
**FRIENDS
OF ISRAEL
INITIATIVE**

**The Meaning of the
Russian Deployment
Throughout
the Middle East**

Yaakov Amidror
October 2016

Strategic
Outlook
Series

3



The Friends of Israel Initiative (FOII) is a global organization devoted to fighting the delegitimization of the State of Israel and to support its right to live in peace within safe and defensible borders. FOII believes that Israel is an integral and vital part of the West, a dynamic, vibrant and prosperous democracy, and as such Israel deserves to be fully accepted as a normal Western nation, and treated with fairness as any other democracy in the world. FOII was founded in 2010 as a group of global leaders, former Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers and Defense Ministers, and eminent personalities from diverse fields. In order to further its message, FOII members engage their peers in direct and frank dialogues, invite relevant people to field trips to Israel, call on expert groups to prepare reports and policy papers, disseminate analysis affecting the future of Israel, and publish opinion editorials in pertinent media outlets, among other activities.

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The Meaning of the Russian Deployment Throughout the Middle East

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Series Editor: Davis Lewin

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Foreword

The Friends of Israel Initiative (FOII), brought to life in 2010 by former Prime Minister of Spain Jose Maria Aznar and consisting of a board of distinguished statesmen and thought leaders, always had at its core a dual mission: First, we fight to demand a fair debate about Israel. At its simplest our call is not just to recognise that Israel is an essential part of the West, but to caution that if we let it fall in the face of the slanders it faces, our own nations will fare no better. Today, sadly, it is all too discernable that this argument was a prescient one. However, if the first mission is a defensive one - asserting a fair debate - the second important mission FOII fulfills is as a crucial forum for an offensive mission - to understand the new realities of a rapidly changing world, and how our Western alliance with Israel fits into this difficult picture.

In this spirit I am pleased to introduce our latest policy paper initiative - the Strategic Outlook Series. This new occasional series is aimed at investigating a set of interrelated challenges: What happened in the Middle East over the last decade, what does it mean for the region, what does it mean for the West, what does it mean for Israel - and above all what are the implications for the interrelationship between all these?

This third in the series is an analysis on the reasons behind Russia's increasing involvement in the Middle East. Certainly, due to the U.S. withdrawal, Russia emerges nowadays as the most influential foreign power in the region. General Amidror delves into the past and the present events that explain this Russia's move, its interests, especially its intervention in the civil war in Syria, and the role of Moscow in the reordering of the Middle East. Last but not the least; he examines the Israel's perspective and the relation with Russia, which shall imply new challenges and balances for the Jewish state.

The paper, much as the Strategic Outlook Series as a whole, seeks to make a comprehensive, expert contribution to the debate in the field, to further discussion and policy solutions, and to discern the best way forward in what will remain a strategic burden shared by Israel and our own nations - to ensure our continued security and prosperity in the face of myriad threats and a rapidly changing international scene.

I hope this work will be the first of many towards this shared goal between Israel and the West.



Rafael Bardaji
Executive Director
Friends of Israel Initiative



About the author

Yaakov Amidror

Major General (res.) Yaacov Amidror served with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) for 36 years (1966-2002). During his long military career, he was commander of the IDF Military Colleges, Military Secretary to the Minister of Defense, Director of the Intelligence Analysis Division (responsible for annual National Intelligence Assessments) in the IDF Military Intelligence, Head of a large scale technology project, Intelligence Chief of the Northern Command and Head of the branch of the Military Intelligence.

After retiring from the IDF, Amidror served as National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of Israel and Head of Israel's National Security Council. During his role as National Security Advisor of Israel, he participated in high-level talks with U.S. officials about the Iranian nuclear program and led efforts to restore relations with Turkey after the Gaza flotilla raid incident. Amidror is Research Fellow in the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and in 2014, he joined the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies as the Anne and Greg Rosshandler Senior Fellow.

General Amidror has published several books, "Winning Counterinsurgency War: The Israeli Experience" (2008) and "International Law and Military Operations in Practice" (2011); and also has published articles on worldwide prestigious media about Army, Security and Intelligence.

