



Syrian President Basar al-Assad with Russian President Vladimir Putin (c), January 7, 2020. Photo: kremlin.ru

Truly a Paper Tiger? Russia as a Challenge to Israeli National Security

Daniel Rakov

Russian policy in the Middle East poses a challenge to Israeli national security interests, and this will not change as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, dialogue with Moscow and political maneuvering between Moscow and the West has proven successful in offsetting the dangers to Israel and cultivating new possibilities. Israel should continue its dialogue with Moscow, strengthen the lateral communication channels (beneath the leadership echelon), and exercise caution to avoid injury to Russian soldiers and assets in Syria. The coming months may witness a new window of opportunity to promote Israeli positions vis-à-vis Syria and Iran in the event that Moscow tries to reach “interim arrangements” with the Trump administration and with Europe prior to the upcoming US presidential elections. In the long term, Israel should prepare itself for heightened great power competition in the region and improve state and academic mechanisms for learning about Russia and developing policy tools to contend with it.

Keywords: Israel, Russia, national security, United States, Iran, Syria, oil, civilian nuclear program, arms sales, campaign between wars

Russia's return to a leading role in the Middle East, which has accelerated since the onset of its military intervention in Syria in September 2015, has made Israel's strategic environment more complex, and has posed a mixture of threats and opportunities for Jerusalem on the regional, international, and bilateral levels. The main challenge to Israel in the Russian context is the tension between preserving the strategic partnership with the United States and the desire to actualize concrete regional interests requiring closer relations with Moscow, which Washington views as a bitter adversary.

At the same time, the Israeli policy and security community is hard-pressed to determine whether Russia is a "paper tiger" or a "neighborhood bully" that should not raise concern (an assessment supported primarily by a comparison between the Russian economy and that of the United States, China, and the European Union, each of which is larger in scale than that of Russia), or rather a global power with the ability to challenge Israel's national security in a significant way. In recent months, another question has arisen: following the Covid-19 pandemic, will Russia's role in the Middle East intensify or grow weaker, and how will this affect Israel?

Israel and the Great Power Imbroglia

Israel's heightened political and security dialogue with Russia occurs at a time when Moscow's relations with the West in general, and with the United States in particular, continue to move from bad to worse. Russia is classified as a primary challenge to US security (second only to China), and the sanctions on Russia continue to expand. Both countries are finding it difficult to maintain open channels of communication (not to mention cooperation) in almost all realms. Relations with Russia are also at the focal point of burning political disagreements between Congress and the US President, who is accused of being overly fond of Moscow.

This surging rivalry has likewise been manifested in the Middle East, as both powers

find it difficult to cooperate in the context of concrete shared interests in the region due to a fundamental lack of mutual trust, and the American fear that a regional arrangement will give Russia undesirable additional strength in the global realm.

Israel's close relations with Russia have been the subject of criticism by Jerusalem's allies in the United States and Europe, who question why Israel, and Prime Minister Netanyahu personally, legitimize Russia through phone conversations and frequent meetings with President Putin. Israel is grateful to the (Soviet) Red Army for liberating concentration camps in Poland during WWII, and it expresses this sentiment publicly by recognizing Russia and its military as the heir to the legacy of the Red Army. Still, Israel is criticized for helping Russia promote a political narrative that is perceived by East European countries as undermining their sovereignty. This criticism intensified especially after Netanyahu's appearance at a "Victory Parade" in Red Square in Moscow (2018) and Putin's visit to Israel as part of the World Holocaust Forum (2020).

Many Russians believe that Israel has decisive influence over US strategy in Syria and with regard to Iran; they strive to receive Jerusalem's assistance in developing political arrangements with Washington (as reflected in the June 2019 meeting of national security advisers in Jerusalem). They seek to bring about a full withdrawal of American forces from Syria, have the world come to terms with Assad remaining in power, and raise money for Syria's reconstruction. In exchange, the Russians propose security guarantees for the Kurds and a graduated process for the Iranians' removal from Syria.

On the other hand, many in the West doubt whether there is a viable formula for Israel to bridge the divisions between Moscow and Washington, even in the narrow regional context. The mistrust that prevails between the Americans and the Russians in general, and the gaps between the different positions regarding the Syrian context in particular, runs deep.

There is currently no identifiable willingness on the part of the United States to grant Russia **anything significant in return** for promises to assist in an Iranian withdrawal in the future, and it is difficult to imagine a breakthrough toward a settlement in the Syrian context before the end of Trump's current presidential term. Even if a settlement of some kind is reached prior to the end of 2020, it will be difficult to launch a significant change on the ground in Syria before 2021.

