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Russia / World

Is Russia supporting Hezbollah?

Direct Russia-Hezbollah relationship could lead to any number of dangerous scenarios that spiral out of control

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As its relationships with the United States, Europe and Turkey have deteriorated since its interventions in Ukraine and Syria, one country Moscow remained on good terms with is Israel.

This reflects the increasingly friendly Russian-Israeli relationship since Putin first burst on the scene. Putin [visited](#) Israel twice – in 2005 and 2012 – making him the first Russian leader to ever travel to the Jewish state. While there, he went to the [Western Wall](#) — Judaism’s holiest site — as well as Israel’s [Yad Vashem](#) Holocaust memorial, where Putin observed a moment of silence. Russia also now takes a more balanced approach to Israel's terrorism and security concerns, especially compared to the Soviet period. In 2008 for example, the Kremlin [promised](#) Israel it would cancel a contract to sell S300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran, which President Dmitry Medvedev officially did in 2010. Likewise, though Putin [told](#) Netanyahu to end Israel's 2014 war with Hamas, he also hosted a leading Israeli rabbi [saying](#) “I support Israel’s battle that is intended to keep its citizens protected” and asked the rabbi to tell Netanyahu he is a true friend of Israel. More recently, Putin and Netanyahu [agreed](#) to continue cooperation in the fight against terrorism, and the Russians did not interfere when Israel assassinated a prominent terrorist in a Damascus suburb.

While suddenly seeing the Russian military astride its northern border is certainly not something Israel finds ideal, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was twice [reassured](#) by Putin that he respected Israel’s key “red line” in Syria: that advanced weapons which could alter the balance of power between Israel and Hezbollah not be transferred via Syria to the Iranian-backed terrorist group. Israel has enforced this red line since the beginning of the Syrian civil war by [striking](#) arms convoys suspected of going from Syria to Hezbollah’s strongholds in Lebanon.

Putin’s reassurance to Netanyahu that Russia understands Israel’s anti-Hezbollah policy is therefore no small thing for the Israelis. Israel and Hezbollah fought a bloody but inconclusive war in 2006, and if they clash again, Israel will rely heavily on its superior firepower to defeat Hezbollah. Though Hezbollah is tied down in Syria

for now, Israel's military considers another conflict with Hezbollah to be almost [inevitable](#).

For this reason, a recent [story](#) from *The Daily Beast* that Russia supplies weapons directly to Hezbollah was a thunderbolt. According to the report, a mid-level Hezbollah commander said "we are strategic allies in the Middle East right now—the Russians are our allies and give us weapons." Another Hezbollah commander claimed that Russia did not even place limits on how Hezbollah can use the weaponry it allegedly obtains directly from Russia.

Given Putin's generally friendly relationship with Israel, what might motivate Moscow to directly supply Hezbollah? The most likely answer is a cold hard calculation by Russia of its national interests. When the Russian military deployed to Syria, Putin [discovered](#) that the Assad regime was weaker than previously thought. Putin clearly prioritizes salvaging the Syrian regime – and thus protecting Russia's political, economic and military interests in the country – and the Russians possess more confidence in Hezbollah than they do in Assad's forces. In this regard, the policy might simply represent the great weight Putin places on protecting its interests in Syria.

Although it's not difficult to see Russia's motivations for supplying Hezbollah with weapons, many Israelis doubt the story is accurate. Yossi Melman, author of a book on the history of Mossad entitled *Spies Against Armageddon*, [tweeted](#) the story was a "Daily Beast fail," while a leading Israeli defense [questioned](#) the report as well.

Eyal Zisser, a professor at the University of Tel Aviv and an expert on Hezbollah, elaborated on the reasons for Israeli skepticism, saying "I doubt it [the Daily Beast story] very much. The Russians are careful to not engage directly with Hezbollah. Russia's message to the Israelis is quite clear - as long as you do not sabotage our efforts in Syria you are free to do with Hezbollah whatever you want." Zisser also wonders why Hezbollah would bother revealing its Russian pipeline in the form it did, noting that "if Hezbollah wants to publish something important it has its own sources like al-Akbar, it does not need such an indirect link like the Daily Beast."

