9. Avoiding Zero-Sum: Israel and Russia in an Evolving Middle East

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Since the end of the Cold War, and particularly under Vladimir Putin, Russia's relations with Israel have transformed dramatically. From open hostility, confrontation, and proxy warfare, Jerusalem and Moscow now maintain a cooperative, politically effective, and even friendly relationship that compartmentalizes points of friction and avoids crossing red-lines *vis-à-vis* Israel's bedrock alliance with Washington. Even in Syria, where conditions have been ripe for a clash, Israel and Russia have worked out an arrangement that allows them to coordinate their actions while pursuing their differing vital interests.

Against the backdrop of "converging and conflicting" strategic and security interests, the two countries have qualitatively improved diplomatic, economic and cultural ties – the latter deriving partly from the outsized expatriate Russia-speaking population that lives in Israel[1].

The two countries share a number of overlapping interests and, for its part, Israel has largely managed to avoid zero-sum tradeoffs with respect to Russia's confrontation with the West over Crimea and Ukraine. Israel has maneuvered within the confines of its American alliance, while at the same time adapting to Russia's reemergence as a global and regional player.

[1] The term is borrowed from O. Raanan and V. Michlin, *Israel-Russia Relations: Mutual Esteem or Cold-Eyed Utilitarianism?*, The Arena, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, 14 October 2018.

Since Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015 saw its military operating on Israel's northern flank – a dramatic development not seen since the days of Soviet support for Egypt under Nasser and Sadat – Russia has been very high on Israel's national security agenda. Jerusalem faces the twin challenges of deconfliction – as a military clash with Russia in Syria would be calamitous – and the pursuit of its self-declared "Campaign Between the Wars", which aims to roll back Iranian and Hezbollah entrenchment in a weak and broken Syria.

Israel maneuvered a calculated response when Moscow faced a major confrontation with Washington and intense international opprobrium in 2014-2016, and maintained this posture even as countries began seeking rapprochement with Russia[2]. Until now, Jerusalem has managed its ties with Russia largely through bilateral channels – including enhanced and frequent dialogue between the leaders of both countries. But with the increasing likelihood of an all-out victory by Bashar al-Assad's regime – and the semi-permanent Russian role this may entail – Israel's approach is taking on a more multidimensional appearance. This was recently illustrated by the June 2019 trilateral dialogue in Jerusalem between Israeli, American, and Russian national security advisors.

The meeting symbolizes a further development in the new phase of Israeli-Russian ties. Israel adapts to Moscow's enlarged role in the Middle East and is simultaneously drawn into the new international game played in the Middle East by Russia and the United States. In contrast with the sense of crisis that took hold following Russia's initial military intervention in Syria in 2015, the national security advisors' meeting suggests that Israel has the potential to play a bridging role – however limited – between the two superpowers.

From the Israeli perspective, the Jerusalem trilateral was "an achievement for Israel's policy, which has succeeded in navigating between Moscow and Washington's interests and in being

[2] Ibid.

a party to the superpowers' dialogue on the future of Syria and on Iranian intervention in that country"[3]. However, a word of caution is in order, as Israel might be punching above its weight by exposing its core national interests to the volatile relations between the United States and Russia.

It is useful to assess the regional and international context behind Israel's flexible and adaptive posture toward Russia. Israel is neither a marginal actor nor a decisive player in determining Russia's fortunes in the region and beyond, but will continue to play an important role. Should Russia's re-entry into the region's security and political affairs advance further, or should Russia's tensions with the United States and the West worsen, then Israel will face new dilemmas that could potentially limit its steadily deepening ties with Russia.

This chapter examines the historical context of Israeli-Russian relations, including the dramatic impact wrought by the Syrian civil war; assesses the central role of Israel's alliance with Washington; reviews current Israeli and Russian priorities; and concludes with an analysis of overlapping interests and sources of tension.