It appears that despite the mounting pressure on Jerusalem to "pick a side," it can still blaze a middle-ground path in the confrontation between Russia and the West. It is widely evident that its relationship with the United States and the West is deeper than the relations that have taken shape with Russia. Indeed, in Israel's eyes, its extensive security and economic ties with the United States and with the European Union are more important than its ties with Moscow. Thus, the strengthening of Jerusalem-Moscow relations in recent years has been reflected primarily in the symbolic and economic realm, and serious obstacles still hinder security and technological cooperation between the two countries.

The case of the **extradition** of Russian hacker Aleksei Burkov to the United States in late 2019 (despite heavy Russian pressure on Israel to prevent this) attests to the fact that when Israel is forced into a corner and must choose between Moscow and Washington, it chooses the latter. Moscow also understands this and seeks to minimize putting Israel in such a position, which may publicly demonstrate the limits of its influence.

China currently plays a **secondary** military-political role in the region and refrains from competing with the United States and with Russia. Moscow and Beijing do not maintain close cooperation in the Middle East, and they strive to refrain from situations that may drive a wedge between them, and especially **from voting against one another** in UN Security Council discussions. Still, the United States

policy of double pressure on China and Russia, and the grouping of these two powers, together with Iran, as "reactionary regimes," may, in the medium and long terms, force them into more active cooperation against American influence in the region. Such a scenario would not help preserve Israel's political freedom of action.

Russia on the Regional Level: The Age of Frenemies

Nearly five years after its intervention in Syria, Russia can be satisfied with its improved regional standing. It has leveraged its tactical military successes in Syria (ensuring the survival of the Assad regime, the return of most of the state's territory to Damascus control, and the leasing of two permanent military bases in Syria for **half a century and more**) into the image of a proactive actor in regional matters. Moscow has formulated a positive agenda vis-à-vis every state in the region by means of political support, strategic cooperative economic efforts, joint fighting, and coordination of the price of oil, and has maintained diverse leverage. Countering **predictions**, the Russian army did not sink in the Syrian quagmire: Russia's military presence in Syria is limited to a few thousand troops, and the Russian declarations that **its cost has been limited in relation to its accomplishments** should not be disregarded.

The actors in the region watch Russia with suspicion but recognize its determination to remain part of the Middle East landscape over time and deepen its involvement, as opposed to the United States, which according to statements by President Trump seeks a reduced military presence. Even if the reality differs from the rhetoric, the perception in the region is the end of the era of Pax Americana and the strengthening of Russia. As such, relations with Moscow increase the bargaining power of regional actors vis-à-vis Washington.

The most pressing issues for Israel with regard to the Russian presence in Syria are its freedom of military operation in the northern arena and the possibility of Moscow helping

remove the Iranian entrenchment. Israel has found it difficult to ignore Russia's emergence as a new neighbor. It has chosen to strengthen dialogue and create a military mechanism for de-confliction with Moscow, despite concern that Russia's entry into Syria will strengthen Israel's enemies, with Iran at the head of the list. In fact, Russia and Israel have agreed to disagree about Iran and Syria, but have expressed a commitment to prevent a direct military conflict between them.

With the perspective of nearly five years, it is evident that the approach of dialogue with Moscow has been worthwhile for Israel. Despite ups and downs, the IDF's freedom of operation in Syria has been preserved, and Russia is trying hard to refrain from a direct clash with Israel. Moscow does not view Israel as an opponent; it assesses its relations with Israel beyond the Syrian arena and does not wish to pick a side in the confrontation between Israel and Iran. On the other hand, Moscow is keen on preventing Israel from disregarding Russian interests, led by building legitimacy for Russian hegemony in Syria as a basis for strengthening its regional standing as a global power and for defending Russian troops and assets. Russia frequently voices severe criticism of Israeli actions in Syria against the following background:

- a. The Russian Ministry of Defense's dissatisfaction with the level of coordination of IDF attacks and concern regarding the possibility of operational errors resulting in injury to Russian soldiers, as occurred in the case of the downing of the Russian plane by Syria (September 2018).
- b. Ongoing Russian embarrassment facing Iran, their partner in the Syrian campaign (and beyond), which perceives Moscow as enabling Israeli strikes at pro-Iranian forces in Syria.
- c. Detrimental impact to the reputation of the Russian weapon systems possessed by the Syrians, which are frequently destroyed by the IDF.