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Introduction

Russia, despite the limitations on its power and its resources, is now the most influential foreign power (and certainly the most dynamic) in the Middle East. This is largely due to the ability of Russia's President Putin to invest considerable resources in the region and to take risks, while being free to advance his country's interests without domestic political constraints or other restrictions. There are a number of salient expressions of this involvement and the impact it has had: The fighting to stabilize the Assad regime and destroy Islamic State; the establishment of a Russian air base in northern Syria, and deploying ground troops in support (in fall 2015); for a very short time, the operation of aerial forces from a base in Iran (in August 2016); the use of "strategic" means (cruise missiles) in an essentially tactical battle; the rift with Turkey, and the subsequent renewal of relations with it; the supply of weapons to Iran; and most recently, the signing of an agreement with Secretary of State John Kerry on the future of Syria in which it was the United States, and not Russia, that compromised on its position.

It would seem that, beyond analyzing each of these events in isolation, it is important to understand the reasons behind Russia's efforts in the region as a whole, and the connection between them and other events, including the war against Georgia in 2008, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the threat to the integrity of Ukraine, and disturbances in the Baltic states. None of these are directly connected to developments in the Middle East, but they are all consequences of the decisions of one man, and thus it is important to understand the context that connects them.

This attitude is expressed on issues of both symbolic and substantial importance in the international arena. On the symbolic side, Russia emphasizes the importance of the role played by the Soviet Union in the Second World War—its contribution to the Allied victory, and the casualties it suffered. In 2012, Putin traveled to Israel to inaugurate a large monument dedicated to the Red Army and its role in defeating Hitler. Making a presidential visit in order to attend this ceremony demonstrated the importance he attaches to this subject.

It is thus impossible to understand Russia's actions today without appreciating that it is attempting to retaliate against the humiliation it endured following the breakup of the Soviet Union (a humiliation that is only exacerbated when former Soviet republics in the Baltic renounce the past, join the European Union and NATO, and compare Stalin to Hitler). This fierce drive stands behind Russia's worldview today, and is reflected in almost all its actions.

Russia's Involvement in Syria

Thus, Russia responded with unusual aggression when it felt that NATO, led by the United States, was attempting to expand its reach into former Soviet Union states close to Russia's borders. This is the reason why Russia invaded when Georgia made signs of opposition (2008) and seemed to be moving toward entering NATO; why it reacted strongly when it perceived that the West was behind the ousting of a Russia-friendly Ukrainian president, and that NATO was looking to extend membership to Ukraine (it should be remembered that Kiev was the birthplace of the Russian empire, and the possibility of it shifting from being a controlled ally to becoming part of the enemy camp attempting to humiliate Russia was wholly unacceptable); why it has deployed missiles to Kaliningrad; and why it will oppose the deployment (by the West) of anti-missile missile systems in former Communist bloc states. Russia is not prepared to accept the role conferred on it by the US president when he called it a "regional power", and is not prepared to accept the policies of containment and exclusion that it feels are being implemented by NATO (led by the United States), chief among them being the attempt to bring Russia's neighboring states under the sway of the West, although this list also includes the banning of Russian athletes from the Rio Olympics. Russia views the actions of NATO and the European Union as a threat, and rejects the West's claims that these efforts are purely defensive; it believes that this is all part of the American plot to isolate and weaken it.

Many of Russia's actions have been aimed at curbing US influence. It views the United States as its main rival, but also as an enfeebled world power, mainly due to the nature of the current administration, which is wary of confrontation, and certainly of any that might descend into military conflict. Russia is aware of the weakness of will that the United States currently projects, and does not hesitate to exploit it. This is why Obama's "Russian reset" efforts have failed, and why Russia is unwilling to compromise on the annexation of Crimea, on its continued support of separatist, pro-Russian forces in East Ukraine, or on the status of Assad in Damascus. The Russians are highly inflexible in all discussions on these issues, and others, because they feel that they are not faced with a determined superpower (certainly not as determined as Moscow).

