



Russian Policy in the Middle East in the Context of the Struggle Against the West: Insights for Israel

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In recent years, Moscow has accelerated its system of partnerships with destabilizing actors around the world based on the logic of conflict with the West, which has intensified against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Many of these actors—states and terrorist organizations—operate in the Middle East and are involved in the armed conflicts with Israel in a way that makes this Russian strategy an indirect threat to Israel. Israel's assertive actions in friction zones in the last year as part of its multi-arena war, which have impacted Russian interests and assets, and President Trump's push for quick agreements with Russia, could restrain Russia's provocative strategy. An analysis of the Kremlin's considerations and interests in the region helps understand the causal relationship between the developments and the change in Russia's conduct. Israel should understand how best to interpret Moscow's activity, which Israeli actions contribute to restraining Russia's relations with actors that are hostile to Israel, and how the negotiations between Moscow and Washington will affect Russia's policies in the region.

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A Historical Lens on the Russian Approach to Actors in the Middle East

Throughout almost the entire the Cold War—from the 1950s to the end of the 1980s—the Soviet Union's policy on the Israeli-Arab conflict in the Middle East converged, as a rule, on a dualistic view of the inter-bloc competition. Thus, the “progressive” Arab countries (socialist and nationalist regimes that were established in the second third of the twentieth century) received Soviet diplomatic and political support as well as military aid. In contrast, Israel, which

from its outset abandoned its non-aligned socialist agenda, was seen by Moscow as an ally of the Western powers (Britain, France, and the United States) and thus was treated with suspicion and hostility even during the years when there were diplomatic relations between Israel and Russia, and certainly after they were severed following the Six Day War. In each round of Arab-Israeli wars, the Soviet Union stood clearly with the Arab countries, including providing military aid and deploying military advisors in Syrian and Egyptian territory, with Russian fighter pilots even participating in

battles against the Israeli Air Force ([Operation Rimon 20, 1970](#)).

With the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union (later Russia) and Israel in 1991, the principles of Moscow's policy toward the region changed. The dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the Russian desire to build a positive relationship with the Western world, as well as the large-scale immigration from Soviet republics to Israel that began at the end of the 1980s, served as a solid foundation for the development of diplomatic relations between Israel and Russia. The threat of Islamist terrorism that Moscow experienced in the northern Caucasus also contributed indirectly.

Russia began to pursue a policy of “talking to everyone” in the Middle East and gradually (and especially in the 2000s) increased its activity in the region—reinforcing its good relations with Israel and continued cooperation with Arab actors (including Syria and the Palestinian factions) and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This constructive approach (from an Israeli and Western perspective) was expressed in an effort to influence the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as part of the Quartet (the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the UN), mediation attempts following the capture of Gilad Shalit, and the accelerated development of its relations with Israel in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century.

Russia simultaneously developed and deepened its relations with Hamas (which it sees as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, alongside the Palestinian Authority), expanded its military and intelligence presence in Syria in [full synergy with Assad's army and security agencies](#) (while maintaining security coordination with Israel) and gradually strengthened its military relationship with Iran through cooperation on the war in Syria and also in other areas. In addition, Russia invested considerably in developing economic and business relations, especially surrounding

the coordination of energy prices (the OPEC+ mechanism), the development of resource-intensive infrastructure projects (nuclear power plants in Iran, Egypt, Turkey, and more), and numerous arms sales deals.

The War in Ukraine

Although signs of this shift can be traced back to 2014, the prominent shift in logic of the Kremlin's foreign strategy occurred after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the West's severe diplomatic, economic, and military response. Until then, the need to cope with Western pressure was not a primary consideration in determining Russian policy toward one actor or another, but the heavy international pressure following the invasion caused Russia to change its priorities in managing its international relations and focus on a diplomatic agenda that was adversarial toward the West with an emphasis on the Global South (non-Western countries). This was expressed in several efforts: First, mobilizing support from countries with preexisting anti-Western positions (such as Iran); second, ensuring that the neutral countries—those that did not join the sanctions that the West imposed—would not change their position (Israel, the Gulf countries, and many others); and third, maintaining bilateral relations with countries belonging to Western “clubs” but with a more careful approach toward Russia (such as Turkey, a NATO member).

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These trends in the Middle East became even more pronounced after October 7, 2023. Russia chose to adopt a pro-Hamas position because this cohered with its policy of mobilizing support in countries in the Global South, as most of them see Israel as the West's representative

in the region. Thus, Israel itself is not a valuable target of Russian attacks, but Russia's support for Hamas serves its broader diplomatic agenda, which is dictated by the constraints of the war in Ukraine and the conflict with the West.