In circumstances where is an increased risk that Israeli attacks in Syria could escalate quickly to the point of war, Israel needs to ask itself: What role will Russia will play during an emergency? Whereas Moscow may have great interest in bringing about a quick resolution to the escalation, it is also liable to challenge Israel in circumstances of severe conflict of interest between the two states—within the framework of a campaign, or as a result of unintentional harm to Russia by Israel.

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Russia, positioned between the different opposing camps in Syria (Turkey, the Iranian regime, Israel, the United States, and others), has not succeeded, on its own, in bringing about a fundamental change in the strategic deadlock in Syria, especially as long as the United States maintains a military presence in the Kurdish region. On the other hand, at the same time that the United States is signing an agreement with the Taliban for a gradual withdrawal from Afghanistan, US partners in the region, including Israel, are compelled to prepare themselves more vigorously for the contingency of US unilateral withdrawal from Syria, which would make it easier for Iran to solidify its position but also increase Russia's role.

Russian-Iranian relations are complicated: although both countries share an interest in limiting US influence in the region and preserving Assad's rule in Syria, the relations between them also include historical suspicion and cultural differences. Russian support of the nuclear agreement (2015) with Iran did not stem from naivete but rather from an assessment that the agreement was the least of all possible evils,

and that foregoing it would increase the risk that Iran would pursue a military nuclear program. It is clear to the Kremlin that Russian-Iranian relations are intrinsically linked to Russia's relations with the Sunni countries and with Israel. Russia is interested in maintaining its close relationship with Iran, but major gaps between these two actors leave Israel with significant freedom of political action vis-à-vis Moscow.

The model for Russia's influence in the Middle East must contend with the limitations of its economic power. The Russians choose competitive asymmetric approaches. They seek to establish ties with each country in the region through large inter-governmental contracts in a number of realms that are of national strategic importance, which would also serve Moscow as future leverage.

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a. Arms sales: Russia may provide Israel's adversaries in the region with capabilities that undermine Israel's military superiority. In the coming years, the Russians will play a central role in rebuilding the Syrian military and seek to sign significant contracts with Iran, after the arms embargo against it expires in October 2020. The Russians play an important role in Egypt's military

acquisitions, and the Russian-American competition over the Middle East weapons market creates the risk of erosion of the self-restraints in American exports to the region, as well as of Washington's commitment to maintain Israel's Quality Military Edge (QME).

- b. The Russians are currently building ten nuclear reactors in the Middle East (two in Iran, four in Egypt, and four in Turkey), and their intentional position of not selling them dual-use technology that could serve a military nuclear program, such as the nuclear fuel cycle, is noteworthy. This approach could provide Russia with an important future role in attempts to steer the region away from a nuclear arms race. At the same time, the existence of a Russian alternative helps Saudi Arabia's bargaining with the United States on Washington's demand from Riyadh to commit itself to the "golden standard" of nuclear non-proliferation, that could limit it in the future, in the event that it seeks to pursue a military nuclear program.
- c. Energy: The potential for a conflict of interest with Russia with regard to the Israeli export of natural gas to Europe could intensify in light of Moscow's interest in maintaining its status as one of Europe's major natural gas suppliers. Along with Turkey, Russia operates natural gas export pipelines to Southern Europe and strives to become a partner in natural gas production projects in the region (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Egypt). Although the Russians do not address this issue publicly, they might perceive the emerging gas consortium of Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Italy as a threat to their interests.
- d. Agricultural produce: One impact of the Western economic sanctions against Russia has been the growth of the agricultural sector in Russia and its transformation into the world's largest exporter of wheat and other grains. Countries in the Middle East, including Israel, are among Russia's major customers in this area, which provide

Moscow with influence over food security in some of the countries in the region. On the other hand, for Israel, which specializes in agricultural knowledge and cooperates with Russia in this field, opportunities may arise in this context.

Bilateral Relations

As Israelis went to the Knesset elections on September 17, 2019, President Putin [spoke](#) at the annual conference of Keren Hayesod (the United Israel Appeal) in Moscow. There, he articulated his view of Israel as a Russian speaking country, due to the almost two million Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union who live there, and he praised Prime Minister Netanyahu for his personal contribution to the relations between the two countries.

Putin exaggerated the size of the “Russian community” in Israel: the number of immigrants from the former Soviet Union living in the country is [closer to one million](#), some of whom live their lives in Hebrew more than in Russian, while others, from the younger generations, do not know Russian at all. Their percentage of the overall Israeli population stands at 11-15 percent. It is not a homogenous community, including as to their political preferences, although the older population does indeed maintain cultural ties with Russia.

