



PUTIN AND RUSSIA'S MIDDLE EASTERN POLICY

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Russian President Vladimir Putin is currently pursuing a two track policy towards the Middle East, allowing Russia to develop friendly ties with Israel while simultaneously nurturing alternative, sometimes competing, interests with Arab countries. This non-ideological policy has allowed Russia to reclaim a part of the economic and strategic leverage it lost following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus far, Russia has successfully signed diplomatic, military, and energy deals and developed ties with both Israel and its Arab neighbors without significantly alienating one or the other. Whether Putin's embrace of Hamas in March 2006 or his continued armament of Iran will damage Russia's relations with Israel is still an open question.

RUSSIA'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

Russia's policy towards the Middle East today is a far cry from the ideologically-driven, Cold War zero-sum thinking which guided the Kremlin for many years. In fact, Putin's policy towards the region has been anything but ideological.¹ Learning from U.S. policymakers who for many years developed relations with both Arab states and Israel and were thus at an advantage when it came to resolving disputes and capitalizing on economic opportunities, Russian officials now similarly avoid any ideological principle that would force their policy to be zero-sum. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the Russian newspaper *Pravda*, "Russia's policy is neither pro-Arab, nor pro-Israel. It is aimed at securing Russian national interests. Maintaining close and friendly ties with Arab states and Israel is among them."²

The Kremlin's *modus vivendi* in the region is marked by pragmatism, cynicism, and economic calculations occasionally mixed with an undertone of anti-Americanism. Russian policymakers recognize that the

Middle East is not a primary area of concern, even if it is, increasingly, becoming an area where Russia can exert influence.³ While Russia plays more than a "niche role"⁴ in the region, it lacks the well-defined, long-term strategy necessary to be considered a "real great power."⁵ Russia simply cannot penetrate the Middle East as the Soviet Union once could nor does it necessarily have an interest in doing so. Russia's limited capacity to affect change far from her borders forces Russian leaders to distinguish primary from secondary objectives. Tangibly, this has meant that Russia has concentrated on maintaining its traditional role in the region as a leading arms supplier while simultaneously opening new markets to Russian companies. This was demonstrated most clearly when on his only trip to the Middle East in April of 2005, Putin's fellow travelers included the chief executives from the MiG Corporation and Rosoboroneksport (Russian Defense Exports).⁶ Indeed, Putin is interested not only in continuing exporting arms to the region, but also expanding the role of Russian companies in the energy sector. For years, Russian firms have been

buying oil from Iraq and then reselling it to Europe and the United States, but only recently has Russia begun crafting energy deals with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Jordan, and even Israel.⁷

Progress in Russian-Israeli Relations under Putin

During Putin's presidency, Israel has come to play an increasingly significant role in Russia's Middle East policy. Putin has done more than any other Russian leader to improve economic and strategic ties with Israel. As the same time, however, the Kremlin's dealings with some of Israel's adversaries have complicated the full development of Russian-Israeli ties, as was seen in the Israeli response to the Kremlin's controversial February 2006 decision to invite Hamas to Moscow for meetings with senior Russian officials.

On the surface, Russian-Israeli cooperation has never been closer. As Putin told his Israeli hosts in late April 2005, "We have all the conditions for success, and most important, there is the will and desire on both sides to strengthen our friendship, trust and cooperation and to build a constructive partnership together."⁸ Trade between the countries has doubled under Putin and today amounts to close to \$1.5 billion in direct trade,⁹ and over a billion in energy deals. Israelis and Russians are working together in sectors spanning heavy industry, aviation, energy, and medicine. Since 1989, almost one million Jews from the former Soviet Union have immigrated to Israel, creating a natural economic bridge between the two countries. Today, they make up approximately 20 percent of Israel's population. As Putin told

the Egyptian Newspaper *Al-Ahram* in April of 2005, Russia "is not indifferent to the fate of these people,"¹⁰ many of whom have dual Israeli/Russian citizenship and business ties with both countries. Among the immigrants have been several powerful Russian oligarchs—Leonid Nevzlin, Vladimir Dubov, and Mikhail Brudno (all former partners of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in Yukos), Vladimir Gusinsky (a media tycoon), and Arkadi Gaydamak (a suspected arms dealer). Several of the richest businessmen who invest in Israel are also wanted by the Russian government, which alleges that the men funneled hundreds of millions of dollars into Israeli bank accounts.¹¹ Thus far, the Israeli government has turned down Moscow's requests for their extradition.

