

Vladimir Putin visited the National Defence Control Centre November 2015 to discuss the actions of Russian forces in the Syrian Arab Republic. **Photo:** <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50714>

Russian and U.S. Roles in the Middle East: An Israeli’s Perspective

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In recent years the Middle East has undergone major upheavals that saw dramatic changes in the roles played by the United States and Russia. Since 2009, Russia’s influence in the Middle East has greatly increased, while American influence has declined. This dynamic has raised concern among many U.S. and other Western observers and spurred much debate over its causes. It is particularly illuminating to look at this issue from the perspective of America’s principal ally in the region, Israel. The view from Israel is especially valuable because of the unique position that country currently holds in its relations with Russia and the United States. Israel’s traditionally close

ties with the United States were undermined by deep differences and mistrust between the Obama administration and Israel’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. At the same time, despite profound contradictions in interests and agenda, Israel has developed a rather close security coordination with Russia.

Israel’s perspective on regional affairs is to a significant degree shaped by its relations with the world’s great powers: primarily with its main ally and the world’s only superpower, the United States; but recently also with a Russia that has become more active on the international stage.

Israeli regional policies are traditionally guided by direct threats arising from neighboring countries, especially the strategic threat posed by the Iranian nuclear program. The other traditional issue that for decades has preoccupied Israeli politics and variously affected its policies and relations in the region is the unsettled conflict with the Palestinians. However, in recent years, diverse threats originating in the rise of militant Islamism across the region as both a radicalizing and a destabilizing force have risen in importance to equal the classic challenges or even supplant them. In Iraq, Egypt, and Syria, as elsewhere across the region, various Islamist and jihadist groups have undermined moderate or at least accountable regimes while at the same time spurring guerrilla and terrorist attacks against Israel and Jewish targets around the globe. Though Israel has reached a certain degree of strategic confidence in handling threats arising from state actors (with the exception of Iran), more elusive asymmetric challenges emanating from across the border are more difficult to handle. These new challenges peaked after the Arab Spring and have grown peculiarly intertwined with preexisting risks and issues, significantly changing the actors' status and interrelations.

Handling Regional Allies and Commitments

In an effort to profoundly transform the Middle East and simultaneously ease the United States' burden of regional involvement, Barack Obama sought to free the U.S. Middle Eastern policy from the constraints of traditional commitments and obligations. Accordingly, Obama's administration abandoned America's long-established practice

of siding with established Sunni regimes and Israel in favor of capturing the new opportunities it envisioned—as suggested by a more accommodating position toward Iran, the endorsement of the popular uprisings that came to be known as the Arab Spring, and a more activist stance on the Palestinian issue.

One of the seminal turning points embodying this new approach in relation to the Arab Spring as a whole was America's handling of the 2011 protests in Egypt. Viewing them as part of an essentially progressive phenomenon, after some hesitation Obama's administration fully associated itself with the protesters and publicly pressured President Hosni Mubarak to step down and, subsequently, the Egyptian army to withdraw from running the country. This mode of behavior facilitated the radical revolutionary scenario, whereas a more balanced and discreet approach might have allowed a more gradual transition with less instability, which would also have allowed the secular forces time to prepare for political competition. Where Washington saw opportunity, the Israeli

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government saw radicalization and anarchy, and therefore it became deeply alarmed by what it perceived as the United States' mishandling of the crisis and abandoning of a loyal regime. The Israeli government was later appalled by Obama's warm relations with Egypt's successor president



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during a working visit to Russia.

Photo: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56135#>

Mohamed Morsi's Islamist government, relations that the United States continued to uphold despite Morsi's outward hostility toward Israel, his support for Hamas, and growing ties between Egypt and Iran. Predictably, the Israeli and U.S. governments became deeply divided over Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's military counterrevolution, which took al-Sisi to the Egyptian presidency. It was seen in Washington as an antidemocratic coup, while Jerusalem saw it as a chance for moderating Egyptian politics.