Putin’s attempt to rehabilitate Russia’s standing as a global power has also involved the nurturing of [relations with the Russian-speaking diaspora](#) around the world. In the post-Soviet space, Moscow is trying to extend its protection to members of the Russian minorities in a manner that undermines the sovereignty of the new states that were established on the ruins of the Soviet Union. Until the past few years, the “Russians” in Israel have served as a bridge between the two countries by consuming Russian-language shows, books, television, and media; purchasing food products from Russia; traveling to Russia; and doing business with Russia. Israel’s cherishing of the Red Army veterans, who are present either physically

or in the memory of almost every family of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, has further strengthened this bond.

Tackling the [bilateral relations](#) issues creates many problems and opportunities that both governments can resolve or exploit, for example, reducing the difficulties of movement between countries, easing commercial investments and projects, and resolving issues of double military service or the normalization of pension rights for people with dual citizenship.

Putin’s many summit meetings with Netanyahu between 2019 and 2020, including during the three recent election campaigns in Israel, have given him an image of someone who has the potential to exercise [political influence](#) in Israel. Putin enjoys this image of influence, especially as exercising it through official engagement with Israel puts him above any would-be accusation of illegitimate intervention in the democratic process. The two leaders met before each of the recent elections:

- a. Before the April 2019 elections: The two met in Russia in February 2019, approximately a month and a half before the election (this meeting signaled the end of the crisis surrounding the downing of the Russian plane in September 2018), and again five days before the election (the Russian-assisted return of the remains of missing soldier Zacharia Baumel, who was killed in the Battle of Sultan Yacoub in 1982).
- b. Before the elections of September 2019: The two met in Russia approximately one week before Israelis went to the polls.
- c. Before the elections of March 2020: The leaders met in Israel on January 23, 2020 (at the World Holocaust Forum), and in Russia on January 30, 2020 (the return of Naama Issachar), approximately one month before the election.

[Putin leads Russian policy vis-à-vis Israel](#), and his personal relationship with the Israeli Prime Minister plays a prominent role. This is not unique to Israel: Putin is known for nurturing personal relationships with other leaders. It is

also not unique with regard to Netanyahu, as Putin maintained good relations with Ehud Olmert and Ariel Sharon. Still, Putin presumably believes that 11 years of ongoing cooperative work with Netanyahu has enabled him to bring Israeli-Russian relations to their current historical high point.

This level of personal relations had decisive importance in recent years in the ability to resolve problematic issues. This dynamic found prominent expression in Putin's approach to the crisis surrounding the downing of the Russian plane by the Syrians, in which the Russian Ministry of Defense assigned responsibility for the deaths of twelve Russian officers to Israel. Although Putin backed the Russian military, he also determined that it was not an intentional act by Israel, which contained the crisis in time and limited it solely to the security realm (unlike the Russian-Turkish crisis in November 2015, when a military incident led to across-the-board damage to all realms of the bilateral relations).

The episode of Naama Issachar's arrest in Russia was also resolved only through Netanyahu's intensive involvement with Putin (although dealing with it on this level had a price, as the episode cast a shadow over the Israeli-Russian agenda for a four-month period). In this way, Putin has succeeded in using this relationship to advance the issues that appeal to him personally, with an emphasis on restoring to Moscow control over the Christian [religious sites in Jerusalem](#) that were built during the Czarist era.

In comparison to the Russian past, Putin's [friendliness toward the Jews](#) and his appreciation of Israel's successes is noteworthy. He praises Israel's accomplishments in [the fight against terrorism](#), its resolve in defending its security interests, and [its technological accomplishments](#). The Russians are interested in benefiting from Israel's defense and civilian technological assistance, as in their [purchase](#) of UAVs in 2009, which even today serve as work horses of the Russian army. Nonetheless, the American-Russian competition makes it

extremely difficult for Israel to cooperate with Russia in the realms of science and technology due to a desire to avoid doing damage to cooperative efforts with the West. In any event, Russia and Israel compete on the global arms market and [are suspicious of one another](#) regarding the intelligence and offensive potential of the cyber arsenal at their disposal.

Moreover, under Putin, criticism of Israel has decreased regarding disagreements between the countries that have no solution on the horizon. It has become less public and less automatic on the Israeli-Russian dispute regarding the Iranian nuclear program, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the issue of Israel's nuclear posture. Both countries have found ways to limit the impact of these disagreements on the existing areas of cooperation. They have also discovered that ongoing dialogue on these matters may result in significant pragmatic understandings (for example, [freezing the sale](#) to Iran of the S300 air defense system in 2010).