Yet lingering scandals surrounding Russian-Israeli businessmen have not affected cooperation in other areas—most notably, in the energy sector. Although the Israeli government does not publicize its energy exporters—it worries that oil-rich Persian Gulf states who already boycott it may act to close off energy routes for Israel-bound shipments from other countries—one senior-Israeli diplomat revealed that 88 percent of Israel's crude oil comes from the FSU.¹² The deal's current structure provides Israel with sour (high sulfur) oil, sometimes of poor quality, at reduced market prices. Moreover, Israel's dependence on Russian energy is increasing. Following a June 2004 meeting between Alexey Miller, the Chairman of Gazprom, and then Prime Minister Sharon, Israel promised to increase the share of Russian gas in its energy balance from one percent to 25 percent by 2025.¹³ In November 2005, it was reported that the Blue Stream Natural Gas Pipeline—a \$3.4 billion

dollar project between Russia and Turkey—would be expanded to Israel through the Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline to allow Russian and Azerbaijani oil and gas to be exported by tanker through the Red Sea to China and through the Suez Canal to Southern Europe.¹⁴ Were the Blue Stream Pipeline to be expanded to Eilat, Israel would instantly become a major regional hub of oil and gas, receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in tariff revenues and, maybe even more importantly, finally achieving some much needed energy security. In March 2006, following a return visit by Alexey Miller to Israel, then acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated that Gazprom had agreed to supply Israel with gas.¹⁵

The most visible area of cooperation between Russia and Israel has been in counterterrorism. Israel was one of the first nations to offer its support to Russia after the Beslan tragedy in 2004 in which almost 300 people, mostly children, were killed in a hostage standoff with Chechen rebels. “Israel, which has been struggling against terrorism for many years, stands alongside the Russian people and sends its condolences,” Ariel Sharon stated, “there is no justification for terrorism and this is the time for the free, just and humanitarian world to unite and fight this horrific plague, which acknowledges neither borders nor limitations.”¹⁶ These statements were not a break from the past. Since 1999, Israeli officials have stressed the similarity between Chechen and Palestinian Islamist terrorists, and reiterated the need to respond forcefully to terrorism more broadly.¹⁷

Following an onslaught of terrorist attacks between 1999 and 2004 on Russian apartment buildings, subways, airlines, and

theaters—and inadequate and often bungled responses by Russia’s security services—Russia’s intelligence services began serious collaboration with their counterparts in Jerusalem. Though Mossad agents secretly held meetings with Russians at the Kremlin during Yeltsin’s tenure and Putin’s first years in office, the level of cooperation increased dramatically in the post-Beslan security environment. As Ehud Olmert, then Israel’s Vice Premier, stated in November of 2004, “I think there is a growing realization in Russia that they [Russians] have to become more prepared for future terror attacks and that it’s a good idea to compare notes with us [Israelis].”¹⁸ Senior level talks have focused on three areas: training, border security, and arms. Since 2004, Russian and Israeli anti-terror forces have secretly trained together, and there are plans to hold joint counterterrorism exercises.¹⁹ The Israeli police, by Moscow’s request, also prepared reports detailing alternative responses to the hostage crises at the Nord-Ost Theater and Beslan.²⁰

