

COMMENTARY

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Russia, Iran and Israel: Putin's Strange Middle Eastern Diplomatic Front

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One of the more interesting aspects of the Russian military intervention into Syria has been the creation of a new diplomatic alignment in the Middle East consisting of Russia, Iran and Israel. While Iran has repeatedly called for Israel's destruction, and many Israelis continue to see Iran as an existential threat--despite last year's nuclear agreement--Russian leader Vladimir Putin has effectively used both countries to both strengthen Russia's position in the Middle East and restore Russia's image as a great power.

In the case of Iran, Iranian military forces, together with Iranian-dominated Shia militias such as Hezbollah, have helped Russia keep its military ally, the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad, in power. Russian aircraft have combined with Iranian ground forces to enable Assad to regain territory lost to Syrian opposition forces. At the same time, Israeli drones, sold to Moscow, have provided the Russian aircraft with targeting information that has facilitated Russian airstrikes on opposition forces. This is not to say that Iran and Israel are allies in Syria--quite the contrary--although both countries do oppose ISIS, as does Moscow. In his recent trip to Moscow in June 2016, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, even as he was entertained by Putin at the Bolshoi Ballet and given a private tour of the Kremlin, made clear to the Russian leader that Israel had two "red lines" in Syria that could not be crossed--preventing Iran and Hezbollah from creating another front against Israel near the Golan heights, similar to the one in South Lebanon, and preventing Iran and Syria from sending sophisticated arms to Hezbollah that could be used to threaten Israel. Indeed, Israel has been carrying out airstrikes of its own in Syria to prevent either eventuality, with a minimum of friction with Russia, whose aircraft and SAM-400 air defence missiles control the airspace in which the Israeli air force has been operating--

all this much to Iran's displeasure. On the other hand, Russia is sending SAM-300 air defence missiles to Iran, and is negotiating the sale of additional military equipment to the Islamic Republic, much to the unhappiness of Israel. Nonetheless, while both Iran and Israel are unhappy with some of Russia's policies, they see it as in their interest to cultivate Moscow, particularly as the United States, under President Barack Obama, appears to be backing away from the Middle East.

Yet Russian-Iranian and Russian-Israeli relations go much deeper than troop deployments and arms sales. In the case of Iran, Tehran is a major partner helping Russia achieve one of its major objectives—weakening the US position in the Middle East. While President Obama may have hoped that once the nuclear deal was signed, he would be able to forge a new, and more positive relationship with Iran, the anti-American rhetoric of Iran's Supreme Religious Leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei, and his close ally, Iran's politically powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard, continues unabated. In addition, Russia which has already built one nuclear reactor for Iran at Bushehr and is set to build additional reactors, and now that international sanctions have been lifted on Iran, Moscow is bidding on some major infrastructure projects there.

Israel's economic ties with Russia actually go deeper than those of Iran, as its annual trade of approximately US\$ 3 billion dollars is double that of Iran's trade with Russia. Besides having sold to Moscow the drones which have been so helpful in Russia's military activities in Syria, Israel sells agricultural and high tech products to Moscow, with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev calling for a major increase in high-tech sales from the Jewish State. In the area of "people to people" relations, Israel's ties with Russia also go deeper than Iran's. Prior to Russia's economic downturn in 2015, more than 600,000 Russian tourists came to Israel under the two countries' visa-free agreement. The atmosphere in Israel is a positive one for Russian visitors. Not only are there Orthodox shrines for them to visit (many of the tourists are pilgrims, as they were in Czarist times), but there are Russian newspapers for them to read in Israel as well as Russian TV. Another bond between the two countries is the more than one million Russian-speaking Israelis who came to Israel from the former Soviet Union. They form a bastion of Russian culture in Israel---one that Putin hopes to exploit---and Israeli tourists and businessmen, many of who originally came from the Former Soviet Union, are frequent visitors to Russia as the anti-Semitism of the Soviet Era , to a large extent, has been replaced by what might be called the philo-Semitism of the Putin Government.'

Finally, the Middle East is increasingly in chaos, with wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya; continuing conflicts in the region such as the Sunni-Shia and Palestinian-Israeli; the continuing threats of Al-Qaeda and Isis: and growing internal turmoil in Turkey and Egypt. As Putin seeks to increase Russia's influence in the region, he is in need of stable partners. And, as much as they may oppose each other, Israel and Iran are the only two stable countries in the region, and as such, they have become important partners of Russia.

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