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Conceptual Foundations of National Security

Today's Relations between Putin's Russia and Israel

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Introduction

In the past 20 years, Vladimir Putin has cultivated a special relationship with Israel, and in return, probably influenced by its large number of Russian immigrants, Israel seems to have reciprocated. The two countries appear to be sharing a number of common interests and Benjamin Netanyahu makes a great deal of his personal friendship with Putin, skillfully balancing at the same time the US-Israel special link. Today Israel and Russia are both involved in the Syrian crisis, they both share the need of stability in the Middle East, and they both look for security from the jihadist threat. Also, they are in some way connected, although with very different aims, by their respective relation with the US.

This paper will briefly analyze the relationship between the two states from the Israeli National Security point of view. An analysis of the current bilateral relations will be illustrated, then the reciprocal types of power interactions will be presented and, finally, it will be evaluated how important is the connection with Russia with regard to the most significant State of Israel's value: being the national home of the Jewish people.

Russia needs Israel and Vice-versa

With its new stance in the Middle East, Russia has quickly discovered that Israel is an essential player on which to rely on in order to balance its interests in the area, even with respect to those who are the Jewish state's sworn enemies.

The Russian Federation has the need to show that can be a trustworthy superpower if it wants to occupy the empty room left from the US, and Israel see this as an opportunity to improve its internal security by containing the Iranian threat.

The gradual US disengagement from certain areas of the Middle East, combined with the crisis in Syria, have brought Russia and Israel to get closer and closer. When Israel decided not to support the sanctions of the West against Russia, following the events in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, it sent a clear and strong message to Putin whom now considers the Jewish State an important “ally” member of the opposite block.

The liaison between the two states is not an obvious one, given a tendency for the Soviet Union before and Russia after to be generally closer to the Arab world.

The main cause of the change has been Putin himself. Also because of personal life experiences, his “second father” was his Jewish judo trainer Anatolij Rakhlin, he is well aware of the importance of the Jewish communities around the world and considers the Russian Jews that emigrated to the Holy Land as compatriots to be protected and involved in Russian global strategy, in view of the fact that they clearly share language, culture, and mindset with their country of origin.

The large migration waves to Israel began at the end of 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the reinstatement of the bilateral relations that were interrupted in 1967, and today over a million Russian-speakers, about 12% of the population and 16% of the electorate, live in Israel.¹ Russian is the third most spoken language, after Hebrew and Arabic, a fact that made Putin declare, already in 2011 and again very

¹ J. Krasna, Moscow on the Mediterranean: Russia and Israel's Relationship, Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 2018, [goo.gl/E4A3PJ](https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/06/moscow-on-the-mediterranean-russia-and-israels-relationship/)

recently², that Israel is a “special” state for Moscow because is one of the few foreign countries with Russian-speakers. This minority is also well supported by a large presence of Russian language media, such as TV and radio channels, newspapers, web-sites, and also Russian product shops, and a great number of cultural activities. During his years in power the Russian leader has kept the same positive approach with different Israeli prime ministers but it was only with Netanyahu that the relations skyrocketed, showing how the interest is mutual. The number of reciprocal visits, meetings, phone calls, and exchange of courtesies is countless and leave no doubt on the importance that the prime minister attributes to this special relationship. Israel is a powerful state but is still limited in dimensions and resources and cannot act independently, surrounded as it is by threats and enemies. Every opportunity at increasing stability in the region must be pursued, even if it means getting closer to a Russian partner that is always in conflict with the US.

Types of power interactions

Between the two nations a mix and balance of both hard and soft powers can be observed.

On the side of hard power, while military force is not strictly employed for coercion by any of the two players toward each other, the reciprocal military capabilities are obvious and both know that a direct confrontation might result not only in physical damage but also in a heavy political one. Therefore, particularly with regard to Syria, there is continuous coordination between Israeli and Russian armed forces on a

² JTA, Putin Says He Considers Israel a Russian Speaking Country, 19 Sep 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/putin-says-he-considers-israel-a-russian-speaking-country/>

number of levels, and it is definitely worth noting that “Russian-speaking officers occupy both ends of the line”.³ This kind of hard power is then very much present but also particularly well balanced.

Another type of hard power between nations is the imposition of economic sanctions. When the West block has imposed a number of those to Russia, Israel has chosen not to. In this case a sort of “negative use” of hard power in order to bring solid political advantages while at the same time trying not to bring detriment to the relations with the US.

Finally, the use of culture to influence other states and a positive way of engagement with each other is a known soft power. Based on what said above, it can definitely be stated that societal influence is at play between Israel and Russia. The huge cultural exchange happening through the Russian Jews and the way that the leaders of the two countries talk and behave about each other are a clear attempt at influencing their relative international stances.

The Jewish identity as a national value

In their recent Guidelines for Israel’s National Security Strategy, Gadi Eisenkot and Gabi Siboni, highlight how national values “*express the nation’s identity, vision and raison d’être*” and how “*the State of Israel...serve as a source of pride for the Jews all over the world*”.

Putin’s special relationship with his Jewish judo trainer has already been mentioned, and he also lived near a Jewish family as a kid and holds good memories of them and

³ M. Aharonson, Russia-Israel Relations: Expectations and Reality, 20 Nov 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/20/russia-israel-relations-expectations-and-reality-a68249>

their way of life. He has expressed many times genuine closeness to the Jewish people and strong sentiments against antisemitism, often mentioning the importance of the Jewish community in Russia. He authorized the opening of the first Jewish school in Saint Petersburg and regularly emphasizes the sacrifice made by the Soviet Union and its people in fighting nazi-fascism and freeing Jews from the Holocaust. In light of the above, the relationship with Russia assumes a special importance because it becomes not only purely geopolitical but also a way to support one of the core values of the Jewish State, probably the most important one, by improving the international support of Jewish communities.

Conclusions

The analysis of the current bilateral relations between Russia and Israel showed how important it is to maintain a close and balanced connection between the two in an area as turbulent as the Middle East, where both countries share common interests.

A brief overview of how different types of power are reciprocally exercised has again shown how balanced the interaction between both countries is and how both strive to keep it that way.

Lastly, it has been outlined how the relationship with Russia, whose today's powerful leader shows great respect and support for Jewish communities everywhere, is relevant to Israel in order to contribute to one of its more fundamental values: its role as the national home of the Jewish people and as provider of assistance to World Jewry.

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