On the issue of border security, Israel has proposed that Moscow reform its intelligence gathering and border-protection agencies. In November 2005, *The Jerusalem Post* reported that Israeli and Russian experts were jointly developing a plan for a security barrier along the border with Chechnya, similar to the Israeli barrier in Gaza and the West Bank.²¹ Finally, as has been widely reported in the Russian and Israeli press, Dmitry Kozak, Putin’s envoy to the Northern Caucasus region, has spent the majority of time since his appointment in March 2004 shuttling between Moscow and Jerusalem signing counter-terrorism and arms deals.²² In November 2005, for example, the state-

funded *RIA News* reported that Kozak had negotiated a deal whereby Israel would sell unmanned flying vehicles to Russia to help patrol the border with Chechnya.²³ Even the tension caused by Hamas' visit to Moscow in March 2006 did not significantly disrupt counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries. A joint counter-terrorism working group—formed between the law enforcement agencies in both countries in the autumn of 2004—met in Israel on March 13, 2006, days after Hamas' visit, to create a single database of international terrorist organizations and their leaders.²⁴ On the weapons front, the two countries are jointly producing and selling military equipment on the world market including helicopters and AWACS aircraft.²⁵ In private conversations senior Israeli officials admit that other arms contracts have been signed, but no details have been made public.

Lingering Issues in Russian-Israeli Relations

Yet for all the progress made, major issues of contention remain. Israeli officials are currently most concerned by Russia's continued support for Iran's nuclear programs, despite the Iranian government's explicit threats to destroy Israel. Yet other issues of concern for Israel include Russian arms sales to Syria, Moscow's legitimization of Hamas, and the Kremlin's inattention to rising anti-Semitism in Russia. Russian officials, for their part, have been frustrated by Israeli resistance to Russia's efforts to play a larger role in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the end, however, Israel has much more reason to be worried about Russia's actions rather than the other way around, because it holds far fewer levers

of influence by which to affect Moscow's interests.

Most threatening to the future of Russian-Israeli relations is Russia's continued construction of a nuclear reactor in Iran, which most Israelis feel threatens their country's existence. Russia, for its part, does not believe that Israel has much cause for concern. This stems from the fact that while Putin sees his country's dealings with Iran as primarily an "economic issue," Israel views it as a security concern. More so than anyone else, Russians are aware that the market for their antiquated nuclear technology is shrinking, and that the \$10 billion agreement they signed in July 2002 to provide Iran with six nuclear reactors over the next decade is a deal the Russian nuclear industry desperately needs in order to stay afloat.²⁶ The project, which employs several thousand top-grade Russian scientists who would otherwise struggle to find work, pays Russia in hard currency—something many of their other arms importers are reluctant to do.²⁷ While centered on the sale of nuclear technologies, Russia's cooperation with Iran revolves around other areas as well. As reported in *Vremya Novosti* in April 2005, Tehran was in the process of purchasing Tu-204 jets and a "communication satellite" from Russia. In exchange for the cooperation, Tehran has floated the idea that Russian companies will be able to play a role in oil and gas projects in Iran.²⁸

Israel interprets Russia's dealings with Iran as a threat to its national security.²⁹ If Iran uses the Russian civilian nuclear technology to build a nuclear weapon, it would cause a radical shift in the regional balance of power, possibly catalyzing a regional nuclear arms race (led by Saudi

Arabia and Egypt), and, likely, a nuclear stand-off between Israel and Iran. Giving nuclear technologies to an Iran led by radical ayatollahs and a president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who denies the Holocaust and repeatedly calls for Israel to be “wiped out from the map of the world,”³⁰ is simply unacceptable to the Israelis. The issue of Iran looms large over all areas of Russian-Israeli relations, so much so that Dr. Robert O. Freedman, a leading expert on Russian-Israeli relations, believes that “Russia is working *against* Israel on all the major issues.”³¹ No amount of counter-terrorism cooperation or trade links will be able to save Russian-Israeli relations if Russia remains complicit in Iran’s nuclear aspirations.