The U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq, along with Obama's passive endorsement of Iranian influence in the riven country, his softer attitude toward the Iranian nuclear program, and his perceived abandoning of traditionalist Sunni regimes in their struggle for survival against popular upheavals, only enhanced Sunnis' motivation to become involved in the Syrian civil war. Such involvement

helped sustain popular legitimacy at home and counter a reinforced Shia axis abroad. Ironically, America's perceived abdication of the security guarantees it had tendered to its Sunni allies also pushed those allies, the Saudis in particular, to clandestinely seek security cooperation with Israel to counter the common Shia threat. This Saudi-Israeli rapprochement seems to be holding even after Trump unequivocally realigned with the Sunni states against Iran and indicated his administration would not interfere in the domestic issues of U.S. allies.¹ The uncertainty previously generated among America's regional allies has proved hard to undo, while Trump's ambivalent handling of allies has helped reinforce a certain mode of self-dependence among them. Some examples of recent perplexing U.S. actions are the contradictory treatment of al-Sisi's regime and the Kurdish independence aspirations, as well as the seeming disregard of

Israel's vocal concerns over the Iranian presence near its border as U.S.-Russian arrangements for Syrian de-escalation began to take shape.

In contrast to the United States, Russia had little at stake in the regimes undermined by the Arab Spring, but decisively opposed the uprisings for its own reasons. Like Israel, Russia believed the Arab Spring uprisings spurred anarchy and led to the proliferation of Islamists. Above all, Russia projected the antigovernment and, as it believed, U.S.-inspired protests onto its own situation. The Kremlin believed the Middle Eastern turmoil followed a pattern of similar anti-establishment, pro-Western "color revolutions" in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space and represented a threat to its own power. In

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keeping with this conspiratorial thinking, the Arab Spring was seen as an American plot, a "controlled anarchy" tactic aimed at establishing American puppet regimes instead of more independent ones.

Syria, Russia's only regional client in the region, seemed poised to join the list. Russia has stubbornly supported Bashar al-Assad's regime against mounting international pressure and militant opposition from his own people, even when the regime's chances for survival seemed grim. It also diplomatically supported al-Sisi as the leader of a secular regime that opposed Sunni Islamists, while hoping to fill the void left by the United States in Egypt. Russia's stance in Syria initially antagonized the Sunni Gulf states, but it also earned the Kremlin

respect and credibility among them. Despite Israeli concern over an increased Russian presence in Syria and Moscow's rapprochement with al-Sisi's regime, Russia's basic position was in accord with Israel's immediate preferences. Even the Kremlin's support for Assad worked partially in Israel's interests, as it preserved the balance of powers among Syria's fighting parties and therefore diverted their attention from Israel.

The Syrian Civil War

America's uncertain navigation among a myriad of often questionable Syrian opposition groups, many of which were dominated by the Gulf states or were simply insignificant, undermined its reputation in Israel and added to the mounting feeling that Washington was baffled by the new regional realities. Much as in its response to the Arab Spring events, in Syria the United States was seen as mostly lagging events rather than directing them, unsuccessfully trying to jump on an already departed bandwagon.

Assad's chemical weapons crisis in 2013 became a watershed event in the regional perception of both U.S. and Russian roles in the region. American inaction and evident reluctance to use force against a bold violation of its own publicly announced "red line" decisively convinced America's regional associates, and the Israeli leadership in particular, that Obama's security guarantees on the nuclear deal with Iran, the Syrian civil war, and the Palestinian track were hollow. The crisis unfavorably contrasted American indecisiveness with Russia's exhibition of militancy and bravado. During the incident Putin moved his naval vessels toward the Syrian shores and hinted he might intervene to

protect Assad against a possible American attack.² Years later, Trump's strikes on Syria, executed on a similar premise, met no reprisals, suggesting that Putin probably was bluffing. Nonetheless, the Kremlin's untested gestures signaled Russia's new commitment to the Middle Eastern arena. Russia's activity in the region later culminated in intervention in the Syrian civil war.

