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# A Strategic Alliance: An Exploration of Israeli-Russian Relations

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A Strategic Alliance: An Exploration of Israeli-Russian Relations

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Fall 2014

International Studies and Multilateral Diplomacy  
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**Abstract**

This paper offers an exploration of various facets of the Israeli-Russian political relationship. The positive relationship between the two states seems unlikely considering each state's history and strategic alliances, though Israel and Russia have endeavored towards a strong working relationship since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. This paper first explores the history of the relationship between the former Soviet Union/Russia and Israel from the formation of Israel in 1948 to the present day. The historical arc is used in an attempt to explain the development of the current relationship. Next, this paper explains the current status of the relationship, particularly through Vladimir Putin's leadership of Russia and his diplomatic relationship with Israeli leaders Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu. I then turn to the multiple facets of the strategic alliance, including military, economic, technological, and cultural partnerships. Lastly, this paper summarizes the implications of the Israeli-Russian alliance on Middle Eastern and international geopolitics.

**Preface**

As I contemplated my Independent Study Project, the relationship between Israel and Russia was nowhere near my mind. In fact, I had no idea that such a relationship existed. I believed that Israel felt the same way as Western Europe and the United States in regarding Russia. The topic came to my attention one day during class at the SIT office when Dr. Csurgai mentioned the growing alliance between Israel and Russia. He chuckled, adding, “That would make a great ISP.” From then, my interest was piqued and I began my initial research.

Now, two months later, I feel I have added to the academic literature on the topic. The relationship is fascinating, especially considering the history and environments in both Israel and Russia. Like the idea for my project, the alliance is unexpected, but surprisingly satisfying to research and on which to report. I must thank Dr. Csurgai for inspiring me to this topic, as it is research I hope to continue when I return to the United States.

In the end, the Israeli-Russo relationship should be examined for its uniqueness and additions to world politics. My examination of the topic has changed my perspective on the Middle East, and I hope my work inspires further exploration, too.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the program director and coordinator, Dr. Gyula Csurgai and Aline Dunant, for academic advice on my Independent Study Project, as well as support and flexibility throughout the independent research period.

I would like to thank my parents, Tom and Beth Bailey, for providing me the opportunity to study in Switzerland and participate in the SIT program.

Lastly, I would like to recognize my interviewees and thank them for their time and consideration.

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## Introduction

Without the Soviet Union, Israel's formation in 1947 and independence on 14 May 1948 would have been impossible. However, the Soviet Union's support for a Zionist state and the Partition Plan seems to directly contradict the rampant anti-Semitism present in the former Soviet Union, as well as Russia's positive relationships with Arab states in the Middle East. The relationship between Israel and Russia came to a halt during the 1950s<sup>1</sup>, and remained at a standstill until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Despite the lingering differences in philosophy and ideology, Russia and Israel have constructed a strategic alliance, impressively strong since Russia's diplomatic re-recognition of Israel in 1991.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship is complex and multifaceted, including diplomatic support, military contracts and practice, cultural and customs unions, technological cooperation, and energy contracts. Additionally, Israel became the number one destination for post-Soviet Union Jew migration, thus a large Russian-Jewish diaspora exists in Israel. In fact, Israel absorbed over one million Russian Jews, whom increased Israel's population by approximately eighteen percent.<sup>3</sup> The diaspora community has kept its networks in Russia, therefore increasing the connections between the two states.

This paper seeks to explain the development of the current relationship by examining history, recognizing both the depth and breadth of the current alliance between Israel and Russia. Through an understanding of the diplomatic relations between Israel and Russia, this

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<sup>1</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy," *Middle East Quarterly* 12 (2005): 51.

<sup>2</sup> "A Hazy Landmark," *Transitions Online*, 2 May 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Larissa Remennick, "Transnational community in the making: Russian Jewish immigrants of the 1990s in Israel," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (2002): 516.

paper will show the implications of this relationship for the geopolitics of the Middle East, particularly relating to the United States of America.