Back to the Future: How Moscow and Jerusalem Rediscovered Each Other

In the aftermath of World War II, with the defeat or exhaustion of traditional European powers, the acceleration of decolonization, regional flashpoints like Korea, and an emerging Cold War, Israel and the Soviet Union (USSR) initially enjoyed relatively positive relations. Moreover, under Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin, Moscow voted in favor of UN General Assembly Resolution 181, which partitioned Mandatory Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, and Moscow was the first to grant de jure recognition to the State of Israel. Moscow's bloc of votes

[3] Z. Magen, "The Trilateral Israel-US-Russia meeting: Motives and Ramifications", *INSS Insight*, no. 1178, 23 June 2019.

was not insignificant, and neither was its consent to a Czech arms deal that was vital during Israel's fight for existence in the 1948-49 Arab-Israeli war. The young Jewish state enjoyed full diplomatic relations with the USSR, which had also played an important role in the defeat of Hitler and the fascist regimes that sought to annihilate the Jewish population in Europe and beyond.

But relations were complicated, and not only due to Israel's increasing alignment with the West in the Cold War. Tensions were exacerbated by increasingly harsh Soviet policies against the USSR's large Jewish population, which after the Holocaust was the largest Jewish community in the world outside of North America, and far larger than the Jewish population of Israel in its early years.

Over time, Cold War alignments led to a complete deterioration of Israeli-Soviet relations. Moscow decided to break off diplomatic ties with Israel in 1967, and the Soviets were heavily involved in arming Egypt and Syria – at times even fighting on behalf of Egypt – and generously supported Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian cause. Aside from a periodic opening in the 1970s that allowed for limited Jewish emigration from the USSR, Israeli-Soviet relations remained fraught until the last days of the Cold War.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War opened the way for a transformation. The first and most impactful sign was Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's termination of restrictions on Jewish emigration, which led to a flood of immigrants to Israel numbering in the hundreds of thousands, a development that reshaped Israeli society and brought with it enormous gains in human capital.

The collapse of the USSR allowed Russia and Israel to reestablish formal diplomatic relations. However, Russia turned inward and assumed a greatly reduced role on the international stage as it faced enormous governance and economic challenges at home. Moscow's international focus turned mainly to its immediate neighborhood of former Soviet states – its "near abroad".

The era ushered in by President Vladimir Putin led to a gradual shift in Russian behavior, and with it Moscow's reemergence as an assertive international player. As Putin sought to reassert and diversify Russian power, he began to view Israel as an opportunity. Particularly in his second term in office, Putin has looked for ways to draw closer to Israel without giving up key levers of international and regional influence, such as Moscow's close relations with Iran – a perennial challenge to both Israel and the United States – or its continued support for Palestinians in international fora.

Putin traveled to Israel in 2005, and again in 2012 – a journey no Soviet leader ever made – visits that included religious elements connected to the Russian Orthodox Church's footprint in the "holy land" – a major source of domestic legitimacy for Putin[4].

Further promoting cultural and historical ties between the two states, Israel established a war memorial in the coastal city of Netanya commemorating the Red Army's defeat of Hitler, the only such memorial outside the former Soviet sphere and a visible and public gesture that was not lost on Russia. The move was interpreted as Israel de facto siding with Russia in its ideological struggle against what Moscow sees as an attempt by East European countries to rewrite the historic memory of the Soviet victory and sacrifice in World War II, although Israel has never formally addressed this sensitive issue.

As relations improved, the two countries entered into a visa waiver arrangement in 2008 that had a dramatic impact on people-to-people and economic ties and led to a surge in travel. As relations warmed, Israel's standing in Russia also changed, with state-controlled media beginning to report on Israel in more positive terms – for example, even referring to Israel's "right to

[4] See "Владимир Путин посетил Русскую духовную миссию в Иерусалиме" ("Vladimir Putin visited the Russian Spiritual Mission in Jerusalem"), Kremlin press release, 28 April 2005; see also J. Krasna, *Moscow on the Mediterranean*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 7 June 2018, p. 11.

defend itself" in coverage of Israeli-Hamas fighting in Gaza[5].