If Russia is not supplying arms directly to Hezbollah, why does the Lebanese organization claim Moscow does? Its possible Hezbollah is simply engaging in information warfare to confuse the Israelis. According to one report in an Israeli paper, an anonymous western official [described](#) the story as "an awkward attempt by Hezbollah to plant disinformation via a respected Western news site in order to muddy the waters between Israel and Russia."

Not all Israeli analysts dismiss the story though. **Yiftah Shapir**, who heads the Middle East Military Balance project at Israel's **Institute of National Security Studies**, said he truly believes the main thrust of the story is genuine. While **Shapir** does not believe that Russia would openly sell P-800 Yakhont cruise missiles and the Buk Surface to air missiles (SA-17) to Hezbollah – the main threats as far as Israel is concerned – he believes that Hezbollah is resupplied with Russian weaponry. This means "artillery shells for guns they already have, artillery rockets for MRLs they already have – and anti-tank missiles (such as the Kornet) for launchers they already have," concluded **Shapir**.

Even if – as [Shapir](#) believes - Hezbollah does not receive Russia's most advanced weaponry, the real issue is the possibility of a direct connection between Russia and Hezbollah. [Shapir](#) bluntly notes that “Hezbollah worries Israel a great deal... Everything they do worries us.” [Shapir](#) is right to be concerned. During the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah clash in Lebanon, the Israelis [discovered](#) their Merkava tanks were extremely vulnerable to Hezbollah's Kornet anti-tank missiles – the same weapons [Shapir](#) believes the Lebanese group may receive from the Russians.

Adding a further degree of uncertainty to the story, neither the Israeli or Russian governments have acknowledged the report yet. This is not surprising, for a direct Russia-Hezbollah relationship could lead to any number of dangerous scenarios that spiral out of control. For example, what happens if Israel strikes Russian arms shipments to Hezbollah and Russian troops are killed in the process? Alternatively, what if Russia defends an arms transfer to Hezbollah by shooting down an Israeli jet with one of its S-400 missiles recently deployed to Syria? Either one of these scenarios could lead to a rapid escalation that would draw the United States – still Israel's closest ally despite the longstanding tensions between Netanyahu and President Obama - into the fray.

However, even if one of these worst case scenarios does not come to pass, at a minimum, Israel's freedom for maneuver in Syria is diminished by the Russian presence. Whereas previously Israel owned the skies over Syria, the Israeli air force must now coordinate its activities with the Russians to avoid accidental clashes.

Moreover, according to a report co-authored by Israeli Brigadier General Muni Katz and Nadav Pollak for the Washington Institute, simply working alongside the Russians will significantly upgrade Hezbollah's military capabilities. “Hezbollah will be exposed to Russian military thought, which entails sophisticated operational concepts and advanced military planning skills,” the report notes, including “how to organize an effective command-and-control structure, how to choose different weapons for different scenarios, how to create additional targets after entering a battlefield, and how to maintain logistical routes.” The authors argue this will enhance Hezbollah's offensive warfare and urban capabilities, which better positions the group to make good on Nasrallah's pledge to launch strikes into northern Israel's Galilee region in the next war. Hezbollah can also watch the weapons systems the Russians use, and according to the report, “can learn how to use its existing weapons more effectively, and examine systems it might want to procure in the future.” In sum, even though the report does not suggest that Russia is training Hezbollah to fight Israel, thanks to Moscow's Syrian intervention, Israel will face a more powerful and sophisticated adversary the next time it clashes with the terrorist group.

With the Russian Bear clearly in Syria for the long haul, expect the Israelis to keep a very close eye on the Russian-Hezbollah relationship going forward.

- See more at: <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/russia-world/russia-supporting-hezbollah#sthash.BWNj15ZF.dpuf>