Aside from maximizing the connection with actors that do not promote a Western agenda, the Kremlin is looking for opportunities to harm Western countries and intentionally weaken them, as long as its actions do not cross the threshold of direct military escalation. This conduct—which can be called hybrid warfare—is expressed in a variety of efforts: From the diplomatic-public perception campaign, which, in the context of the war in the Middle East [presented the United States and the West as responsible for humanitarian catastrophes](#) that Israel supposedly deliberately causes in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon; to large-scale disinformation campaigns ([including in Israel](#)) to inflame internal tensions and undermine social and political cohesion; to physical sabotage operations in Western countries, [assaults on diplomats and intelligence personnel](#), and encouraging violent activity against Western interests.

Hybrid warfare methods are not new, but their prominence in the Kremlin's policy toolkit has increased in the past two years. Both strategies—expanding the leveraging of relations with actors that are not pro-Western and the hybrid struggle against Western interests and assets—are expressed in Russian foreign policy in general and in the Middle East in particular. It is important to remember that the Middle East is just one region in the overall “playground,” in which Russia has assets, leverage, and interests that create opportunities for action. The current dialogue between Moscow and Washington (details below) reflects precisely this wider global playing field where the powers engage in a variety of arenas in which interests can be advanced in certain regions at the expense of concessions on other issues.

In June 2024, [Putin began to discuss the possibility of supplying advanced weapons](#)

to “regions from which attacks may be possible against sensitive targets in countries providing weapons to Ukraine.” This provocative statement was preceded by a decision by Kyiv's main arms suppliers (chiefly the United States during the Biden administration) to partially remove restrictions on the use of their weapons within Russian territory, which allowed the Ukrainians to improve their positions in the war. Since then, Britain, France, and the United States have expanded the authorization for attacks inside Russian territory several times, including the use of precision missiles with ranges of hundreds of kilometers. Following this shift in policy, Russia has started to look for ways to hurt the West, including via military proxies—as a kind of “symmetric” response—and, to this end, has strengthened its relations with some of the most prominent anti-Western actors.

Examples of the Development of Russia's Relations with Anti-Western Actors Throughout the Middle East

The Houthis—The most prominent example of Russia's proactive policy of establishing practical leverage against the West is the dynamic of their relations with the Ansar Allah movement of the Houthis, who have declared that the rationale behind their attacks on international shipping routes and Israeli territory is to cause military and economic harm to Israel. The talks with the Houthis, who are disrupting the movement of merchant ships in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, began at the end of 2023. But in June 2024 (following the announcement of Russia's strategy of providing weapons to the West's enemies), [reports](#) emerged that [Russia was considering transferring advanced weapons, specifically cruise missiles](#), to the movement. Ostensibly Saudi Arabia had been informed (apparently by the Russians themselves) and blocked the transfer, suggesting that Moscow promoted the move with a certain degree of conspicuousness (though not publicly). Furthermore, the Russian aid effort included [sending several military intelligence officers to](#)

Houthi bases for military consultations of one kind or another, transferring satellite photos to improve the guidance of the launches that the Houthis carry out, and talks involving the veteran Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout to promote arms deals.

It is evident that this development is directly connected to the Western countries' decision to approve Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory, and it is an expression of increased pressure (via the Axis of Resistance) on Western forces and interests in the Middle East. The Russians (and the Chinese) have apparently also reached agreements with the Houthis on international political backing for the movement in return for refraining from attacking ships belonging to the two countries—although since then, several ships carrying Russian cargo have been affected by the attacks from Yemen. Moreover, the Houthis made at least two visits to Moscow—in January 2024 (when they discussed, among other things, the effort to end the war in the Gaza Strip) and in July 2024. The visits were presented publicly as diplomatic dialogue with the Russian Foreign Ministry, but military talks probably also took place.

Hamas—Following the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, it appears that Russia exploited the war in Gaza (and Lebanon) in the diplomatic-public relations sphere to chastise and weaken the West—both with respect to the Ukrainian arena (reducing attention and drawing resources) and the Middle East (boosting anti-Western sentiment among the public and local political elites). Since Hamas' attack on Israel, Russia has hosted at least six official visits from leaders of Hamas' military wing in Moscow (October 26, January 19, the meeting of the Palestinian factions on March 1, June 24, October 23, and February 3, 2025), while providing the terrorist organization with political backing at the UN, strengthening Hamas, and declaring it a recognized political actor and even as a legitimate party in discussions on ending the war.

There are also reports of Hamas receiving Russian weapons, including an unverified claim by a Hamas official that it produces light weapons in Gaza under a Russian franchise. These reports have not been refuted or denied by Russia—in contrast with the situation less than a decade ago when Putin took pride in counterterrorism cooperation with Israel and saw it as a model for future activity. It should be noted that even if Russia was interested in providing material, military, and other assistance to Hamas, doing so is logistically difficult. However, Hamas' continued presence as an active player in the arena forces Israel and its allies in the West to commit resources to combatting it, and thus serves Russia.