Still, alongside this thaw in relations there existed on-going tensions, most notably related to Moscow's continued arms sales to Israel's adversaries, voting against Israel in international fora, and refusal to back away from its close ties with Israel's arch-enemy Iran.

In 2011, the popular uprisings across the Middle East led to a confluence of events that challenged both countries, albeit in different ways. Moscow's deep suspicion of US and Western intentions spiked with the US-led military operation in Libya and the overthrow of Muammar al-Qaddafi, which unfolded alongside Hosni Mubarak's fall in Egypt. Meanwhile, Israel became increasingly nervous about the empowerment of Islamist and populist movements throughout the region, which Israeli leaders often viewed as hostile to the Jewish state. So, on one level, Moscow and Jerusalem drew closer together, and yet even the convulsions of the Arab Spring did little to bridge the gaping divide over Russia's close ties with Iran.

Syria

During the Cold War, Syria was a major flashpoint and irritant in relations between Moscow and Jerusalem, in contrast to the current situation, which presents a more nuanced and multi-dimensional impact on each country's interests. Although it is far from clear if there is any commonality in terms of Russia's and Israel's end-game approach in Syria, for the time being the conflict is the principal issue – perhaps even more than Iran – defining the relationship. In essence, the bilateral relationship is increasingly derivative of how the conflict in Syria unfolds.

As Syria's public protests began peacefully in 2011 and soon met with brutal repression by the Assad regime, Israel took a neutral approach toward the civil conflict and did not pick a side in the war. As the situation worsened, violence escalated,

[5] O. Raanan and V. Michlin (2018).

and the country's institutions began to crumble, Israel acted swiftly to reinforce its northeast frontier with Syria on the Golan Heights and the tri-border area with Jordan, but otherwise kept its distance from the drama that was unfolding inside its traditional adversary to the north.

Russia's reaction could not have been more different. Moscow acted early on to shield the Assad regime from international criticism and blocked any opening for legitimizing international intervention. Russia repeatedly vetoed UN Security Council actions on Syria, and was able to constrict international mediation efforts – including the mission of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan – in ways it felt would not threaten Assad's hold on power. As the civil war escalated, Moscow ramped up its economic and military support for Damascus, doing so with a tepid reproach from the United States and few meaningful sanctions, due to the US administration's hesitancy to more forcefully challenge Moscow while it was still engaged in a larger policy of engagement.

Moscow faced little push-back for its obstructionism and assistance to the Assad regime, in part also because Washington believed Assad's fall was inevitable – particularly following the Damascus bombings in the summer of 2012 that targeted key regime figures. All the while Israel maintained its role on the sidelines, unsure if the Syrian opposition could deliver a fatal blow to Assad, yet unwilling to be seen as favoring a regime that was committing mass atrocities – not to mention conscious of the decades of hostility between the countries.

Over time, as the Syrian state disintegrated and the country's borders became porous and lawless, Israel began to miss the predictability that had long defined its heavily fortified but largely peaceful Golan frontier – an arrangement negotiated by then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1974, with the assent of the USSR[6].

[6] According to the terms of the 1974 US-negotiated agreement, the UN peacekeeping force that would be established (United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF) would draw from troop contributing countries "who

Israel took measures to physically reinforce its border with Syria, reportedly maintaining quiet channels with – and providing limited assistance to – rebel groups along the border to ensure stability and prevent Iranian or Hezbollah forces from gaining a toehold there. Syrian violations of the 1974 disengagement agreement became increasingly frequent, including military operations in areas near the Golan frontier where arms were to be limited. The UN peacekeeping force was suddenly caught in the cross-fire, and suffered from attacks by Syrian rebels and troop withdrawals.