The issue of Russian-Syrian cooperation is additionally irksome for Israel. Russia and Syria, which are united in their opposition to U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, have a historical record of diplomatic, military, and economic co-operation that dates from the Soviet period. The invitation to Moscow that Putin extended to Syrian president Bashar al-Asad in 2005 was the first such overture by a Russian leader in over a dozen years. “Syria is a country with which the Soviet Union had, and today’s Russia has, special [and] very warm relations,”³² said Putin as he welcomed Syrian President Bashar al-Asad to Moscow in late January 2005. With Putin’s explicit approval, Moscow forgave 73 percent of the \$13.4 billion debt owed by Damascus, a significant amount of money for Russia.³³ Moreover, in April 2005, Russia sold Strelets surface-to-air missiles to Syria, thereby ignoring vocal Israeli and American concerns that the weapons could fall into the hands of Hizballah.³⁴ When asked on Israeli television

whether he felt the sale of the Strelets defense system posed a threat to Israel, Putin won himself few friends in Israel by laughing at the question and stating that “sure, Israeli aircraft will no longer be able to fly over Bashar Asad’s palace.”³⁵ Later, in September 2005, Russia sold munitions to Syria and promised to double the number of Syrian officers trained in Russian military academies.³⁶ Russian officials have also stopped short of confronting Syrian officials over their providing shelter for senior Hamas officials, even though Israeli officials have repeatedly asked them to do so. Russia’s arms supplies and cooperation with her Soviet-era client has worried Israeli and American officials who consider Syria to be a “terrorist safe-haven” and a regional menace.

Some of Russia’s domestic policies have also irked Israeli officials. Specifically disturbing was Putin’s continued refusal to put Hamas and Hizballah on Russia’s list of terrorist organizations, allowing money to flow freely from Russia to two of Israel’s worst enemies. This concern became especially pronounced when in March 2006 Putin invited Hamas to Moscow claiming that Russia was in a unique position to do so since, unlike the United States and the EU, it had “never considered Hamas a terrorist organization.”³⁷ At the time, Israeli Education Minister Meir Sheerit compared Putin’s invitation to Hamas to a hypothetical Israeli invitation of Chechen leaders: “[Putin], I believe, would feel very bad if Israel were to invite the Chechen terror organizations into Israel and give them legitimacy.”³⁸ Other Israelis shared the belief that it was hypocritical for Russian officials to travel to Jerusalem and ask Israeli intelligence services

for help in countering their own terrorist threat if the Kremlin was simultaneously acknowledging terrorist organizations seeking Israel's destruction.

From the position of the Israeli foreign ministry, equally worrisome has been the Kremlin's indifference to the spike in anti-Semitism in Russia in 2004 and 2005—due to what the Russian think-tank *SOVA* calls a “general growth of xenophobic sentiments in the society” and the “growth of ultra-nationalist organizations.”³⁹ On November 4, 2005, for example, ten thousand neo-fascists marched down the main streets of Moscow carrying signs with swastikas and giving Nazi salutes to onlookers. In the weeks that followed, Putin's Kremlin issued no condemnation, giving the impression that those instigating hate and violence in the Russian capital would not face punishment. Israeli fears were confirmed when a few months later, on January 11, 2006, a skinhead ran into Moscow's main synagogue with a knife screaming “Heil Hitler!” In the mayhem that ensued, the 20-year old neo-Nazi stabbed eight people before being arrested.⁴⁰ One Israeli Foreign Ministry official worries that the Kremlin will move to assuage the concerns of Russia's Muslim population, numbering some 20 million, over controversial issues such as Chechnya by allowing anti-Semitism to fester.⁴¹ It is conspicuous that Putin closed down two Russian newspapers for printing cartoons of the prophet Mohammed just days before Hamas visited Moscow.⁴² The official's opinion might have been further vindicated by Putin's statements on a visit to Chechnya in December 2005 when he told Chechen militants that in fact “Russia has always been the most loyal, reliable and consistent

defender of Islamic interests.”⁴³ The president's political statement is telling, given that Orthodox Russia is becoming increasingly Muslim due to higher Muslim birthrates and the unprecedented rate of conversion to Islam.⁴⁴

For some in Israel's defense community, this conglomeration of events paints a rather disturbing picture—one of a Russian state willing to help Israel's enemies and violate Israel's basic security requirements. Senior Israelis in the defense industry openly wonder whose side Russia is really on. In talking to the Israeli defense establishment about Russia's objectives in the region, the word most frequently used is “suspicion”—suspicion about its post-imperial ambitions, suspicion about its unchecked arms trade, and suspicion about its behind-the-scenes dealings.⁴⁵ Some Israelis believe that Putin misled them when he promised in 2002 that “Russia will never help Israel's enemies.”⁴⁶ Many wonder aloud whether Russia is reverting back to its Soviet-era policies, especially in the wake of Putin's official embrace of Hamas.