Syria—The Assad regime, Moscow's longtime protégé, fell (December 8, 2024) following an attack by the rebel coalition led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), notwithstanding the Russian forces deployed in the country to prop up the regime. Moscow has reached temporary understandings with the new regime in Damascus on not forcefully expelling its forces and is now conducting complex negotiations on permanently maintaining its military bases on the Syrian coast and on terms for cooperation. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of the lack of progress in lifting Western sanctions (against HTS), Russia is offering itself as an economic, logistical, and perhaps also military partner (the Syrian army depends on Russian weapons) to Damascus while continuing to sharply criticize Israel for its actions in the Syrian arena.

Iran—A surge in military cooperation between Russia and Iran began in the summer of 2022 due to Tehran's willingness to supply Moscow with weapons for the war in Ukraine (suicide drones, ballistic missiles, and other munitions), which Russia urgently needed once it began to exhaust its own independent capabilities. On the Russian side, this cooperation is reflected in major deals to supply weapons to Iran, primarily focused on aircraft, including the advanced SU-35 aircraft (a deal that had started to take

shape even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine but was pushed forward starting in 2022, though it has not yet been completed). Additionally, there have been reports of the deployment of Russian electronic warfare systems in Iran due to the increased American presence in the region, against the backdrop of the tensions between Israel and Iran in the second half of 2024.

Regarding Israel, Russia has oscillated between publicly backing Iran—it justified the missile attack on Israel in April 2024, claiming that it was an act of self-defense according to the UN Charter—and calling for de-escalation and even offering to mediate between Iran and Israel after the exchange of strikes in October, due to growing concerns of a broader escalation between the sides.

In January 2025 Moscow and Tehran signed a strategic partnership agreement that emphasized their intentions to continue to develop mutual assistance programs, including in the political-military sphere. However, it should be noted that the cooperation between the two countries is limited, in part due to Russia's inability to resupply Iran with new air defense systems to replace those damaged by Israel (due to Russia's own internal needs), delays in the supply of weapons promised by Russia, and mutual accusations regarding the collapse of Assad's army and regime in Syria.

The Impact of Trump's Return to the White House

After Donald Trump, who declared his intention to work toward quickly ending the war in Ukraine, was reelected as US president, a rapid process of rapprochement between Russia and the United States began. This is reflected in high-level talks (up to president level) and official bilateral meetings in Riyadh, Istanbul, Moscow and Washington, attended by the foreign ministers, national security advisors and presidential special envoys—for the first time since the war in Ukraine began.

Among the topics for discussion and coordination in Riyadh (where the main focus

was the possibility of a deal to end the war in Ukraine under terms favorable to the Kremlin), issues in the Middle East were also raised—in particular, the war in Gaza and Russia's presence in Syria. Trump is interested in a complex deal with Russia, apparently even at the cost of undermining US allies in Europe and Ukraine, and he is pursuing a wide agenda with many topics for discussion with the Kremlin.

Thanks to Trump, Russia has managed to return to the forefront of the international stage while speaking “one on one” with the United States, without having to make any concessions (unlike during Biden's term, when the U.S. demanded Russia halt its aggression as a precondition for any normalization talks) and without the presence of the other Western representatives. Russia's goal is to be officially recognized as an actor on par with the United States, reminiscent of the division of the world at the Yalta Conference at the end of World War II. To this end, Putin is willing to offer a wide variety of avenues for cooperation (economic, diplomatic, and political-military).

Russian policy in the international arena in general and the Middle East in particular seemingly contradicts the spirit of developments currently taking shape between the two leaders. However, in practice, all of the means and tools that Russia has accumulated over the years that have the potential to harm the West and the United States, may serve as bargaining chips in negotiations between the two powers. This is because Putin has found a convenient partner in Trump, who is willing to compromise on the principles of collegiality and the demands on Russia that are shared by all of the Western countries, for the sake of political pragmatism.

It is too early to tell whether the emerging negotiations will truly succeed and lead to concrete agreements, but in any case, Russia's assets in the anti-Western countries in the region—such as its bases in Syria, aid to the Houthis, and cooperation with Iran—may be useful as either carrots (conceding some of them) or sticks (accelerating relations and

utilizing them to a greater extent against American interests).