Israel occasionally took limited military action inside Syria, usually to stop major weapons transfers. As chaotic as the Syria situation was becoming, Israel enjoyed some strategic benefits, including the weakening of its traditional adversary Assad, the re-direction of Hezbollah's attention away from Lebanon's border with Israel, and the international effort to remove Syria's weapons of mass destruction – an enormous relief for Israel, given the state's decades-long concern about chemical and biological weapons stockpiled by the regime in Damascus.

The Syrian equation changed dramatically with the US-led international intervention against the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in late 2014, and then even more so a year later with Russia's military intervention on behalf of the Assad regime.

Active Russian military operations in Syria meant an entirely new strategic and tactical situation for Israel. On the one hand, Russia intervened on the side of Assad, Hezbollah, and Iran; Israel's worst enemies. Moreover, Russian intervention created new uncertainties about further escalation in Syria, increased the likelihood that the Assad regime would be saved, and suddenly raised the possibility of a broader surge in Russian involvement in the region. On the tactical level, Israel would no longer enjoy a virtual monopoly on its ability to deploy air

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are not permanent members of the Security Council". See "Separation of Forces between Israel and Syria", United Nations Peacemaker, 31 May 1974, (last retrieved on 27 September 2019).

power or missile strikes in Syria; it would have to deconflict with Moscow[7].

On the other hand, it created an opportunity to engage Russia as a new and committed player in Syria and the larger regional equation at a time of enormous flux and uncertainty. Israel viewed Moscow as having the capability and influence to shape outcomes in Syria. It viewed Russian intervention as driven by Moscow's desire to reassert its global role – and thereby divert attention away from Ukraine – as well as the specific purpose of saving the Assad regime, a long time Russian ally, from collapse[8].

As Dmitry Adamsky has written, in war games conducted by leading Israeli think tanks that simulated military conflicts with Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria, Russia emerged as a pivotal broker with a unique ability to escalate or de-escalate confrontations[9].

From late 2015, Russia and Israel avoided pitting themselves against each other in a zero-sum game and promoted both military and diplomatic channels of coordination and deconfliction. However complex, deconfliction had a good chance of success from the beginning given that both countries core interests could still be pursued. "Russia went into Syria and is there now to make sure that Assad remains in power. It isn't there to save Israel, or to harm it", according to Dorit Golender, a former Israeli ambassador to Moscow. "Israel, for its part, has spelled out that we cannot remain indifferent to certain scenarios in

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[7] *Coping with the Russian Challenge in the Middle East: U.S.-Israeli Perspectives and Opportunities for Cooperation*, Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson Center, 3 June 2019, p. 20, "From Israel's perspective, having a permanent Russian military presence and anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities on its northern border put significant constraints on the unfettered freedom of action Israel has enjoyed previously in Syria and increased the potential for Iranian entrenchment in the country under the Russian umbrella".

[8] A. Yadlin, "Russia in Syria and the Implications for Israel", *INSS Strategic Assessment*, vol. 19, no. 2, July 2016.

[9] D. Adamsky, "Putin's Damascus Steal", *Foreign Affairs*, 16 September 2015; see also J. Krasna (2018).

Syria involving Hezbollah and Iran. The Russians understand that, so the coordination process operates perfectly"[10].

Once Israel was able to reliably manage deconfliction, it sought out more ambitious goals with regard to Russia: understandings that would prevent further Iranian or Hezbollah entrenchment in Syria, especially in areas near the Israeli frontier. This continues to be the key driver in Israel's approach to Syria *vis-à-vis* Russia, more so than end-of-conflict considerations[11].

But the relationship can quickly be tested, as it was in September 2018 when Syrian ground forces – in a failed attempt to target Israeli aircraft – mistakenly shot down a Russian military transport plane, killing over a dozen Russian personnel. The initial tone out of Moscow was sharp and critical of Israel, blaming Jerusalem for putting Russian troops at risk, while Israel blamed Assad's forces. Following intensive contacts, Moscow and Jerusalem managed to defuse a situation that could have led to serious damage. In the spirit of preserving once-again warm relations, Russia facilitated the return of the body of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldier Zachary Baumel, who went missing in 1982 during the Battle of Sultan Yacoub against the Syrian army.