I begin with the history of Israel, the early relationship between the Jewish Agency and the Soviet Union, through the 1990s and to the current status under Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu. Through this history, I will show the growth of the relationship and the motivating factors for continued development. Next, I turn towards the Russian diaspora in Israel. I will explain how the diaspora has influenced the development of Israel, Israeli culture, and lobbied for continued relations with Russia despite the anti-Semitism in their former homeland. Then, I will explain the strategic partnerships between the two nations: military, technological, energy, and cultural. Each of these subsections highlights the extent of Russia's involvement in Israel and vice-versa. This paper will conclude with an explanation of the geopolitical situation in the Middle East regarding Israel, Russia, and the United States. The Israeli-Russian relationship is unexpected, but verifiably functional and robust in the world political arena.



## Literature Review

The literature available for this topic was limited, though there was certainly enough academic literature to form a comprehensive perspective on Israeli-Russian relations. In general, I believe the relationship between these two states has flown under the radar, thus the restricted nature of previous academic analysis.

My first set of sources is historical, academic articles. These journals provide a history of the relationship, mostly from the strategic perspective of the Soviet Union. As Israel was a fledgling country, the literature suggests that almost any alliance would have been helpful; the Soviet Union, however, walked a tenuous line after World War II and into the 1990s, thus the relationship has been framed as a strategic move on the part of the former Soviet Union and Russia. Only the more recent literature has addressed the Israeli benefits of this relationship.

The second set of sources is also historical, but focus on sociological and anthropological information. The Russian-Jewish diaspora in Israel has had a profound effect on the relationship between the two countries, as well as Israeli internal politics. I used these articles to develop my understanding of the cultural relationship between the two, in addition to the fundamental internal forces driving the relationship. These sociological and anthropological articles describe the Russian diaspora and the Israeli absorption of over one million Russian-Jews.<sup>4</sup> Understandably, these works are only from the Israeli perspective.

The third and final set of sources I utilize is news articles, mostly recent, that comment equally on Israel and Russia's motives in the relationship. These articles show the "landmarks" of recent relations, especially new contracts, diplomatic trips, and customs agreements. Through this variety of articles, I pieced together a landscape of modern Israeli-Russian relations. The news articles paint the relationship in both a positive and negative

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<sup>4</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy," 57.

light. For example, some Israeli news sources call for attentiveness towards the relationship, stating that the strategic alliance may benefit Russia more than Israel.<sup>5</sup> Others point to Russia's continued relationship with Israel's enemies: Iran and Saudi Arabia. On the opposing side, these articles promote the relationship by highlighting the similarities between the Russian government and Israeli government, as well as each state's devotion to fighting broadly defined "terrorism" both at home and abroad.<sup>6</sup>

Within the past five years, there have been a few books written on the strategic alliance between these two states, though I was unable to gain access to these materials through either inter-library loan or the United Nations library at Geneva. These books are comprehensive, and should be considered in a complete analysis of the Israeli-Russian relationship. However, the newness of these books as well as the limited nature of the academic literature suggests that this subject must be explored in greater depth. I hope that this academic work may be used as a guide and amalgamation of current information.

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<sup>5</sup> Azriel Bermant, "Israel should beware ally Russia," *The Jewish Chronicle Online*, 23 September 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Dorit Goldender, "Russia and Israel: Strategic Partners that Sing the Same Folk Songs," *International Affairs (Moscow)* 17 (2011): 124.

## **Research Methodology**

My academic research was conducted primarily through the examination of academic and news articles available from reputable academic search catalogs. The articles are from a variety of sources, providing a broad perspective on my topic. The news articles were not academic sources, but were verified and used to piece together the current state of affairs between Israel and Russia. The research, therefore, was primarily qualitative and not quantitative.

A majority of my work was conducted at the United Nations Library in Geneva, Switzerland, as well as in Nyon, Switzerland and Commugny, Switzerland. Most sources came from online catalogs accessed through my membership with DePauw University's databases, though a few were found through InterLibrary Loan and with help from the staff at the United Nations Library.

In addition, I conducted four interviews in conjunction with my analysis of written works. I attempted to interview a variety of individuals: a professor and expert in Middle Eastern Studies, Dr. Jubin Goodarzi; a Russian Jew who emigrated from Russia during the 1980s, Mr. Alex Safronsky; a former journalist with knowledge on the relationship, Mr. Noel Howell; and expert on Soviet Union/Russian foreign policy, my anonymous interviewee. Each of these interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour and took place near Geneva, Switzerland. There were no specific ethical concerns in my research, though I addressed the ethical considerations of anonymity, confidentiality, and direct quoting specifically during each of my interviews.