Russian officials have also, on an intermittent basis, objected to Israel's policies. They regularly join the chorus of voices condemning Israel at the United Nations for Israeli incursions into the occupied Palestinian territories, and they have protested Israeli threats against Iran and Syria. In fact, out of 21 UN votes relating to Israel going back from September 2004, Russia voted against Israel 17 times and abstained only four times.⁴⁷ This trend may have been motivated in part by Russia's perception that Israel has been reluctant to allow Russia a greater role in mediating the Arab-Israeli conflict. For several years, Putin

has been positioning himself as such—joining the Quartet, supporting the Road Map for Peace, building ties with both Israel and her Arab neighbors—but at least thus far, his advances have been largely rebuffed. During his visit to Israel in May 2005, Putin proposed that Moscow host a Mideast Peace Conference for senior Israeli and Palestinian officials in January 2006. While the Palestinians accepted the proposal, Israelis simply brushed it aside.⁴⁸

Impact on Russia's Other Interests in the Middle East

Russia's relationship with Israel does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it has an effect—direct or indirect—on Russia's other interests in the Middle East. Syria and Iran are most directly affected by continuing Russian-Israeli cooperation, but other Russian partners, including the Palestinian Authority, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Yemen are also involved. On occasion, Russia's relationship with Israel has impeded its ties with other countries and, in the case of Syria, done so in rather dramatic ways.

As Russia has tried to reposition itself from being a benefactor to being a partner of the Arab states, there has been a general nostalgia among some for a more "Soviet" Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. Sometimes this comes through in public statements, sometimes in private requests. Often regional leaders remind Russian leaders of their historical ties to the Arab world. Speaking to students at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in January 2005, Syrian President Bashar Asad asserted that "Russia's role in the world is

very large, and it has a colossal authority, especially in the countries of the Third World."⁴⁹ He went on to state that "in these countries, there are great hopes that Russia will restore its earlier positions in world affairs."⁵⁰ Egypt, whom Russia supplies with hardware, cars, and trucks and with whom Russia is in discussion over the sale of a research satellite and portable missiles, is also mindful of the historical ties that bind the countries.⁵¹ As Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit told Putin during his visit to Egypt in April 2005, "Egypt remembers its friends who have always supported that country in hard times."⁵² Meanwhile Algeria, which signed a \$7.5 billion arms contract with Russia in March 2006, has similarly expressed hope that Russia will become more active in the Middle East.⁵³ For countries that hope to see Moscow revert to Soviet-era policies in the Middle East by cooling relations with Israel and placing political and personal concerns above economic calculations in dealings with the Arab states, Russian cooperation with Israel cannot be a welcome sign. Russia's invitation to Hamas in March 2006 as well as its pledge to forgive Algeria \$4.74 billion of its Soviet era debt that same month must be seen, at the very least, as an attempt to placate these Arab concerns.

Syria

The country most directly affected by Russia's increasingly warm ties with Israel has been Syria, which has seen the quantity and quality of its arms supplies cut as Russian-Israeli cooperation has increased. This tension became especially pronounced

in the highly publicized arms negotiations of recent years. Since 2003, reports have surfaced about Russia's potential sale to Syria of Iskander-E high-precision surface-to-air missiles, shoulder-fired Igla SA-18s, Strelts missiles, S-300 PMU2 air defense missiles, and the Tor-M1 advanced air defense system.⁵⁴ Taken together, weapons sales of this magnitude could dent in Israel's military superiority in the region and, as some defense analysts in Russia gently pointed out, threaten U.S. soldiers serving in Iraq.⁵⁵ Israeli and American authorities jointly pressured Russia to abandon the weapons deal, citing their joint fear that such weapons would fall into the wrong hands. In January 2005, Former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres told the *Associated Press* that any missile sales to Syria were unacceptable, arguing that "we have enough problems on the ground in Syria and we don't need more problems from the sky."⁵⁶ Meanwhile, American officials warned Putin that any advanced weapons sales to Syria would jeopardize the Bush-Putin summit in Bratislava scheduled for February 2005.⁵⁷