International Context

Well before Russia's full-blown military intervention in Syria, Moscow's international position changed dramatically with its annexation of Crimea and its intervention in Ukraine's east. Against the backdrop of its warming ties with Russia, Israel faced a serious dilemma when the Crimea crisis erupted. Rather quickly, Jerusalem decided that its equities were best served by

[10] O. Raanan and V. Michlin (2018).

[11] As Udi Dekel has written, Israel is relying on Russia to remove the Iranian forces and the Shia militias from the border area, in exchange for Israel's not attacking regime forces. See U. Dekel, "Southern Syria: Familiar Story, Familiar Ending", *INSS Insight*, no. 1072, 5 July 2018.

staying out of the sudden East-West confrontation. For example, it failed to vote in the UN General Assembly in February 2014 when more than one hundred countries voted in favor of condemning Russia's annexation – despite lobbying by the United States – but at the same time it worked to maintain good relations with Ukraine, support Kiev in later votes, and absorb a surge in Jewish emigrants fleeing war-torn Ukraine[12].

Israel's response to the Crimea crisis in early 2014 – well before Moscow's intervention in Syria – is one of the starkest examples of the differentiated approach Israel would adopt, an approach that fundamentally sought to avoid conflict with Moscow without jeopardizing Jerusalem's vital alliance with Washington. Hence, for instance, Israel has sought to avoid addressing the question of Russia's illiberalism and other international policies. Nonetheless, Jerusalem is "sympathetic to Washington's concerns about Russian global malign activity and restricts the scope of its security contacts with Russia accordingly"[13].

The Centrality of the United States

Any consideration of Israeli-Russian ties must also consider the centrality of the United States in Israel's national security concept. For Israel, its alliance with the United States remains

[12] The authors were serving in official government roles at this time. Co-author Lasensky was serving at the time as a Senior Policy Advisor to the US Ambassador to the UN. The Israeli government ostensibly explained its no-vote in the General Assembly as the result of a Foreign Ministry strike that was underway. Nonetheless, it was widely viewed inside and outside the US government as a deliberate decision by Israeli leaders, and consistent with Israel's low-key and non-condemning posture toward Moscow. Later international incidents, like the Skripal assassination attempt in the United Kingdom – and Israel's decision not to join in the international outcry – further reflect this policy of avoiding criticism of Russia. On steps Israel took to balance a perceived tilt toward Russia on the Ukraine conflict, see also S. Frantzman, "Ukraine Thanks Israel for Support on Crimea at UN", *Jerusalem Post*, 29 November 2017.

[13] Kennan Institute (2019), p. 15.

preeminent among its foreign relations, overshadowing virtually all other relationships.

Israel's military is heavily reliant on US defense systems, with annual US military aid close to $4 billion. The two countries share their most closely guarded intelligence with each other, including cooperation on counterterrorism, extremist Islamist groups, and Iran. Washington's diplomatic weight shields Israel in numerous international fora. Israel "sees the continuity of American military dominance in the region as crucial to its security and to regional order"[14].

Nearly a half-century of American leadership in brokering Arab-Israeli peace, despite some lackluster outcomes in recent years, has left a legacy of strategic advances for Israel—most notably its peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, which are further entrenched by a web of relations with Washington.

Bilateral economic ties continue to expand rapidly, especially in the technology sector, and rival Israel's trade with Europe, which was traditionally more central to the Israeli economy. The United States is also home to the largest Jewish community outside Israel – numbering around six million – which is as vital for Israeli diplomacy as it is for the Jewish state's identity and its recognized position at the center of the Jewish world. People-to-people ties stretch well beyond the Jewish community, with American Evangelicals representing yet another source of support and connectivity for Israel.

The overall bilateral relationship is so institutionalized and so deeply intertwined socially and economically that it has easily weathered the turbulence of political disagreements, including most recently the breach between Israel and the Obama Administration over the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, or periodic disagreements over China that have cropped up regularly since the late 1990s.