## History of Israeli-Russia Relations

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Israeli-Arab conflict has led to the Jewish question: should Israel be an independent state? Some Jews turned towards Zionism, the nationalist belief dictating the creation and continuation of an Israeli homeland and the right of return for all Jewish people.<sup>7</sup> This question divided states into two groups: those supporting the two-state solution, and those supporting an Arab nation, not an Israeli-Arab nation. During World War II, the Soviet Union annexed large parts of Eastern Europe, bringing over two million Jews into the USSR.<sup>8</sup> The Soviet Union, however, took a contradictory position on the Jewish question. They supported Zionism in the case of Israel, but perpetuated deep and institutionalized anti-Semitism at home. Jews were removed from political leadership and most Jewish and Yiddish-speaking cultural institutions were closed.

Before the second World War, Stalin suggested a combination Jewish-Arab state, but the official position of the Soviet Union switched as the post-World War II “Great Power” struggle became evident.<sup>9</sup> The USSR was faced with combatting the United States and Great Britain for global hegemony, and the Middle East was quickly becoming the arena for that fight. Lauren Rucker suggests that, “Moscow concluded that if the Soviet Union was to succeed in weakening Great Britain in the Middle East, the Zionist movement was the only means of doing so.”<sup>10</sup> The choice to support Israel, therefore, had little to do with Zionist ideology, but rather the Soviet Union’s self-interest and provisions to continue its role as a world power. Stalin viewed Zionism as a political tool, and manipulated the world stage to

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<sup>7</sup> Gideon Lichfield, “Russia Invades the Middle East,” *New Statesman* 134 (2005): 34.

<sup>8</sup> Laurent Rucker, “Moscow’s Surprise: The Soviet-Israeli Alliance of 1947-1949” (working paper, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, interview by Megan Bailey, 14 November 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Rucker, “Moscow’s Surprise,” 33.

use it as such. In April 1947, the then Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko announced the USSR's newfound support for an independent Jewish state.<sup>11</sup>

On 29 November 1947, the United Nations held a vote in consideration of the two-state plan: the creation of Palestine and Israel and the end of British mandate.<sup>12</sup> The Soviet Union voted yes, while also ensuring the votes of Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. With coercion and political strategy, the Soviet Union almost guaranteed the creation of Israel, the Zionist state. In May 1948, the USSR became the first country to grant the newly founded Israel with de jure recognition.<sup>13</sup> Moscow's support continued when Israel suggested an arms contract in late 1948. Israel and Russia sent diplomatic envoys back and forth, and some Israeli ambassadors suggested outward support for the USSR in the Cold War. Israel stayed in the Soviet Union's good graces until the early 1950s, when all relations came to a halt. Stalin had allowed the relationship to continue because he calculated that the benefits of an Israeli relationship outweighed the costs<sup>14</sup>; this attitude distorted as Israel turned Westward and the status quo in the Middle East shifted.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a myriad of Arab regimes with nationalist and socialist ideologies rippled through the Middle East. Iraq ended its monarchy in 1958; Syria's revolt was complete by 1963; many others followed suit.<sup>15</sup> Israel's alliance no longer appealed to the Soviet Union, as it instead envisioned a Middle East of socialist nations with the USSR as their model. With Israel planted firmly in Western hands, particularly those of the United States, Moscow found it necessary to take action to secure their role as a Great Power as the

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<sup>11</sup> Vladislav Zubok, "The Soviet Union and the Establishment of Israel," in *Harry S. Truman, the State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East*, ed. Michael J. Devine (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2009), 76.

<sup>12</sup> Rucker, "Moscow's Surprise," 20.

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, 14 November 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Rucker, "Moscow's Surprise," 36.

<sup>15</sup> Jubin Goodarzi, interview by Megan Bailey, 11 November 2014.

