

COMMENTARY

No. 61

Friday, 27 July 2012

Israel and Russia: The Odd Couple

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Israel on 25 June underlines the fact that three months after being re-elected as Russian President, Putin's Middle East goals have not changed since he last served as president during 2001-2008. This also means that the relatively moderate policy in the Middle East of Russia's previous president, Dmitry Medvedev (agreement of serious sanctions on Iran in 2010 and to action against Libyan ruler Muammar Kaddafi in 2011) are a thing of the past.

Putin's goals are threefold. First he wants Russia to be acknowledged as a major player in world affairs, and the Middle East with its numerous crises is an excellent place for him to do this. Related to this goal is the fact that Putin seeks to replace American hegemony in the world with a multi-polar world where Russia is a very important pole. Second, Putin seeks economic gain from Russia's activities in the Middle East. This includes the sale of high-tech items as nuclear reactors (Iran), major infrastructure projects such as railroads (Libya) and sophisticated armaments (Iran, Libya and Syria). In addition, Moscow is seeking to acquire high technology imports, such as nanotechnology, from Israel, to help it set up the Russian version of Silicon Valley near Moscow. Putin also is interested in joint projects to develop oil and natural gas deposits in such countries as Iran and Saudi Arabia (and possibly in Israel as well) to replace dwindling Russian domestic supplies of such fuels.

Putin's third goal is to prevent the Middle East from being a source of support for radical Islamists active in the North Caucasus, in regions such as Chechnya and Dagestan. Putin's policies after regaining the Russian presidency in March 2012, such as protecting the bloody Syrian regime of Bashar Assad from serious international punishment and the Iranian regime

from additional UN Security Council sanctions because of its continued enrichment of uranium and suspected weaponization of that uranium, clearly illustrates that he is continuing to pursue his old goals.

Unlike Syria and Iran, Russia's primary allies in the Middle East, Israel is a pro-American and democratic state. Yet Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, apparently oblivious both to Putin's human rights problems in Russia and his support for Assad's suppression of his population, as well as to Moscow's arms sales to both Syria and Iran, (sworn enemies of Israel) warmly welcomed Putin to Israel. Why did he do this? There are four answers to this question. First, unlike in Soviet times, Israel and Russia enjoy excellent bilateral relations, however problematic to the Russian support for Iran, Syria and Hamas might be. Trade between the two countries is approaching US\$3 billion a year; there are extensive cultural relations, primarily between Israel's Russian immigrant population and Russia; half a million Russian tourists visit Israel every year (where they can feel right at home with Russian language newspapers and Russian language TV readily available); Israel has sold military drones to Russia to help it after its poor military performance against Georgia in 2008; and above all, given Netanyahu's Zionist ethos, the gates of Russia have remained open for Jewish emigration.

A second factor relates to Israeli domestic politics. While polls have shown that the vast majority of Russian immigrants do not want to replace Israel's American alliance with a Russian one, they do appreciate the fact that because of good bilateral relations they can easily fly back and forth between Russia and Israel, both for business reasons and to see family and friends who have remained in Russia. Consequently, maintaining good bilateral relations is helpful to Netanyahu as Russian immigrants currently form 20 percent of Israel's population and are an important part of Netanyahu's ruling coalition both in the Russian-based Yisrael Beiteynu Party, led by Israel's Soviet-born Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, and in Likud itself.

Third, following the onset of the Arab Spring, which has brought Islamists to power in Tunisia and Egypt, both Israel and Russia share an interest in preventing the spread of radical Islam in the Middle East, and it might be expected that intelligence cooperation on Islam was one of the topics discussed by the two leaders. Finally, Israel is developing its natural gas reserves off its Mediterranean coast, and the first of the natural gas should arrive in Israel in 2013. This is fortunate for Israel because, following the ouster of Hosni Mubarak as Egypt's President, numerous explosions in the pipeline from Egypt as it crossed the Sinai led to the severing of Israel's natural gas agreement with Egypt which, before the fall of Mubarak, had supplied 40 percent of Israel's natural gas needs.

Moscow's interest in Israel's natural gas production is twofold. First Russia's state natural gas company, Gazprom, has offered to help develop some of the natural gas fields off Israel's coast. Second, although current estimates of Israel's proven reserves of natural gas are not that high,

they could grow and Israel could become a natural gas competitor for Russia in sales of the fuel to Europe. From Israel's perspective, the main challenge to the development of its natural gas fields is diplomatic, not technological. Turkey, which controls Northern Cyprus, objects to the sea boundary drawn between the Greek-controlled sector of Cyprus and Israel, and has threatened military action to defend its claims. While Turkey, which currently has a host of domestic and foreign policy problems from a Kurdish rebellion in South-eastern Turkey, to Syria which just shot down a Turkish warplane, may just be bluffing ; having Gasprom involved in the disputed area may serve as a diplomatic check against Turkey.

Consequently, what might come out of the discussions with Gasprom is an informal agreement under which Israel would not sell natural gas to Europe, and Russia would help develop the natural gas in the disputed area. Under this agreement, both sides benefit, and Israel could sell any excess gas it produces beyond its domestic needs to Jordan, which was also badly hurt by the numerous Sinai gas pipeline explosions.. Such an arrangement would reinforce the Jordanian-Israeli relations at a time of increasing domestic turmoil in Jordan as a result of the Arab Spring. Should Israel have any gas remaining after its sales to Jordan, it could sell the gas to Russia to help make up for its dwindling supplies which are needed both domestically and for export.

While Netanyahu sees a number of benefits from close bilateral Russian-Israeli relations, so too does Putin. By being invited to Israel, an ally of the United States—the ostensible purpose was to help unveil a monument to Soviet soldiers who helped defeat Nazi Germany in the Second World War—Putin can demonstrate to the world that despite Russia's lack of popularity in the Sunni Arab World because of its support of the Assad regime, Russia remains a major factor in Middle East affairs. Second, Israel's Russian Orthodox churches and holy places are not only a major attraction for Russian tourists, they also reinforce Putin's ties with the Russian Orthodox Church which has become his major supporter, as the Orthodox Church was to the Russian government during Czarist times. Indeed, in 2008 Putin had persuaded Israel to return Sergei's House and Courtyard, a 19th Century hostel for visiting Russian Orthodox pilgrims, to Russian control. Third, the good bilateral ties enable Russia to draw on Israeli high technology from nano-technology to military drones. Finally, if negotiations between Gasprom and Israel work out, Israel may become an energy partner for Russia. What was interesting to note in the Putin-Netanyahu talks, however, is that Putin did not appear to make any concessions on Russian policy toward Iran—the number one priority of Netanyahu—or in the supply of Russian weapons to Syria. This would appear to indicate that in the bilateral relationship, Russia clearly has the upper hand.

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