Against this backdrop of Russia's nationalist motivation and its perspective of the United States, its actions in the Middle East can be better understood as a continuation of the pragmatic strategy pursued by "Mother" Soviet Union. It is attempting to regain some of the Soviet Union's strongholds in the Middle East, an area that is geographically close to Russia, both by

investing in relations with important actors, such as Iran, and by providing large-scale support to allies in difficulty, such as Assad.

One traumatic event that continues to influence Russia's behavior in the region is the Libyan crisis. In 2011, Russia consented to UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which was carefully worded so as not to allow for an all-out war against the Gaddafi regime, but which in practice led to his downfall. Russia found itself surprised by the Western powers as, under the flimsy umbrella of the Security Council resolution, they destroyed the regime in which Russia (and before it, the Soviet Union), had invested considerable financial and political resources. The Russians were very hurt by what they saw as the crude and disloyal behavior of France (which pushed for the military operation) and the United States (which was pushed into it, as per the American language of "leading from behind"). The catastrophic results of this operation, which admittedly led to the removal of a regime led by an unstable dictator, were disintegration and chaos, and the country has yet to recover. Libya became the main source of weapons for terror organizations throughout Africa, for Hamas in Gaza, and for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and also began to attract refugees from all over Africa on their way to Europe. This chaotic situation, in Russia's view, is a result of Western deception and of an irresponsible resolution, led by the United States, which gave free rein to French illusions of grandeur and British jingoism. In their analysis, events in Libya serve as an illustration for the Russians, and for others, of why they should avoid a repeat performance in other parts of the Middle East. Russia presents this analysis whenever it is asked about its motives for protecting Assad, and it is indeed difficult to argue with the appalling outcome of the Libyan episode, which in retrospect looks highly foolish. When the Syrian crisis erupted in March 2011, and the situation continued to deteriorate, the Russians, drawing on their own conclusions from Libya, refused to countenance any UN resolution that might provide an opening for military action against the regime.

There is no doubt that the events that took place in Egypt several months previously also influenced Russia's decision making. As a result of the Arab Spring in Egypt and the overthrow of Mubarak, the United States was tarred with the brush of being a treacherous ally, having washed its hands of a leader who had previously always stood by its side. This abandonment of Mubarak was a warning sign for Russia, which decided that it would do whatever was required of it rather than ever allow itself to be accused of betraying an ally. It was important for Russia to be seen as being entirely different from the United States in this respect.

Thus, these two episodes, in Libya and Egypt, informed Moscow's immediate response to events in Syria. It quickly and clearly stood behind Assad.

Behind this decision was also another fear, more primal, about which little was said openly in Russia: The Russians were disturbed, to put it mildly, by Western intervention in Syria. They were honestly concerned by the prospect that, due to their differing approaches to the despotic regime, the West would use claims about human rights abuses as a reason to intervene. In this respect, Syria might have become an unwelcome precedent. Egypt is also party to these concerns, and thus has not joined other Sunni states in actively opposing Assad and his regime. China also takes issue with foreign intervention based on claims of “the obligation to defend” citizens of a state whose regime has infringed on their human rights. This is why China, far from opposing Assad, will support his regime at the Security Council on every occasion.

Another important motivation influencing Russian policy in the Middle East is the concern over Sunni Islamic fundamentalism. Some of Russia’s actions are designed to prevent this threat becoming any more serious, because the assessment is that if these movements do become stronger, they will eventually establish a presence in Russia itself, whose population is around one-fifth Sunni Muslim (in the Northern Caucasus and other areas, Sunni Muslims form a clear majority.) The radical Sunni threat in Russia is not trivial, and not only because of the appalling terror attacks that Russia has suffered in the past. Russia’s leaders are well aware that the Sunni minority is growing in numbers and in power, due to low birth rates among Christian Russians, and that it provides a fertile bed for these dangerous movements. The number of volunteers from Russia who serve in the ranks of Islamic State also justifies Russia’s fears.