From Israel's point of view, Russian intervention in Syria is a mixed blessing. The presence in the neighborhood of a global power with a clear strategic inclination to favor Israel's enemies posed a strategic threat. At the same time, in the shorter run Russian involvement diverted the fighting factions away from Israel. The Russian presence in Syria complicated the task of inhibiting Hezbollah's military buildup, but after certain unofficial understandings were reached the Russians turned a blind eye to Israeli airstrikes against weapons shipments threatening it. Israel did not take responsibility for the strikes and the Russians did not react. This delicate behind-the-scenes coordination between two mutually suspicious parties was even more remarkable when viewed against the perceived American supercilious conduct on the Iranian nuclear deal. Unlike the United States, Russia was no ally of Israel and by no means was expected to behave like an ally, though its respectful accommodation of Israel's key interests and game plan was appreciated. As for the Sunni states, even recent American strikes against Assad's forces, which humbled Russia's bravado image and helped restore much of the American image of deterrence, did not prevent the Saudis or even the Qataris from seeking closer ties with Moscow.

The Palestinian Track

The difference between the United States' and Russia's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian track couldn't be greater. Obama's administration, exemplified in particular by Secretary of State John Kerry, enthusiastically sought to advance Israeli-Palestinian talks. From the outset of Obama's presidency, the White House had presented Israel with demands and the outlines of a settlement that significantly contradicted understandings reached with the preceding Bush administration. Though hardly revolutionary, these demands and proposals were announced very publicly and without any warning or diplomatic preparation. Furthermore, the administration, disregarding the political circumstances and social realities on both sides, repeatedly made highly publicized attempts to restart negotiations, forcing an often maximalist agenda on both sides. Such conduct raised worries on the Israeli side of an imposed settlement and led to inflated expectations among the Palestinians, thus creating excessive public pressure on both Palestinian and Israeli leadership and stiffening their respective positions. When coupled with the diminishing credibility of American security guarantees, this hot pursuit of a settlement quickly saw the situation disintegrate into a stalemate. In 2014 the frustration on the Israeli side was flamboyantly expressed by the then minister of defense Moshe Yaalon, who privately called John Kerry "obsessive" and "messianic." "The only thing that can 'save' us," he cynically remarked to associates, "is for John Kerry to win his Nobel Prize and leave us alone."³ In marked contrast, President Trump has not presented any vision concerning the Palestinian issue and, while sending some contradictory signals, has essentially left the arena without much attention. However, Trump's

status quo clearly favors the Israeli rather than the Palestinian leadership.

Whereas American efforts were driven and sometimes hampered by an excessive vision, Russia's actions were limited by a narrow self-interest. Hoping to gain favorable publicity and enhance its status as an international player, the Kremlin had occasionally suggested hosting Israeli-Palestinian talks but, indifferent to the peace process itself, did not insist on the proposition when it encountered difficulties. In pursuit of international recognition, Russia presented one of the more critical stances on Israel's Palestinian policy and, to Israel's dismay, even hosted Hamas delegations in Moscow, but none of these gestures translated into any practical moves. Ironically, because Russia's hostile attitude matched Israeli expectations, it did not significantly affect the limited bilateral relations. In contrast, the position of the incomparably friendlier Obama flew in the face of Jerusalem's assumptions and seriously obstructed contacts between the two countries.

Iran's Nuclear Program

In fact, very soon after the beginning of Obama's presidency, the U.S. regional initiatives came to be increasingly perceived by the Israeli leadership as a serious security challenge. Towering above all else is the American nuclear deal with Iran and its various repercussions. The extent to which the deal created disdain and mistrust in Israel is explained no less by the manner in which it was carried out and promoted than by its actual content. Indeed, resistance to the deal on the Israeli side formed even before its outlines were fully revealed, when it became clear the deal was being promoted without engaging Israel. Such American conduct violated the

unspoken "no surprises" understanding that had held between the United States and Israel since the mid- to late 1980s. "No surprises" meant that either side had to at least preliminarily inform its counterpart of any significant moves it planned to undertake in the region. In this case, in contrast to American reassurances, in the summer of 2013, six months before it was officially informed by Washington, Israel learned from Saudi sources (of all things!) that direct, secret U.S.-Iran negotiations were taking place.⁴ The exact content of the talks was not known, but the situation created deep mistrust toward Obama's administration and spiraling anxiety among the Israeli leadership with respect to the deal.