Israeli and American pressure eventually bore fruit when Putin shelved the deal in late 2004, but not before expressing several choice words. Putin accused "Israeli sources" of pouring "huge sums of money"⁵⁸ into the presidential campaign of Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine—an opposition leader whom the Kremlin opposed—and of unduly threatening Syria's President Asad. Only later, once the deal was taken off the table, did Putin take personal credit for stopping the transfer of "serious systems" to Syria. As he later boasted to the Russian daily *Kommersant* in January 2006, "The negotiations really took place. Our military people were ready to

supply Syria with the new missile systems 'Iskander,' but I prohibited realization of this."⁵⁹ In the end, even though some Strelts missiles were sold to Syria, Russia did everything in its power to assuage Israeli concerns. Another independent Russian newspaper, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, reported in February 2006 that "insiders say that the Russian military informed its Israeli colleagues of the tactical-technical characteristics of the SAMs."⁶⁰ This was a clear indication that Russia was attempting to minimize the fallout from its weapons sale to Syria. Mark N. Katz, an expert on Syrian-Russian relations, believes that Israeli pressure on Russia succeeded in changing Moscow's weapons sale to Damascus: "Indeed, the fact that Moscow would not sell Syria the air defense missiles it apparently wanted most (S-300, Iskander-E, and Igla) due to American and Israeli objections must have been a clear indication to Damascus of how sensitivity to Israeli security concerns limits the extent to which Moscow is willing to cooperate with Syria."⁶¹ The case of Syria demonstrates Putin's attempts to maintain traditional Arab allies while simultaneously building relations with Israel.

There are several reasons why Putin gave into Israeli and U.S. pressure. For one, Russian-Israeli trade in absolute terms is far greater than Russian-Syrian trade, thus making it more costly to jeopardize relations with Jerusalem. Additionally, as Russian defense analyst Ruslan Pukhov pointed out in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, "selling weapons to this country [Syria] would solve problems of one or two Russian companies but will not change the situation in the military-industrial sector."⁶² Finally, Syria has historically failed to repay debts to Russia and its lack of hard

currency made the arms sale questionable on economic grounds. In the end, the total value of the Strelets missile sale was only \$100 million, in part because this was a sum the Syrians could pay on the spot.

The fact that Russia did everything in its power to assuage Israeli security fears—while at the same time going through with a deal that enriched Russian arms manufacturers—certainly could have done little to please the Syrians. It also did not help that in March 2005, Russia sided with the United States, Europe, and Israel in pressuring Syria to withdraw from Lebanon following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. At the time, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov defended the action by stating that he was acting in accordance with a UN Security Council Resolution, but his forceful demand that “Syria must withdraw from Lebanon”⁶³ must have come as a surprise to Damascus.

Since Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon, however, Russian officials have attempted to mend the rift in their relationship. Chief of the General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky traveled to Syria for three days in February 2006 to meet with President Asad and other top Syrian officials. Among the topics discussed were Hamas (some of whose leadership is based in Syria) and the prospects for new weapons deals. Some Russian military analysts predicted that Russia would again propose to sell the Tunguska mobile air defense system to Damascus.⁶⁴ Overall, however, it is clear that Putin’s warming relationship with Israel in 2004 and 2005 strongly affected Russia’s strategic choices regarding Syria.