While Russia has never emphasized this issue in the context of Syria, the Russians have said to anyone willing to listen that they have no personal commitment to Assad, but that they are committed to halting Sunni radicalism and to the strong and long-term relations between Russia and Syria, going back to Soviet times. In retrospect, the rise of Islamic State and its acolytes around the world justify Russia’s argument. Sunni extremism has in fact been nourished by the bitter results of events in Syria (and Iraq). Russian researchers say this loud and clear: The ending of Saddam Hussein’s regime by the United States, and the support for the Sunni opposition in Syria from America and its allies, are the culprits for the successful rise of Islamic State. They believe that the West is paying the price for its lack of caution; we in Russia, seeing what was going to happen, tried to prevent this, these researchers and academics say.

Russia’s intervention in Syria had three stages:

The first was a result of the complete dependence of the Syrian armed forces on Russian weaponry. Russia continued its considerable efforts to

meet the needs of the Syrian army, and to that end expanded its stronghold in the port of Tartus, so that the number of ships unloading arms there grew steadily. At first, this was simple weaponry, mainly large quantities of ammunition, but subsequently grew to encompass advanced weaponry that serves no purpose in the regime's war against the rebels—and indeed, some of it was transferred to Hezbollah. While the Russians deny any knowledge of this transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah, there is no doubt that they are well aware of it, and have taken no effective steps to prevent it.

These weapons sales raise the possibility that Russia exploited Syria's difficult situation for another need, mainly economic. Russia has nothing to sell to the world except energy (oil and natural gas) and weapons systems. Given any opportunity to take in foreign currency in cash, it will not hesitate to sell the most advanced weapons, as long as the price is right. For a country, such as Russia, with severe foreign currency problems, economic considerations are of great importance. The fact that there is no connection between the needs of the war against the rebels and the new weaponry that Russia has sold to Syria, and that a large share of these weapons made their way on to Hezbollah, gave Russia no pause for thought. The extent of Iran's role in funding this weaponry is not yet clear, but it presumably covered at least those elements that ended up with Hezbollah.

The second stage in Russia's engagement was less conspicuous, but at some stage the involvement of Russian military advisors and intelligence personnel grew significantly. It is difficult to determine their precise numbers, or the extent of their involvement, but it is clear that this was a step beyond the initial stage of supplying weapons, and there is no doubt that Russia's sophisticated intelligence capabilities turned the tide and halted the deterioration in the position of Assad's army. In this case, the Russians waited patiently until the nuclear agreement was signed with Iran; they looked at the United States' feeble conduct of the negotiations, and realized that the time was right to move to the next, more obvious stage of their involvement, because no-one in Washington would move to stop them, and it was now impossible to blame them for cooperating with Iran when Iran itself was now a legitimate dialogue partner of the Americans.

The third, current, stage is clearly marked by the deployment of ground troops (mainly for securing Russian strongholds, the airport, and the sea port) and of advanced warplanes, in order to take a direct and unveiled role in the fighting. It is clear from these steps that Russia is using maximum force in Syria in order to save the Alawite regime to which they have a long-standing commitment, and to thwart Islamic State and other extremist organizations. But its priorities are clear: first, to maintain the rule of the Ala-

wites, headed by Assad (at least in the near future); and only second, to fight against the Islamic fundamentalists.

Russia has made the most of the opportunity presented it, and has turned the battlefield in Syria into a testing ground for new weapons systems, and an arena in which it can demonstrate its strategic capabilities, to a degree far beyond that demanded by the situation on the ground. Thus for example, it fired cruise missiles from warships in the Caspian Sea, when it has planes stationed less than 150 kilometers from the targets attacked, and has likewise made use of strategic bombers and of firepower from ships in the Mediterranean. The deployment of the S-400 system is also a demonstration of Russian power rather than a response to an operational need, as there is clearly no aerial threat in the region endangering Russian forces in Syria.