Since President Donald Trump came into office in 2017, Israel perceives the alliance to have consolidated even further,

[14] Kennan Institute (2019), p. 3.

as the White House has sought repeatedly to demonstrate – in word and in deed – that it stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel on the widest possible range of issues. The Jerusalem embassy move and Trump's Golan recognition are just two examples. Nonetheless, Trump's posture on Syria has also caused concern in Israel, such as the sudden White House announcement in December 2018 of an imminent US withdrawal or the uneven responses to the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons.

Israeli Interests

Israel has long nurtured a multi-tiered set of relations with other regional and global actors, including Turkey, India, China, and Russia. Israel has diplomatic, strategic, and economic reasons to diversify its foreign relations as much as possible, and does not see this as being in conflict with its outsized alliance with Washington.

Israel has a particularly strong interest in cultivating ties with powers that have leverage over its fiercest adversaries, especially Iran, which provides another rationale for Israel's rapprochement with Moscow. In Russia's case, the combination of its influence in Iran and its newfound central role in Syria make Moscow an even more attractive interlocutor for Israel. Iranian involvement in Syria has been at the heart of the dialogue between Russia and Israel, with the former hinting that it could rein in Tehran's role in the context of a conflict-ending settlement and bring about the withdrawal of all foreign forces. At the same time, Israel is able – through its close coordination with Washington and support for its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran – to wield pressure on Tehran from other quarters, not to mention its own covert military campaign[15].

[15] U. Dekel and C. Valensi, "Russia and Iran: Is the Syrian Honeymoon Over?", *INSS Insight*, no. 1171, 27 May 2019.

There are other interests at play, including the still sizable Jewish community in Russia, as well as the economic and cultural ties that come with Israel's burgeoning population of approximately one million citizens born in the former Soviet states.

Russian Interests

Russia's ties with Israel and its reemergence in the Middle East are based on several interests. First, saving the Assad regime serves a number of important strategic and reputational interests. Second, asserting its involvement in the Middle East also serves Russia's interest in breaking its international isolation stemming from Crimea and Ukraine – i.e. to "trade displeasure with Russia's East European policies for its Middle East accomplishments"[16]. Although failing so far to achieve such an objective, it remains a motivation for Russia. Even short of success, the mere shifting of international attention, or the appearance of a crisis elsewhere, helps ease the isolation that befell Russia following its actions in Crimea and Ukraine.

Third, Russia feels isolated by US- and Western-led alliance networks, including NATO, the European Union, and Washington's alliances in East Asia, and has an interest in creating alternative diplomatic channels that chip away at this sense of encirclement. Therefore, warming ties with Israel – probably the Middle East's most Western-allied actor – clearly serve Russia's interest in this respect. Put differently, maintaining positive ties with Israel – Washington's closest ally in the region – allows Putin to project a message that Russia is not isolated[17].

[16] Z. Magen, S. Fainberg, and V. Michlin-Shapir, "Russia in Conflict: From the Homefront to the Global Front", *INSS Strategic Assessment*, vol. 19, no. 3, October 2016.

[17] The same can be said for Moscow's role as a member of the Middle East "Quartet". However marginal, the Quartet nevertheless gives Moscow a hook to engage in regional conflict resolution processes.

Fourth, Syria, and the region more broadly, also touches on Russia's interests in countering Islamist extremism and terrorism. Though as Anna Borshchevskaya notes, in reality, the terrorist threats Israel faces are very different from Russia's, and Moscow often makes instrumental use of the terrorist threat to stress its shared interests with Israel and Western powers[18].

Last, Moscow's intervention in Syria demonstrates that the Russian military is capable and can project power effectively[19]. Russian officers have gained important combat experience, and Syria has also served as a "demonstration of a wide array of Russian weapons platforms", which helps promote weapon sales in the Middle East and beyond[20].

