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Israeli-Russian Relations in the Context of the Syrian Civil War

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Israeli-Russian relations after Russia's entry into the Syrian civil war have gained a new dimension. Any military action undertaken by Israel against its regional opponents—Hezbollah and Iran—have to reckon with the Russian military presence in Syria. Maintaining good bilateral relations remains one of the main objectives of the foreign policy of both states, although the strategic interests of Russia and Israel in the region remain contradictory. Enhanced cooperation with Russia may adversely affect relations with other Israeli partners, but the nature and intensity of this cooperation may be influenced by the policies of the new U.S. administration and developments in Syria.

Israel and the Russian Intervention in Syria. For Israel, its priority in Syria is to prevent the strengthening of Hezbollah's military capabilities and to limit Iran's military activity (both Hezbollah and Iran are allies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad). Israeli involvement in the Syrian conflict includes air and missile strikes on Hezbollah transport and weapons storage sites, response to border incidents, and humanitarian aid for Syrians delivered in the Golan Heights. Russia's involvement in the war has reduced Israel's freedom of action through the rearmament of the Syrian army and the installation of an S-400 anti-aircraft system in Syria that covers the territory of Israel.

The November 2015 incident when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet shows how easily events in the Syrian civil war can escalate into a broader crisis. Hence, there is tactical coordination between Israel and Russia to avoid any confrontation. Political and military level consultations allow for the maintenance of the necessary channels of communication and flow of operational information. Despite the coordination, there have been cases of violations of Israeli airspace by Russian planes and UAVs, or Israeli jets being fired upon in Syria by the Russians. A strong reaction from Russia came in mid-March when, after an attack on a Hezbollah convoy and shooting down of a Syrian S-200 missile (targeting Israeli fighter jets) by the Israeli Arrow-2 system, Moscow summoned the Israeli ambassador to the Russian MFA for consultations.

Russia remains aware of Israel's interests and military capabilities and is trying to limit, to some extent, the anti-Israeli actions of its Syrian allies. From Israel's point of view, the cooperation has meant Russia ensured there was no definitive response from Hezbollah or Syria to the Israeli attacks and that the delivery of a Russian S-300 anti-aircraft defence system to Iran was delayed (resumed in early 2016).

Bilateral Relations and Strategic Differences. Maintaining proper relations with Russia is one of the main objectives of Israeli foreign policy. Diplomatic relations are intense: since the beginning of the Russian intervention, several dozen meetings and consultations at the highest level have taken place. There is a high frequency of direct contact between the leaders of both states, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Vladimir Putin, who have met five times in the last year and a half. In his statements, Putin often emphasises the ideological and historical community that links Russia and Israel in the context of World War II and the fight against fascism, and now the fight against Islamic terrorism.

Close relations with Israel help Russia strengthen its position in the Middle East. From the Israeli perspective, maintaining good relations with Russia is part of a broader trend of Israel's deepening pragmatic cooperation with non-Western countries, e.g., China or India, and rebuilding of relations with Turkey. Israel has adopted a neutral attitude towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Israel did not participate in the vote in the UN on the condemnation of Russia's annexation of Crimea and did not join the Western sanctions against Russia. The Russian authorities, in turn, did not criticise the Israeli operation in Gaza in 2014, stressing that Israel has the full right to defend its citizens.

Russia remains a close trading partner of Israel. The balance of trade between the two countries in 2015 was estimated at \$3.3 billion. Israel continues to negotiate an association agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia's flagship integration project. The agreement may be signed this year. Scientific and technological cooperation in the high-tech sector is also developing rapidly, e.g., in nanotechnology, space or UAVs. Russia is one of Israel's main oil suppliers and Russian companies are interested in investing in the Israeli gas market. An important element of mutual relations is the tourist-religious sector: it is estimated that Israel in 2016 was visited by 285,000 tourists and Orthodox pilgrims from Russia. A traditionally significant role in Israeli-Russian relations is played by the Russian-speaking population of Israel, resulting from the emigration of Russian Jews in the 1990s, which is currently estimated at about 1.3 million residents.

The strategic regional goals of both countries remain different. Russia's efforts aim to expand its sphere of influence and weaken the U.S. role in the region, which contradicts Israel's strategic interests, in which the United States remains its most important international partner and security guarantor. Relations between Russia and Israel have been negatively impacted by Russia's cooperation with Israel's main regional counterparts—Hezbollah and Iran. Russia supports the agreement limiting Iran's nuclear programme (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), which has been heavily criticised by Israel. In addition, the Russian presence in Syria has enabled the indirect redeployment of advanced weaponry that can be used by the Hezbollah in a conflict with Israel, with particular concern about the possibility of the proliferation of Syrian chemical weapons. The survival of the Assad regime, which is a priority for Russia, would not significantly affect Israeli security unless it preserves the presence of Hezbollah and Iran in Syria. Russia does not recognise Hezbollah and Hamas as terrorist organisations, which Israel clearly does not approve of.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Russia traditionally favours the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem and condemns Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Russia's "Foreign Policy Concept," published in November 2016, states that Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the Middle East Quartet, will continue to work towards a lasting and comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict in all its aspects. In September 2016, Russia reported the possibility of organising Israeli-Palestinian peace talks under its auspices, but this proposal was not accepted by the interested parties. In April 2017, the Russian MFA issued a statement recognising West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in the event of the emergence of an independent Palestinian state.

Conclusions. The development of the situation in Syria is crucial for mutual relations. In order to maintain the current cooperation, Israel will refrain from criticising Russian activities in other areas not strategic for Israel. This can have negative effects on its relationships with other partners, such as the European Union or Ukraine. Russia's participation in Syria's long-term stabilisation could provide Israel the chance to validate its presence in the Golan Heights, weaken Iranian influence, and could translate into greater Russian involvement in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Prolonging or escalating the conflict in Syria could make Israel more committed to protecting its security interests. However, that would carry a political cost in the form of a deterioration of relations with Russia. In such a scenario, the new U.S. administration's stance towards Russia and the Middle East would have crucial meaning to Israeli politics. Deeper involvement of the U.S. and its allies in stabilising Syria could allow Israel to be more assertive in its relations with Russia.