It is important to Russia to make clear to the world that, while it may not quite be the Soviet Union in its heyday, it is a state that can rapidly deploy a sizable aerial force, support it with ground defense forces, give it a missile defense umbrella against any possible threat, and conduct an extended logistical operation, far from home and while taking part in constant fighting. In truth, even the Soviet Union did not deploy and operate military forces far from home, and certainly Russia has not carried out such a complex operation since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This goes far beyond the relatively low-level fighting in Georgia, or the less simple operation in Ukraine, both of them on Russia's borders. In Syria, Russia has demonstrated its superpower capabilities, not only to regional states and organizations, but, perhaps even more importantly, to Europe and the United States. This demonstration has been intended to make its rivals think twice before taking any decision on possible confrontation with Russia around the globe, and particularly in Europe.

Russia's success in Syria is an extremely important component in its change of status in the region. It has shown that it can be relied upon as an ally, in complete contrast with perceptions of the United States, and that it has the capabilities and the willpower to follow through on its decisions to protect its interests and those of its allies.

The Spats with Turkey

Russia faced a difficult test in its spat with Turkey, and in coming through it showed that it knows how to overcome crises. The mutual suspicions of Russia and Turkey date back to the 17th century and their struggle for control of the Balkans and of the passage from the Black Sea to the

Mediterranean. Russia's takeover of the Crimean Peninsula following the conflict with Ukraine, including the key Black Sea port of Sebastopol, was certainly unwelcome for Turkey, a NATO member. Turkey was also displeased by Russia's intervention on Assad's behalf, both because Erdogan has been energetically opposed to the Syrian ruler, whom he despises, and because it led to the deployment of Russian forces on Turkey's southern flank. Worse, these forces in Syria operated right next the Turkish border, fighting rebels whom Turkey had supported, while Russian warplanes occasionally violated Turkish airspace, seemingly with no regard for Turkish sensitivities.

It was thus no surprise when, in November 2015, Turkey decided to set an ambush and shoot down a Russian plane that it claimed had crossed into Turkey. This represented a test for Putin, and he decided to respond forcefully. Trade relations with Turkey were immediately suspended, not an easy decision for a country in a difficult economic situation (and the suspension did not extend to the supply of Russian gas continued to Turkey). Russia then launched a personal campaign against Erdogan and his family, revealing their links to Islamic State in an attempt to delegitimize him in the eyes of the world. Of greater importance, though, was the strategic move taken by Russia to cozy up to the Kurds in northern Syria. While the Kurds are enemies of Assad and want their own autonomous region, they serve as a mighty bargaining chip with Turkey, which fears any sign of Kurdish sovereignty along its border with Syria. The Kurds in this area are linked to the armed Kurdish resistance in Turkey (the PKK), considered a terrorist organization by the Turks, and actively fought by the Turkish armed forces.

Erdogan understood the strategic danger implied by Russia's move, and decided to transform the strained relations with Russia. He exploited the opportunity presented by the failed coup in Turkey in June 2016 to apologize to Russia for the shooting down of its aircraft, claiming that the pilots responsible were among the coup rebels who had now been arrested, and realigned Turkey as a Russian ally, relinquishing his demands for Assad to be removed immediately. In this clash between two strong rulers, both of whom have crushed internal opposition and have not hesitated to act forcefully and demonstratively beyond their borders, Putin emerged victorious. Erdogan was forced to fold due to Putin's clever use of the Kurdish threat. The big losers in this series of events were of course the Kurds, who have no real importance for Moscow; despite Russian talk of the need for Turkish operations in northern Syria to avoid harming the Kurds, these are nothing more than meaningless platitudes.

The Relation with Iran: Fighting in the Same Side

Regarding Russia's relations with Iran: Although Russia's intervention to save the Alawite regime was not made with Iran in mind, the two countries found themselves fighting on the same side for different reasons. This relationship quickly developed into other areas following the signing of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 states. This was a historic shift, and it would appear that it is the Iranians who have struggled to keep pace with the speed of the change in relations between the states, which has come about with no advance planning. It was driven by two factors: First, as mentioned, the high level of cooperation in Syria; and second, and no less important, the desire of both sides to erode, to the greatest degree possible, US influence around the world, and particularly in the Middle East.