Implications for Israel and Recommendations

As stated above, Russia's policy in the Middle East aims to expand its toolkit in the global struggle (which is mainly against the West) while attempting to exploit the various local actors in its favor and create an image of dominance and influence. As Russia sees things, Israel is a regional actor with several main characteristics:

- On one hand, Israel has a clear affiliation with the Western camp, which makes it a convenient target for hostile criticism from Moscow. Russia thus “wins points” with countries in the Global South, inside and outside of the Middle East, through both purely rhetorical actions and by providing aid to Israel's adversaries. This public criticism helps Russia strengthen relations with countries and organizations in conflict with the West and its allies, thus further solidifying its influence in the region. In this respect, Israel itself is not a primary target of Russia's adversarial activity (unlike Europe, for example) and the Kremlin's interests are sufficiently served by a regular routine of diplomatic libels and [a disinformation campaign](#) to undermine internal social and political stability in Israel.
- On the other hand, Israel has significant offensive capabilities (first and foremost military ones) that occasionally remind Russia of the risks associated with its overtly anti-Israel policy (as expressed, for example, from October 7, 2023 until the summer and fall of 2024). Thus, in the final months of 2024 and especially after the beginning of Operation Northern Arrows in Lebanon, Israel began exerting significant force in various arenas (primarily in Lebanon, Iran, and Syria), which, among other things, (indirectly) led to the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus. Following Israel's actions, Russia adjusted its approach, launching a series of initiatives ([unusual](#)

[visits to Israel by Kremlin representatives](#) and involvement in an offer to mediate vis-à-vis Iran [and Lebanon](#)) aimed at mitigating potential damage from Israel's continued operations. These initiatives did not necessarily bear fruit (particularly in the Syrian arena) but reflected Moscow's concern and its understanding that it must take the Israeli factor more into account. This change highlights the main insight that Israel must internalize as a default: Russia is acting opportunistically in the region and is not taking Israel's interests into consideration, but it is sensitive to the potential damage that Jerusalem can cause it and is willing to make adjustments in order to minimize the dangers involved.

Following the decision to attack Hezbollah and as part of its powerful response against Iran, Israel's use of force has effectively begun to pose a threat to Russian assets (its military and political base in Syria, Iran's stability as a secure and reliable supplier for Russia, and more) and contributed to weakening Russia's standing in the region.

So far, Israel has not acted according to this principle, and even now, it is refraining from taking direct action against Russian interests, even when the goal is to push back against diplomatic or media attacks from Russia. However, following the decision to attack Hezbollah and as part of its powerful response against Iran, Israel's use of force has effectively begun to pose a threat to Russian assets (its military and political base in Syria, Iran's stability as a secure and reliable supplier for Russia, and more) and contributed to weakening Russia's standing in the region.

While from Jerusalem's perspective, this was (apparently) not done intentionally or with the goal of undermining Russia's standing in the region, it nevertheless indicates a way to reduce Russia's motivation to act against Israel: Israel should demonstrate power and a willingness to

act against Russian interests wherever Moscow supports Israel's enemies. The first stage is the stability of the actors and geographical regions that the Kremlin relies on—after the fall of Assad, this includes the Russians' shaky position with respect to Syria's new leadership and, of course, the security and internal stability of the regime in Iran. The second stage should be identifying other clear areas where Israel can hurt Russia and block its efforts, for example, regarding the credibility of Russian weapons and pointing out the manipulative nature of sensitive political narratives (for example, "Nazism" in Ukraine). These require thorough analytical development and the formulation of concrete targets that correspond with Israel's political and security objectives, including in the "soft" spheres of building up resilience against hostile foreign influence (such as Russian disinformation campaigns and psychological warfare).

At present, the Trump administration has offered the Kremlin the possibility of a multi-arena inter-power settlement in which Russia is working to maximize the scope of its (compromise) proposals across various global arenas, including the Middle East, in return for securing its core demands regarding ending the war in Ukraine—an issue of paramount importance for the Kremlin. To this end, if the negotiations proceed successfully, Russia may demonstrate a willingness to decrease—temporarily and for the purpose of reaching an agreement on Ukraine only—its involvement in supporting anti-Western forces throughout the region, including Hamas, Iran, the Houthis, and the Shiite militias, and offer a constructive approach regarding American efforts to resolve the regional conflicts. These offers have not yet been made (except for the Russian offer to Iran

to mediate between Tehran and Washington, which has not yet borne fruit), but if the first stages of the negotiations between the American and Russian teams are successful, they will probably be made soon.

Israel must understand that this is a purely instrumental move that aims to achieve concessions from the other side (Trump) and not a fundamental, long-term change of strategy, and should not be swayed by Russia's rhetoric. It is important to coordinate with the Americans and to insist on concrete steps from Russia—public criticism of terrorist organizations, transferring information or other assistance to curb their activities, withdrawing forces and ceasing cooperation with destabilizing actors (such as the Houthis), cooperation on international mechanisms to limit hostile activities (a new nuclear deal with Iran)—all without expanding Russia's capabilities in the arena, which may be leveraged at later stages.

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