



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Why Russia Needs Israel

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Why has Russia under Putin acknowledged Israel's need to prevent the buildup of an Iranian military presence in Syria? Putin's vision is to cement an alliance of minorities against the Sunni majority in the Middle East. Israel could be a valuable participant in making that vision a reality – but only if Moscow works to rid Syria of the Iranian presence, joins forces to topple its Islamist regime, and weans the Alawite regime in Damascus away from Tehran.**

Ever since September 2015, when Russia turned the tide of the Syrian civil war in the Assad regime's favor through strategic air power (and subsequently on the ground, where it brokered truces and withdrawals of rebels from strategic areas in Syria to the rebel stronghold in Idlib), Israel has been heavily pounding Syrian, Iranian, and Hezbollah forces.

The question arises: why has Russia under Putin acknowledged Israeli red lines aimed at preventing the buildup of an Iranian military presence in the country? That Iranian presence, after all, would seem to advance the goal of consolidating the Assad regime – the main reason behind Russia's involvement in Syria in the first place.

To fully understand Putin's acceptance of Israeli involvement in Syria, one must consider the balance of power that existed between Czarist Russia and its southern neighbors, Ottoman Turkey and imperial Iran, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The balance of power at that time – over 100 years ago – was totally in Russia's favor. Russia's population was a massive 100 million compared to 24 million for the Ottoman Empire (a figure that would be halved in WWI as a result of military

defeats, massive loss of densely populated territories, and starvation) and half that number in impoverished and divided Persia.

According to Erik-Jan Zürcher, a leading Ottoman historian, Russia's budget was seven times greater than that of the Ottoman Empire and considerably greater than Persian government expenditures.

One hundred years later, a massive change in the balance of power has occurred between Russia and its two problematic neighbors.

It began with demographics. If in 1900 the Russian population was three times the combined populations of Persia and the Ottoman Empire, today the combined populations of those states exceeds the number of Russian citizens: 165 million compared to 142 million for Russia.

Worse yet are internal demographic trends within Russia that affect the relationship between Moscow and the two states. Russia, as Haifa University expert Alexander Tabachnik demonstrated with dramatic facts and figures at a recent workshop, is Islamizing: Russian Slav birthrates are declining much more quickly than those of its sizeable Muslim Turkic populations.

This tale of woe for Slavic Russia, Putin's core group, does not end at the country's borders. Forever perceiving itself as the heir to the Orthodox Christian Byzantine Empire, Russia views with concern not only its own decline but also the demographic decline of its traditional Orthodox allies in Greece, Bulgaria, and Macedonia.

Slavic Orthodox demographic slack is the basis for increasing Muslim Albanian assertiveness in the Balkans – a trend bolstered by a marked Turkish penetration of the area in accordance with Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman vision.

Economics also tell the tale of a changing balance of power between Russia and its two historical nemeses. The almost sevenfold economic advantage Russia once enjoyed over the Ottoman Empire and imperial Persia has almost entirely disappeared as a result of the successful industrialization of Turkey and the discovery and extraction of oil and gas in Iran. Today, the combined GDP of those two states equals Russia's GDP, and they are closing in on Russia in scientific output as well.

Even further afield, Russia looks with anxiety (shared by many of the southern European states) at the almost complete Islamization of the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean in particular, where Russia has always sought a political, military, and naval presence.

This is where Israel comes in. It is basically the only light for Russia in a long geographical and political tunnel.

Israel is the only Middle Eastern country with an increasing non-Muslim population, where Christians, including a sizeable Orthodox minority, are increasing at least in absolute terms (though not in comparison to Israel's Muslim population).

More importantly, it is the only non-Muslim country in the eastern Mediterranean whose power has increased rather than decreased, as any comparison between Israel, laureled with technological and military success, and crisis-ridden Greece quickly reveals.

And finally, Israel is the only country in the Middle East with a shared culture exemplified by Russian-born and native Russian-speaking politicians in positions of power, of whom Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman, Minister of the Diaspora and Jerusalem Affairs Ze'ev Elkin, and Knesset Speaker Yuli Yoel Edelstein are the most prominent.

Of course, this is not to deny the existence of countervailing pressures on the relationship. Geopolitics are almost always messy. Putin has been drawn into a problematic axis with Turkey and Iran (along with China further afield) because they form a "despotic" axis against the West.

Cementing this axis is a common contempt for human rights. All three countries' leaders whittle away at early twentieth century concepts of inviolable state sovereignty in order to enjoy a freer hand both at home and abroad.

Israel's close alliance with the US is also problematic no matter how warmly President Trump views Putin.

Still, taking a broader view, an understanding with Israel is important to Putin and the Russian leadership.

Moscow's view is clear. The major threat both within and without Russia's borders is Sunni Islam: within, because the overwhelming majority of Russian Muslims are Sunni; and without, because a Turkey led by a Sunni fundamentalist leader with imperial Ottoman ambitions poses a greater threat than Shiite Iran – especially as most Russian Muslims are not only Sunni but broadly related to Turkic ethnicity. Hence Putin's determination to preserve the strategic relationship with Iran in Syria and beyond, and hence his perception of Israel's regional geostrategic importance.

Israel understands the long-term sagacity of the Russian vision, but cannot allow it to be at the expense of its own short-term goals.

For Israel, the Russian vision is plausible only if it works to rid Syria of the Iranian presence, joins forces to topple its Islamist regime, and – until that goal is achieved – helps wean the Alawite regime in Damascus away from Tehran.

Absent such progress, Israel will have to keep pounding the Shiite militias in Syria and the regime Alawites. Given the Syrian and Hezbollah advance southward towards the Golan Heights, it is not pounding them hard enough.

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