

## RSC GUEST ANALYSIS

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### An Unnatural Nexus of Interests: The Israeli-Russian-Iranian Triad

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Interestingly, Russia has managed to maintain relations with both the Israeli government and the Iranian regime, despite the obvious hostility between Iran and the Jewish State. Given that Israel's relationship with the West has been on the decline over disagreements on the Palestinian conflict, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has shifted its diplomatic efforts towards Russia to further Israel's foreign policy interests.<sup>1</sup>

Israel's involvement with Syria exists on the arrangement that the Assad regime has kept the Israeli-Syrian border quiet since after the 1973 war. Israel doesn't wish to sever ties with Russia because Russian cooperation with Iran might increase even more, a fact of which Russia is fully aware of.

Israel's security cooperation with Russia is motivated by Israel's interests of having Russia as a mediator to restrain the threat of Syria and Iran to Israel, a desire for stability, and to combat Islamic extremism. Iran, Israel, and the West all oppose Sunni jihadism which includes both Al-Qaeda and ISIS (Islamic State). Iran supports the Palestinian cause, another rift in its strain against Israel. If Iran and Hezbollah allies are more preoccupied with protecting the Assad regime, they will focus less on Israel, however. Israel views Russia's presence in Syria as a balancing force that will place a restraint on Hezbollah or other groups if they attack Israel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-russia-and-israel-are-cooperating-in-syria\\_us\\_576bdb68e4b083e0c0235e15](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-russia-and-israel-are-cooperating-in-syria_us_576bdb68e4b083e0c0235e15)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/18/russia-iran-and-israel-a-troubled-triangle/>

Until August 2016, Russia used Iranian infrastructure to fight against terrorism in Syria.<sup>3</sup> Russia was the first foreign power to base its forces in Iran since WWII. Originally the Russian air force used the Mozdok military base in the Caucasus region for targeting positions in Syria, which required jets to fly 2000 km.

By using the Hamedan base in Iran, Russia was able to reduce the journey to only 900 km, bringing it strategic and economic benefits and making it more suitable for Russia's TU-22M3, one of the biggest bombs in the world.<sup>4</sup>

The agreement between Iran and Russia helped strengthen the alliance with Iran and Iraq, and the Syrian government, the region's Shiite powers, and would allow Russia to use more firepower against the opposition fighters in Syria.

Although Russia and Iran collaborate based on shared goals, their differences are stark, especially concerning Israel. While Iran and Israel are considered enemies, Russia enjoys close relations with Israel, home to a million Russian emigrants.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.breakingisraelnews.com/74063/iran-lets-russian-bombers-use-air-base-strikes-isis/#IRPaW55yKpWBTjQh.97>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/iran-hamedan-noje-airbase-russia-airstrikes-syria.html>

<sup>5</sup> [www.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/world/middleeast/iran-russia-syria.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/world/middleeast/iran-russia-syria.html?_r=1)

Acting as a mediator between Israel and its anti-Israel allies, Russia plays an important role of helping reduce security threats to Israel via its northern border with Syria. Israel sees Russia as a security partner, and in exchange, Israel agrees to withhold military intervention in Syria and to allow Russian jets to fly over Israeli airspace. Russia benefits by carrying out its military campaign in Syria without the risk of Israel endangering Russia's relationship and goals with the Assad regime.<sup>6</sup>

Russian military involvement in Syria raises concerns for Israel, however, which is careful to see that clashes between the two forces and accidental firing in Israel will be avoided.<sup>7</sup> Dangers include the congestion of Syrian airspace and establishing organized military coordination, a major concern highlighted by an incident in December 2015 in which Turkey shot down a Russian SU-24 bomber aircraft.<sup>8</sup> Escalating tensions between Turkey and Russia were contributing factors in the issue of the limited Syrian airspace as well.

### **Russian and Israeli interests in Syria**

Israel maintains control over both Syrian and Lebanese airspace in which it gains vital intelligence information regarding Hezbollah activities. Its main goal has been to monitor the Lebanese-Syrian border to ensure that weapons and ammunition were not being transferred to Hezbollah via Syria.<sup>9</sup> The congestion of Syrian airspace is of particular concern for Israel, because with the addition of Russian and other international activity, it may not be able to easily maneuver around them and monitoring will become increasingly difficult.

Despite it being an ally of Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, which backs Hezbollah, Russia is one of the few forces that recognizes Israel's security issue concerning Hezbollah's attainment of arms. Israeli jets have operated in Syria in order to prevent the transfer of weapons into the ownership of Hezbollah.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-russia-and-israel-are-cooperating-in-syria\\_us\\_576bdb68e4b083e0c0235e15](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-russia-and-israel-are-cooperating-in-syria_us_576bdb68e4b083e0c0235e15)

<sup>7</sup> <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/world/2015/12/02/Russian-Israeli-relations-reach-new-heights.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/12/15/why-russias-payback-to-turkey-could-be-lethal/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/world/2015/12/02/Russian-Israeli-relations-reach-new-heights.html>

In an interview with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, he remarked that "we operate in Syria from time to time to prevent it turning into another front against us. We act, of course, to prevent the transfer of deadly weaponry from Syria to Lebanon."<sup>10</sup>