Meetings between Russian and Iranian leaders have become more and more frequent since the nuclear agreement was reached, and the agreements signed on energy cooperation (including the sale of Russian nuclear reactors to Iran) and on the supply of weapons are hugely important to both sides. As long as negotiations continued with Iran on the nuclear issue, Russia was careful to stay in line with the other countries involved, led by the United States—among other reasons, because it understood that the alternative to cooperation was the possibility of an Israeli or American military operation. But once the agreement was signed, as far as the Russians were concerned all barriers were lifted, and they were eager to forge ahead. Iran, however, was somewhat more reticent. It still bore the memory of Russia's occupation of part of Iran in the not-so-distant past; during the Second World War, Stalin set up a Kurdish state and an Azari state, both of them in northern Iran. Additionally, great sensitivity surrounds the involvement of foreign states in Iran, which is why Iran halted Russia's use of the airbase from which Russian planes took off to attack targets in eastern Syria, in August 2016. Had the Russians kept this fact secret, rather than publishing it to the world, they would seemingly have been able to continue air operations from bases in Iran, a fact that indicates the depth of relations that have formed between the two states.

Russia, however, is not content with the dramatic improvement in its standing with the Shiite axis, following its successes in Syria. It is also attempting to change its relations with Sunni Arab states in the region. Thus, talks were held recently over the sale of Russian arms to Egypt, in addition to the deals already agreed for air defense systems; and over the construction of nuclear reactors in Jordan, a field in which Russia has great expertise and Jordan has none. Relations with Saudi Arabia are more complex, mainly because of

Russia's anger over the flooding of the oil market, but there are signs that there may soon be increased Saudi investment in Russia, and perhaps even Russian arms sales to the Saudis. For Russia, relations with Riyadh are extremely important (as witnessed by the talks held with Prince Mohammad bin Salman in the summer of 2015), because Moscow is now seen as having taken sides in the Shiite-Sunni struggle, by actively participating in the defense of the ruling Alawite minority in close cooperation with Iran and Hezbollah. Any steps that would be seen as redressing the balance, allowing Russia to show that it has acted only to protect its own interests—whether in its relations with Sunnis or Shiites—would help create dialogue and reach an understanding on the critical issue of raising energy prices. However, Russian efforts in this regard have met with many obstacles, because some of these countries simply do not trust Moscow's intentions.

Returning to the Cold War Scenario

Russia's intensive efforts in Europe and the Middle East, both close to its borders and far away, give rise to an important and interesting question: At what point will its ambitions outstrip its resources? Russia is huge geographically, but its population is more modest; while the Soviet Union, with around 300 million residents, was the third most populous state in the world, after China and India, Russia in 2016 is only ninth on the list, with a population of 140 million, well below half the population of the United States and behind Indonesia, Brazil, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Bangladesh. The Russian economy, according to all theoretical calculations, is on the verge of collapse, and the situation will only worsen if the prices of oil and natural gas drop further. The country is struggling to meet the needs of its population, which already has a low standard of living, even in comparison to Eastern European states that were under Soviet control.

And yet, surprisingly, many in Russia remain supportive of the regime, as far as can be assessed from without, and there is a willingness to make sacrifices in support of global interests that, on the face of it, are of no use to the average citizen. It is unclear whether this gap, between a declining economy and the great expense of expanding military efforts worldwide, can be sustained for long. True, in recent years the regime has invested significant funds in modernizing the Russian military, and the new weapons systems that Russia is producing clearly show that its technological capabilities in this field have not waned, capabilities that were the nation's pride when the Soviet Union was one of two global superpowers. Yet here too, there is a question of whether Russia can continue these efforts without seriously damaging its future in civilian realms. The gap between the capabilities of the Russian weapons industry and the country's basic economic situation

certainly explains its willingness to sell these systems to anyone willing to pay the asking price, but such sales cannot really change Russia's economic situation; while these are significant sums, they are insufficient to address the economic crisis facing Russia, according to all studies and assessments conducted outside its borders. It appears that there are no good answers to these questions, and so it would seem that the world will continue to be surprised whenever Russia once again moves to expand the deployment and operation of its forces. Are the prophecies of economic collapse unfounded; or is this crash just around the corner, and the Russians are playing poker with a junk hand? The future will decide. In any case, it is clear that, despite its economic weakness, Russia poses a very real challenge to the United States, one that will have to be dealt with by whoever is elected president in November.

