europe on May 8.) Netanyahu, for his part, spoke about the Soviet Army's decisive role in the victory over fascism and the great sacrifice of the Russian people. In an especially meaningful gesture, on his lapel he wore a St. George ribbon, which in Russia has become a symbol of both Russian victory in the Great Patriotic War and Russian-backed separatists in war-torn eastern Ukraine.

The legacy of World War II is essential to both leaders' narratives. Putin has positioned himself as the heir to the glorious tradition of Russia's "greatest generation." The World War II victory serves in effect as the foundation of the new Russian state that Putin has built. The Jewish state rose out of the ashes of the war, and Netanyahu has positioned himself as Israel's protector against the threat from Iran, the state that seventy-three years after the Holocaust, he told Putin, wants to destroy Israel.

Russian-Israeli Relations—A Complicated Balancing Act

The Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015 was as much a pivotal moment for Russian-Israeli relations as it was for Syria itself and for the other parties directly and indirectly involved in the conflict. Consequently, the Russian presence in Syrian airspace and on the ground has resulted in a fundamentally new operating environment for the Israeli military. Previously unchallenged in the skies over Syria or Lebanon, and free to strike targets on the ground with little, if any concern about opposing forces, Israel has had to coordinate—or deconflict—its operations with Russia.

The thorniest issue on the coordination, or deconfliction, agenda between Russia and Israel has been the presence in Syria of Iranian forces and Israeli air strikes against Iranian targets. Considering Russia's long-term partnership with Iran and shared objectives in Syria, Israeli strikes against Iranian targets could have become a source of major disagreements with Israel. That appears to have not been the case.

Netanyahu's visit to Moscow on May 9, 2018, was an example of apparent Russian-Israeli coordination and management of this potentially explosive issue. Also on May 9, Israel was hit by twenty Iranian rockets launched from Syria. In the early hours on May 10, the Israeli Air Force struck back. According to Israel's then defense minister Avigdor Lieberman (who happens to be a Russian-speaking native of the former Soviet republic of Moldova), the strike destroyed almost all Iranian military facilities in Syria. Yet a senior Russian foreign ministry official expressed rather perfunctory concerns about the situation and urged all parties to exercise restraint—hardly a vigorous response to a major military strike against a close partner operating on a client-state's territory.

It appears that the combination of personal high-level diplomacy and Israeli insistence on responding to Iranian and Hezbollah strikes with overwhelming force has been met with understanding in the Kremlin. The logic of the Russian position appears quite clear: the Kremlin was not at all disturbed by Israeli strikes against Iranian targets in Syria—as long as there were no Russian casualties. Russian and Israeli interests in this instance were consistent with each other. Israel's interest in securing its border with Syria would be served far better by the Syrian army than by Iranian fighters and

Hezbollah deployed there.²³ That would also serve Russia's interest in enhancing its influence in postconflict Syria and minimizing Iran's influence.

Another long-standing source of friction between Israel and Russia was the prospect of Russia giving Syria a powerful air defense system, the S-300, that would put at risk the Israeli Air Force's ability to operate in Syrian airspace and beyond. The sale of S-300s to Syria had been bound up with the possibility of that system ending up in the hands of the Iranians—something that Israeli officials had long feared. In 2010, then Russian president Dmitry Medvedev canceled the sale of the S-300 to Iran after heavy lobbying by Israel and the United States during the Obama-era “reset” of U.S.-Russian relations. The sale was restored by Putin in 2015 and the missiles were delivered to Iran in 2016.²⁴ However, after the sale was completed, an Iranian government official reportedly complained that Russian officials had shared sensitive technical data about the system with Israel so as to enable Israeli aircraft to avoid it.²⁵