Israeli airstrikes have targeted and intercepted advanced Russian and Iranian-made missiles and aircrafts they believe are on the way to Hezbollah, which has had its presence in Syria since mid-2013. As a result of Israeli-Russian cooperation, an incident involving a Russian jet into Israeli airspace was quickly resolved without incident.<sup>11</sup>

Russian intervention as a temporary possible solution in Syria has been discussed. If Russia controlled Syria, Iran may allow the export of oil and gas to Europe through Turkey. Russia's priority is and has been to prevent the Arab-Sunni pipelines (Sunni) and to prevent Iran-Iraq-Syria pipelines (Shia). Russia wants to construct and control the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline. Oil and gas exports make up seventy percent of Russia's foreign income and sixty percent of its state budget comes from energy export revenues.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, Putin's support of Assad is crucial for Russia; Assad decides what pipelines pass through Syria as well as Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine which are no longer under Russia's control.

Both Russia and Israel fear a Sunni Islamic revolutionary takeover in Syria. They have increased their security policy coordination in Syria in order to avoid conflict and military action. Israel's main concern is the Iranian threat, which it views in the same light as ISIS.

Russia plays a double role in acting to prevent Russian weapons sold to Iran from ending up in the hands of Hezbollah, while simultaneously trying not to break trust with Iran. Russian military involvement is vital for Israel's regional security, because Russia's presence keeps Iran from engaging in terrorism on Russia's southern border. Russia maintains two naval bases in Syria to thwart Iranian intervention.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-3341250/Netanyahu-says-Israel-acts-Syria-time-time.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://warisboring.com/despite-russian-warplanes-in-the-sky-israel-keeps-bombing-syria-d61350c3f5a#.nqo04fej9>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.meforum.org/5876/why-putin-wants-syria>

## Iranian Interests

Iran is an ally of the Assad regime and a main supporter of Hezbollah, the terrorist organization that shares its anti-Israel sentiments and ideological goals. According to analyst Saheb Sadeghi, “for Iran, it is vital that the future Syrian political system maintains an anti-Israeli stance and continues to act as a bridge between Tehran and Hezbollah.”<sup>13</sup>

The Assad regime has long since been a guarantor of arms supplies and a supply highway to Iran via Hezbollah. The loss of Syria would weaken Iran’s regional position and endanger its security interests. By cooperating with Russia and Syria, Iran exercises and projects its power in the Middle East while preventing Western influence from changing the Syrian regime.

Iran wants to export oil to Europe and hopes to do so via Turkey. Tehran desires Russian air defense missile systems to protect itself from Israeli attacks on its nuclear and military facilities. Iran, a vital strategic partner to Russia, has purchased Russian weapon systems, engaged in pipeline projects, and bought nuclear power plants.

The Iran nuclear deal in July 2015 and possible lifting of sanctions makes it possible for Iran to purchase more advanced weapons such as Russia’s long-range S-300 anti-aircraft system.<sup>14</sup> The improvement of U.S.-Iran relations will make it easier for Assad to collaborate with Iran and Hezbollah in order to ensure Assad’s protection.

## Conclusion

Putin’s intervention in Syria has had one aim, to reestablish Russia’s presence in the Black Sea and through the Turkish Straits to the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and Middle East and Black Sea coastal areas.<sup>15</sup>

Russian interests in the Middle East have significant implications for Israel. Assad’s regime does not have diplomatic relations with Israel, but is a strong ally of Russia. Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah are not only allies of the Assad regime, and Russian military allies, they are supporters of anti-Israel foreign policy.

Israel hopes that its growing cooperation with Russia will help curb and neutralize Iranian and Hezbollah foreign policies towards Israel. As a result, Israel is not interested in halting relations with Russia anytime soon for fear of Russia’s increasing support of Iranian interests.<sup>16</sup>

On August 22, 2016, Russian and Iranian officials announced that Russia’s use of the Iranian air base have halted.<sup>17</sup> Recognizing that Russia views Iran as a ‘bargaining chip for extracting concessions’ from the United States, Iran halted permission claiming that Russia publicized the agreement and that Iran acted too soon.

Still, Russia offers Iran a vital means of preserving its regional security interests and shares the ideological outlook in terms of the Syrian conflict. If Russia manages to overcome the barrier of mistrust, Russian cooperation with Iran can result in mutual benefits because both powers share deeply rooted commonalities and, although they are economic competitors, are more similar to one another in terms of security needs and ideological beliefs than to the West.

The future of Tehran-Moscow relations will be contingent upon gaining back and maintaining trust between the two countries, and uniting based on their shared interests, provided that a more structured and intensive relationship is established. While it is premature to tell where the long-term relationship between Russia and Iran is headed, their shared short-term goals will ensure the continuation of their temporary alliance and active engagement in joint military operations, at least until the power balance in Syria is determined.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://warisboring.com/despite-russian-warplanes-in-the-sky-israel-keeps-bombing-syria-d61350c3f5a#.nqo04fej9>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.meforum.org/5876/why-putin-wants-syria>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.meforum.org/5876/why-putin-wants-syria>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/18/russia-iran-and-israel-a-troubled-triangle/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.jns.org/latest-articles/2016/8/22/russia-israel-and-iran-syrian-conflict-creates-adverse-strategic-triangle#.V9qUUvkrLIV=>



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