Nonetheless, disagreements could return to the limelight if conflicts of interest between the states increase, or if Russia identifies in them potential excess profit for itself. For example, the Russians are expected to oppose the annexation of the West Bank according to the "deal of the century." They may play a leading role in providing assistance to Palestinians in international organizations in order to delegitimize the Israeli effort, as this would provide them with the image of a global power and deepen the gap between the United States and the European Union, which is likely, along with the Russians, to oppose annexation. Yet if Moscow identifies the potential for political quid pro quo or pragmatic propositions in Jerusalem or Washington, it might be responsive, at the expense of the Palestinians.

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Russia's Status in the Middle East

At the time of this writing, the total number of people in Russia who have been infected by Covid-19 continues to grow. It is difficult to

understand the immediate impact of the crisis, let alone anticipate its long term implications. The [market volatility](#) stemming from the oil price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia and the renewed agreement to reduce the supply of oil within the framework of OPEC+ that was achieved with US assistance serve to demonstrate the profound strategic instability of the period. There is a serious possibility that the Russian economy will suffer a long economic recession following the pandemic.

This caveat notwithstanding, it appears that as long as Putin continues at the helm in Moscow, the most likely scenario is that Russian priorities with regard to the Middle East will remain unchanged. Although Russia tends to be hit harder by economic crises than Western countries, it is precisely for this reason that it [prepared itself better than most countries in the world, from a macro-economic perspective](#), to absorb the shocks. Its economy's major dependence on the price of oil and natural gas will only push it more forcefully toward engaging in regional matters on the day after Covid-19. The region's proximity to Russia spells high cost-benefit effectiveness of its dealings with the Middle East.

Looking Ahead

The Middle East will continue to be a comfortable arena for Russia's attempt to demonstrate that it is a global power. Its geographic proximity, the American trend of reducing its involvement in the region, and the construction of a network of shared interests with each of the countries in the region facilitates fertile ground for Moscow's [proactive](#) policy, despite the economic limitations and the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The great power competition is reminiscent of the Cold War and Russia's hostility toward Israel in the last century. However, it is also essential to understand the [difference](#) inherent in the current reality. Russian-American competition is not ideological, and Russia does not view Israel as an adversary, but as a partner.

In recent years (and particularly during the crisis following the downing of the plane in 2018), Russia has demonstrated that it has the ability to pose significant challenges to Israeli interests. On the other hand, it has also been proven that dialogue with Moscow and political maneuvering between Russia and the West can offset the risks to Israel and plant the seeds of new opportunities. Israel has no better strategic alternative to its alliance with the United States. However, in circumstances of regional security challenges, it should:

- a. Maintain its successes of recent years through the existing dialogue with Moscow, which enables it to limit Russia's ability to inflict damage, and to promote cooperative efforts with Moscow, especially vis-à-vis the Iranian entrenchment in Syria.
- b. Strengthen the mechanisms for across-the-board dialogue with Moscow, below the leadership echelon, in order to make the relationship less dependent on the fate of specific individuals and reduce the prices that may need to be paid in resolving disagreements at the senior level (as illustrated in the Naama Issachar affair).
- c. Demonstrate sensitivity in the coming year regarding symbolic gestures pertaining to the historical memory in the Israeli-American-Russian triangle (due to the US presidential elections and the marking of the 75th anniversary of the victory over the Nazis).
- d. Prepare to promote its interests vis-à-vis the emerging scenario regarding Moscow's aspirations to reach "interim arrangements" on a wide agenda with the Trump administration and the EU countries prior to the presidential election in the United States. From the perspective of the Kremlin leadership, these "interim arrangements" might halt the erosion in relations between Moscow and Washington in the event that Biden is elected president and are likely to include the pressing issues in the Middle East (Syria, Iran, Libya).

- e. Continue exercising caution in its military activity in Syria, to avoid hurting Russian interests, such as injury to its soldiers and assets or actions that are perceived as an attempt to topple the Assad regime. Such actions would erode Russia's ability to turn a blind eye on Israeli strikes in Syria with a potential for a graver crisis than during the downing of the Russian plane by the Syrians in 2018.
- f. In the long term, prepare for scenarios of more severe manifestations of great power competition in the Middle East, especially if, as a result of the double pressure on Beijing and Moscow, China is forced into a more active role in the region and cooperates with Russia to weaken the American influence.
- g. Strengthen the governmental and academic capacities for learning about Russia and developing policy tools for contending with it. Such improved mechanisms might help to offset Russian means of coercion and strengthen Israel's ability to mobilize Moscow for Israeli needs and interests.

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