Iran

While Russian-Israeli cooperation has had a direct impact on Russian-Syrian relations, it is far less clear how much of an impact it has had on Iran. On one hand, following Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s declaration in October 2005 that Israel should be wiped off the map, Russia took the unprecedented step of condemning the statements of the Iranian leader—something it has consistently refrained from doing out of fear that an escalation in rhetoric could have unintended consequences on the nuclear relations between the two countries. In a clear effort to calm Israeli concerns, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called Ahmadinejad’s comments “unacceptable” and promised to “bring this to the attention of the Iranians.”⁶⁵ He further admitted that comments such as those made by Ahmadinejad damaged Russia’s interests with Iran and give “an additional argument... to those who favor transferring the Iranian nuclear issue to the UN Security Council.”⁶⁶

At the same time, however, Israeli objections have had no affect either on Russia’s arms sales to Iran, or on the even more contentious issue of Russian-Iranian nuclear cooperation. As the Russian Defense Minister Ivanov stated in December 2005, “Russia is supplying Iran with conventional armaments and military hardware such as armored vehicles and air defense equipment of a limited range. This is ordinary commercial trade and we are not going to end it.”⁶⁷ Andrei Piontkovsky, a well respected Russian analyst, argued in March 2006 that the Russian sale of the Tor M1 9M330 Air Defense System to Iran takes away Israel’s final option at a military strike against Iran’s

nuclear installations.⁶⁸ If he is correct, Russia will have not only sold nuclear technologies to Iran but also tacitly protected Iran's nuclear program.

Palestinian Authority

Although there is little evidence that Russia's ties with Israel have damaged its relations with the Palestinian Authority, it is clear that Palestinian leaders have been surprised by the recent expansion of cooperation between Moscow and Jerusalem over the past several years. This is understandable given the Soviet Union's role as the leading benefactor and champion of Yasir Arafat, Fatah, and the Palestinian cause during the 1970s and 1980s. Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, while reducing Russia's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, continued to support the Palestinian Authority, for instance, sending 50 armored personnel carriers to the Authority in 1994.⁶⁹ When Putin came to power in 2000, support for the Palestinian Authority continued, especially at the United Nations—where Russia repeatedly voted against Israeli actions in the Palestinian territories. On his only visit to the territories in April 2005, Putin visited the grave of Yasir Arafat and promised to “provide the Palestinian leadership with technical help, supplies of equipment and training.”⁷⁰ It later emerged that Putin had promised the Palestinians 50 armored personnel carriers, two Mi-17 military transport helicopters, and training for their security services.⁷¹ Only after substantial prodding from the Israeli military establishment did Putin renege on his commitments to the Palestinians. Russia has, however, left open the possibility of sending

the helicopters to the newly elected Hamas government.⁷²

Assessing Putin's Israel Policy

While Putin's actions towards Israel are certainly a break from the past in many ways, his cooperation with Hamas, Syria, and Iran are too dramatic to ignore. What explains this policy of working with Israel, while also working with Israel's enemies? There are several explanations, ranging from broader structural shifts to lasting personal interests.

International dynamics have changed drastically in recent years, compelling the Kremlin to reexamine its historically pro-Arab policies in the Middle East. With the Soviet Union gone, the Kremlin has seen its international relevance and prestige plummet. Making the transition from impractical super-power geopolitics to pragmatic and level-headed foreign policy of a rising power has proven to be a difficult task, especially in a region where the Soviets used to exert heavy dominance, but has since been drifting increasingly westward towards the United States. As a result, Russia is sometimes forced to sit on the sidelines as many of its former arms importers and trade partners, such as Syria, Iraq, and Iran, are castigated as pariah states by Americans carrying the torch of democracy.

Beyond classroom tales of lost grandeur and frustration rooted in political impotence lie murkier personal and economic interests. During the Soviet-era, many high-level relationships were formed between diplomats, spies, and businessmen in Moscow and their counterparts in the Arab capitals of the Middle East. These connections, dating back to the arms trades of

the 1960s-1980s, are especially tight among the old-timers in the Russian military who have friends in high-posts in the energy-rich Persian Gulf states. Some of these men even fought and lost alongside the Arabs against Israel in 1973. Many are still embarrassed by the fiascos of the 1960s and 1970s, when the Soviets passed forged documents to the Egyptians to precipitate the war of 1967, or when Soviet Sinai defenses were overrun by Israeli armored divisions. Many in the Kremlin continue to view Israel in much the same light as it was viewed by the Party apparatus in the 1950s—as “an agent of American imperialism.”⁷³