Russia's relations with Iran, though starting from a far stronger position than America's, seemed to be heading in the opposite direction since the mid- to late 2000s. In contrast to the widespread perception of infallibly intimate relations between Russia and Iran, the Kremlin gradually started developing a more suspicious attitude toward the

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Islamic Republic. Since 2006, Russian supported UN sanctions on Iran for its nuclear program. Despite great diplomatic and financial costs, it suspended the planned delivery of S-300 missiles to Iran. However, this decision was quickly reversed in 2015, after the signing of the U.S.-led nuclear deal triggered an international race for Iran's favors. In a desperate effort to outbid the West, the Russians immediately supplied Tehran with S-300 systems,

indicated a willingness to provide more weapons, and proposed building additional nuclear facilities.

Whereas the Russian moves were received in Israel with a certain deterministic understanding, the Americans were viewed as primarily responsible for Israel's worsening strategic situation. Furthermore, although the United States was the entity that promoted the nuclear deal that led to the change in Iran's international status, it did not reap the agreement's diplomatic fruits. In Israel, Russia continued to be seen as *the* main address to influence Iran. For example, in late February 2017 ex-Mossad chief Efraim Halevy explicitly urged Israeli leadership to reach out to Russia, not the United States, in its efforts to thwart Iran's nuclear program and other ambitions.⁵ This was exactly what Netanyahu did when a month later he got Russia to pledge it would rein in Iranian expansion in Syria.⁶ Moreover, although Donald Trump is known to be a consistent and vocal opponent of the nuclear deal with Iran, well into his first presidential year he has yet to reveal how he actually intends to handle the issue. Further uncertainty might lead to a reversal of Israel's initial optimism and bring the country back to its previous self-reliant mode, accordingly diminishing the United States' ability to affect events.

Analysis and Conclusions

During the period under review, Russia's perceived determination and readiness to use force, coupled with its consistent policy, allowed that nation to significantly increase its leverage in the Middle East far beyond its actual power or investment of resources might suggest. In contrast, the perceived lack of U.S. credibility among both its allies and opponents significantly inhibited the originally

much stronger American position. Consequently, the United States lost its role as a pivotal security guarantor for its regional allies. Like the traditional Sunni regimes, the Israeli leadership came to realize it would have to assume full responsibility for its security without relying on U.S. mediation. America's allies were pushed to deepen contacts with other, often inconvenient, regional players. Some examples during the period were Israel's forced cooperation with Russia in Syria and the Saudi contacts with Israel on the Iranian issue. This new configuration of cooperation in the region in turn reduced American influence on its allies and its ability to affect events in the region as whole.

The Israeli case also vividly demonstrates that the "new Cold War" paradigm that is often introduced as shorthand to describe the (presumed) emerging standoff between Russia and the United States in the Middle East is invalid and misleading. In contrast to the Cold War era, currently there is no clear and inescapable divide between the two camps. The secondary players enjoy much greater room for political maneuvering and therefore stronger bargaining positions relative to the two powers. Additionally, the relative power of the secondary players themselves has greatly increased. Coupled with the emergence of influential nonstate or semistate actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and ISIS, these factors significantly reduce the ability of world powers to affect the region.

This analysis suggests several policy-oriented conclusions for U.S. conduct in the region. First, the importance of clear mutual expectations and rules of the game with regional allies cannot be overemphasized. At the level of everyday contacts, lack of clarity as to intentions and expectations may even be more important than the level and character

of interstate relations as whole. Second, direct, even discreet contacts with local governments should be prioritized over public diplomacy (overemphasized by President Obama), public displays of diplomacy, and mere publicity seeking. And finally, U.S. aspirations and regional goals should be tempered and consciously conditioned by the level of desired involvement.

While Trump has reaffirmed America's commitment to its traditional allies in the region and so far has exhibited a determined yet measured use of force that improved America's standing among them. In the longer run, the lack of a coherent regional strategy (whichever one is ultimately chosen) could seriously impede U.S. efforts in the Middle East. Despite Trump's seeming readiness to compromise with the Russians, unless his administration decides in advance on an acceptable degree of involvement and sets realistic goals, his aggressive approach is likely to be eventually tested, which could lead to an unintended military engagement. Furthermore, despite Trump's demonstrated determination, a lack of clarity as to goals and mutual expectations might in the long run undermine any credibility regained in the interim with Israel and the United States' Sunni allies.





The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.

Endnotes



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