Some Russian analysts see the Russian return to the Middle East in a broader geopolitical context. They explain that Russia is disappointed with the West and its perceived rejection of Moscow and understands that relations cannot be repaired. Therefore, Russia has made a strategic, rather than tactical, turn to the East, including to the Middle East[21].

On the surface, Russia's interests in the Middle East appear to collide with Israel's. As Borshchevskaya explains, "Putin's regional policy […] is primarily driven by zero-sum anti-Westernism to position Russia as a counterweight to the West in the region and, more broadly, to divide and weaken Western institutions. Israel, unlike Russia, is a pro-Western democracy"[22]. Hence, in Syria, Russia backs the coalition that consists of Israel's worst enemies – Iran and Hezbollah. And yet, in its relationship with Israel, Russia has demonstrated that it is willing and able to avoid being party to a zero-sum approach. Hence,

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[18] A. Borshchevskaya, "Putin's Self- Serving Israel Agenda", *Foreign Affairs*, 13 April 2017.

[19] A. Yadlin, "Russia in Syria and the Implications for Israel", *INSS Strategic Assessment*, vol. 19, no. 2, July 2016.

[20] Ibid.

[21] D. Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018, pp. 135, 52.

[22] A. Borshchevskaya, *The Maturing of Israeli-Russian relations*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, inFOCUS Quarterly, Spring 2016.

Russia and Israel have been able to pursue a practical approach to compartmentalize and limit their cooperation, especially *vis-à-vis* Syria.

Overlapping Interests *vs* Sources of Friction

The extent to which Russian and Israeli interests overlap – in Syria and beyond – is considerable. As explained earlier, both countries share a deep suspicion of revolutionary political change wrought by the "Arab Spring;" both share a desire to counter any gains by Islamists; both benefit from expanding people-to-people, economic, and deep-rooted cultural ties; and both share interests in maintaining diversified foreign policies that give them flexibility and additional bargaining power with their adversaries. In Syria, Israeli and Russian interests do not necessarily align, but the two countries have demonstrated since 2015 that they can reach limited understandings about the core interests on which neither will compromise – for Russia, bolstering the Assad regime's grip, and for Israel, keeping Iran and Hezbollah off its frontier and unable to expand their entrenchment in Syria.

Beyond Syria and the strategic agenda, the two countries also share a common interest in "historical memory" in terms of World War II and opposing fascism and Nazism, even if this commonality is deeply complicated by the USSR's own history of hostility, bias, and conflict with Israel and the Jewish people.

Sources of friction are never too far from the surface. The boundaries, thresholds, and red lines that trigger military responses – related most notably to Hezbollah and Iran – are viewed differently by Moscow and Jerusalem[23]. Iran, in particular, as both a consumer of sophisticated Russia arms and Israel's primary regional adversary, is perhaps the most challenging

[23] A. Kortunov and M. Duclos, "Иран на Ближнем Востоке: часть проблемы или часть решения?" ("Iran in the Middle East: part of the problem or part of the solution?"), Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 13 May 2019.

issue. Russia's continued voting patterns in international for a – particularly on the Palestinian issue – also remain deeply problematic for Israel.

Conclusion

Russian-Israeli relations have transformed dramatically since the end of the Cold War. Confrontation, animosity, and zero-sum calculations have evolved into a multi-faceted bilateral relationship that compartmentalizes points of friction and avoids crossing red-lines *vis-à-vis* Israel's bedrock alliance with Washington. On many levels, it has become a cooperative, at times even friendly relationship, despite the severity of differences on questions like Iran and Syria.

Israel does not see itself as a decisive player in determining Russia's fortunes in the region and beyond, but will continue to play an important role in the Syria arena as it assertively confronts attempts by Iran and its allies to deepen their entrenchment. Avoiding a clash with Moscow is critical for Israel. But should Russia's reentry into the region's strategic and political affairs advance further, or should Russia's tensions with the United States and the West worsen, Israel will face starker choices about limiting its deepening ties with Russia.