The clearest example of this type of Soviet thinking in the post-Soviet era has been expressed by Yevgeny Primakov, Boris Yeltsin’s Arabist foreign minister. Throughout the 1990s, Primakov encouraged Yeltsin to move Russia away from Israel and towards some of the Soviet Union’s more traditional allies—notably with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. These deals of the past continue to cast a long and dark shadow on current events, helping to explain why top Kremlin operatives and politicians, including the former Chief of Staff for Putin and Yeltsin, are at the center of the United Nations Oil-for-Food Scandal.⁷⁴ Russia’s close relationship with Syria can similarly be seen as a result of close interpersonal relations. Pavel Felgengauer, one of Russia’s top defense analysts, believes that the relationship can be attributed to the “powerful pro-Syrian lobby in the Kremlin.”⁷⁵ He points specifically to Viktor Ivanov, a confidant of Putin’s who also heads *Almaz-Antei*, a Russian monopoly producing anti-aircraft weapons systems. If not for the

personal interests and sympathies of high ranking government officials in the Kremlin, it is possible that Russia would temper its policies of arming Syria, legitimizing Hamas and Hizballah, and sharing nuclear technologies with dangerous Islamist clerics.

Putin’s Real Goals vis-à-vis Israel

Given the new international context and the lingering personal interests within his government, Putin has had the unenviable task of steering his country’s Middle East policy. While he has relied on Israel to diversify Russian economic interests and train Russia’s beleaguered security apparatus, he has also used the high visibility of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to position himself in the eyes of the international community as a key actor in the peace process. All along, Putin has tried to market Russia as an independent, unbiased party with a large role to play in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Due to the uncertainty about what Russia’s future policies will be towards Israel and the rest of the Middle East, there are few high probabilities. Yet one thing is certain. Given that Russia will take its turn as President of the G-8 this year, and that the meeting will be held in St. Petersburg, Putin will feel pressure to project Russian power. For Israel, this will mean more of Russia’s involvement in Israeli-Palestinian affairs as Putin tries to counterweigh the negative portrayal of his country as a leading weapons and energy supplier. Putin will also continue to sit on the proverbial two chairs. For a country whose prestige and power have declined precipitously in the last two decades,

Putin has done an effective job of leveraging competing interests in one of the world's most volatile regions.

The ambiguity of his two track policy causes confusion and difficulties for some of Moscow's allies in the region, but from Russia's perspective, Putin has succeeded in gaining an economic foothold, developing neutral or warm ties with all the states therein, and maintaining Russia's seat at the adults' table. A final goal of Putin's may be to use Russia's increasing influence in the Middle East as a bargaining chip with the United States. It is possible that Russia is cozying up to governments and organizations with questionable objectives in the Middle East, so as to later trade a pledge of "non-interference" with the United States—by pledging to keep out of the Middle East, Russia could demand that the U.S. keep out of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

In this young new millennium, relations between adversaries seem to have been turned on their head. The historically anti-Israel Kremlin now cooperates with the Jewish state, while it is the Arab states who agonize over the future of their leading arms supplier and historic benefactor. Ultimately, however, as the past several years have demonstrated, Putin will continue to employ a two-track policy which is likely to gradually strengthen Russia's position in the region. So long as Putin can avoid being cornered by the international community into "choosing sides," Russia will gain from building ties with both Israel and her enemies.

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NOTES

¹ One could in fact make the case that the neoconservatives in the Bush Administration have supplanted the Soviet Communists as the leading ideologues trying to reshape the region.

² Sergey Borisov, "Russia and Israel to join forces in anti-terrorist cooperation," *Pravda*, September 7, 2004.

³ For Russian policymakers, the "Middle East" is only of primary strategic importance if it includes Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey—what is typically referred to as the "Greater Middle East." Wars, insurgencies, the spread of radical Islamic networks, and the proliferation of nuclear materials in the Middle East all pose a threat to Russia's interests in the "near-abroad."

⁴ *Ibid.* Olga Oliker and Natasha Yefimova, "Workshop on the Future of the Greater Middle East and the Prospects for U.S.-Russian Partnership," *Carnegie-RAND Occasional Paper*, July 2004.

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