Even after the deal was done, the controversy surrounding the S-300 sale continued. Russian officials continued to raise the topic of the sale and Israeli officials vigorously objected to it. Upon returning from his May 2018 visit to Moscow, Netanyahu announced that he had convinced Putin not to sell the system and its weapons to the Assad regime. This was confirmed by a senior Putin aide in charge of arms exports.²⁶ Yet in September 2018, the S-300 story took another turn, after the Syrian army, using a less advanced system than the S-300, mistakenly shot down a Russian Il-20M reconnaissance aircraft.²⁷ The incident triggered a harsh statement against Israel from the Russian military, with Russian spokesmen accusing the Israeli Air Force of using the Russian aircraft as a decoy while conducting strikes against targets inside Syria. In response for this alleged Israeli violation—which Israeli authorities strenuously denied, and which no independent expert found credible—Russia delivered twenty-four S-300s to Syria in October 2018.²⁸

The Il-20M episode was the worst crisis in Russian-Israeli relations since the two countries restored diplomatic relations. The Russian military relied on harsh rhetoric to describe Israel's alleged offense. However, Putin was considerably more restrained in his statements about the episode. Most important, it appears to have had no lasting effect on Russian-Israeli relations. Official Israeli statements minimized the impact of the S-300 delivery to Syria on Israeli security; indeed, the Israeli Air Force again struck Iranian targets in Syria in January 2019 notwithstanding the S-300 delivery.²⁹

Russia's relationship with Israel remains a complex balancing act. On the one hand, the extent to which Russia is invested in the relationship has been demonstrated by Moscow's muted, perfunctory reaction to Israeli strikes against Iranian and Iran-affiliated targets in Syria and an unprecedented January 2019 statement of concern for Israel's security by a senior Russian diplomat who declared “very strong security of the state of Israel” to be “one of the top concerns of Russia.”³⁰ In a further

sign of Russia's commitment to Israel, according to recent reports, Russia has turned down Iran's request to purchase the S-400 air defense system—a more advanced system than the S-300 that Russia delivered to Iran in 2016—while also reportedly sharing with Israel technical information about the system to ensure that it not pose a threat to Israeli aircraft.³¹

Speaking at the unprecedented June 2019 meeting of U.S., Russian, and Israeli national security advisers, the Secretary of the National Security Council Nikolai Patrushev said: “We pay special attention to ensuring Israel's security,” which he referred to as “a special interest of ours because here in Israel live a little less than about two million of our countrymen. Israel supports us in several channels, including at the UN. The prime minister [Netanyahu] has already said that we share the same views on the issue of the struggle against falsifying the history of World War II.”³²

On the other hand, during the same visit, Patrushev refused to criticize Iran's presence in Syria, which constitutes one of the most urgent Israeli security concerns, and stated unequivocally that “Iran is in Syria at the invitation of the legitimate government and is actively involved in fighting terrorism. Therefore, of course, we will have to take into account the interests of Iran.”³³

The ambivalent nature of the Russian position in the Russia-Iran-Israel triangle was further demonstrated by Putin's meetings in less than a week with both, Netanyahu and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in September 2019.³⁴ The Russian president reaffirmed his commitment to good relations with Israel, while bypassing in his public remarks the issue of Syria and Iran's role there. Meeting five days later with Iran's president, Putin praised the quality of Russian-Iranian relations and expressed his appreciation for Iran's contribution in Syria.

It would be easy in the light of such differences to dismiss the relationship between Russia and Israel as lacking depth or being transactional. But transactional relationships deliver benefits to both sides. Personal ties between leaders also make a difference, but aside from personal factors and regardless of shifts in Israel domestic politics, the geopolitics of the Syrian conflict and the stakes of the two countries in Syria demand that they handle their relationship with care and weigh their choices so as to avoid upsetting it. In the words of one Israeli analyst who follows developments in Syria and Russian operations there, “Russia is our neighbor now.”

Managing Iran

Russian military involvement in Syria has also had a significant impact on its relationship with Iran, its oldest and closest partner in the Middle East during the post-Cold War era. In the past thirty years, Russian-Iranian relations have withstood multiple challenges, including a potential