The Implications for Israel

And finally, a few words on the Israeli aspect. Israel does not see eye-to-eye with Russia on many issues. It believes that Russia is making a mistake to allow Iran to purchase new weapons systems, such as the S-300, which bolster Iranian self-confidence and increase the likelihood that Iran will choose to renew its efforts to obtain nuclear weapons. Israel views the de-facto alliance that has been created between Russia and Hezbollah (the strongest terror organization in the Middle East), due to their fighting together alongside the Iranian regime, as a very serious development with dire implications for Israel. The fact that Russia has not halted its supply of the most up-to-date weaponry to Syria, despite knowing that some of it makes its way into the hands of Hezbollah, makes them partners (at least in the passive sense) to the build-up of Hezbollah's capabilities for striking at Israel in the future in a very damaging way. Israel finds this both disappointing and worrying. At the same time, Russia's willingness to make "arrangements" for Israeli air activity over Syria reflects a form of understanding on its part for Israel acting independently to prevent this transfer of arms.

Israel is realistic about its relations with Russia. It seeks to determine what can be achieved (for example, a long delay in the supply of the S-300 to Iran, until the agreement with it had been signed), and what cannot (for example, canceling the S-300 purchase agreement outright). Israel is fairly active in its efforts to prevent the transfer of Russian (and other) arms to Hezbollah in Syria, but is careful not to harm civilians or Russian troops in Syria when doing so. And it's worth noting, as mentioned, that Russia has also taken a moderate stance, and has not demanded that Israel refrain from these actions. Israel has understood that it cannot prevent the cooperation between Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria in fighting rebel forces, but it wisely took steps

to reach a practical agreement with Russia, as soon as the massive Russian deployment to Syria was announced, to prevent any incidents that might have occurred if both sides were active in this arena without reliable communications between them.

This is the essence of the “de-confliction mechanism” that the two states have established. It is certainly not a pact, and not even an agreement for coordination of forces; it is nothing more than a technical arrangement designed to prevent mishaps. Reaching this arrangement and implementing it has been very important, but its diplomatic meaning should not be overstated: it is limited to the narrow sphere of preventing mistakes in the airspace in which both sides are active, each for its own purposes, and nothing more than that. There is also no basis for hopes that Russia might restrain Hezbollah and Iran from acting against Israel. For Israel, it is sufficient that Russia’s presence does not prevent it from acting against Hezbollah and Iran in the Golan Heights and in other areas of Syria, when Israel has a clear interest to do so. Russia may not like some of these actions, but its leadership understands that Israel has certain vital interests, and that it is within its rights to defend them.

For his part, Putin very much values good relations with Israel, among other reasons because he sees the million Israelis who arrived from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s as a kind of Russian diaspora, deserving of special attention. There is no doubt that the gratitude within Israel for the role of the Red Army during the Second World War also holds emotional importance for him, at a time when many in Eastern Europe have turned away from Russia. The prime minister of Israel has been sensitive to these needs of Russia, and has acted in time to prevent a clash in the new situation that has arisen, and thus has increased the trust between the two leaderships, despite the disagreements between them that still remain.

Israel cannot cope alone with a challenge at the level of international powers. Thus, it cannot be Israel that halts Russia’s growing power in the Middle East, in spite of the fact that in some cases—mainly to do with supplying advanced weapons systems to countries in the region, and the flow of these systems to terror organizations such as Hezbollah—Russia’s behavior is extremely detrimental to regional stability, and creates a real threat to Israel. Israel must continue to live with the current situation, while making clear its own interests, and occasionally using force in order to protect them, albeit without entering into all-out conflict with Russia, with whom it must maintain dialogue at all levels.



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