Cold War escalated. “The competition and rivalry of the superpowers in the Middle East was a central, if not dominant theme, in international relations.”<sup>16</sup> The USSR gained the alliance of numerous Arab countries as it shifted its focus from Israel: Iran, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. By the 1970s, the Soviet Union was the number one supplier of arms to the Middle East, though Israel relied first on France, and then the United States to provide its weapons.<sup>17</sup>

Though the Soviet Union had supported Zionism during Israel’s creation, it declared Zionism as a form of racism in the 1960s. The opinion intensified in conjunction with the mounting tensions in the Middle East, especially with the Six-Day War, during which Moscow supported the Arab side.<sup>18</sup> The KGB circulated propaganda with anti-Zionist messages and a majority of these pamphlets condemned Zionism as the next Nazism.<sup>19</sup> Yuri Ivanavov, a popular Soviet propagandist, published numerous works declaring that Zionism was the next big world threat, that it was implementing a class system, and “dividing the Israeli working people by which the ruling class ensures itself freedom of maneuver and effective control and the opportunity to incite and fan racialism.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the large Jewish population in the Soviet Union and the USSR’s anti-Semitic sentiments, no Russian Jews were allowed to immigrate to Israel. The Soviet Union voted yes on the 1975 United Nations Resolution 3379, which declared Zionism as racism and affirmed Palestine’s role as an observer nation in the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>21</sup> This resolution was revoked in 1991, aligning with the disbanding of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

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<sup>16</sup> Bernard Reich and Stephen Gotowicki. “The United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East,” in *The Decline of the Soviet Union and the Transformation of the Middle East*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Goodarzi, 11 November 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Mark N. Katz, “Putin’s Pro-Israel Policy,” 51.

<sup>19</sup> Yuri Ivanov, “CAUTION: ZIONISM! Essays on the ideology, practice, and organisation of Zionism,” Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Reich and Gotowicki, “The United States and the Soviet Union.”

The relationship between Israel and the Soviet Union remained non-existent until 1987 when President Mikhail Gorbachev declared, “that the absence of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Israel cannot be considered normal.”<sup>22</sup> In following his glasnost, Gorbachev sent multiple diplomatic envoys to Jerusalem; these meetings were widely publicized and took place amongst all levels of Israeli society.<sup>23</sup> Gorbachev’s motives were still strategic. The United States had a firm hold on Israel and had involved itself in the intensifying Arab-Israeli conflict. Its status as a Great Power was secured by its position as an arbitrator between the two groups. Since coming to office, Gorbachev had improved relations with numerous Middle Eastern countries, all in line with his idea of perestroika: Oman, Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan, and Egypt.<sup>24</sup> The final connection was Israel, which Gorbachev knew was necessary for Moscow to ever play a role in the peace process. Procuring Israel was equated to a secure position in the Middle East and in the world. The Soviet Union wanted to “portray itself as indispensable: to the Arabs, as the only country to press Washington...and to the Americans, as the only party to bring the Arabs to the table.”<sup>25</sup> Israel gladly accepted Moscow’s outreached hand, especially as Gorbachev thawed the strict immigration restrictions.

Diplomatic relations continued to improve after the Soviet Union disintegrated in late 1991 and Boris Yeltsin came to power. As Yeltsin attempted to unify Russia’s political parties, most international policies were made to remedy internal politics, too. After coming to power, Yeltsin faced three distinct groups in Russian politics: the pro-Western group that promoted privatization; the centralist group that emphasized Eurasian relations and a slow

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<sup>22</sup> Galia Golan, “Gorbachev’s Middle East Strategy,” *The New York Times*, Fall 1987.

<sup>23</sup> Anonymous, 14 November 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Robert O. Freedman, “Russia and Israel under Yeltsin,” *Israel Studies* 3 (1998): 150.

<sup>25</sup> Golan, “Gorbachev’s.”

privatization; and the “old-line” communists who wanted to resume Russia’s role as a world power.<sup>26</sup> To appease the internal forces, Yeltsin agreed with Gorbachev’s idea that Russia must have a role in the Arab-Israeli peace process. The easiest solution was a renewal of full diplomatic relations with Israel.

In 1992, Israeli and Russian diplomats signed an agreement to promote the development of Israeli-Russo relations, including political, legal, economic, and cultural cooperation, as well joint investment projects.<sup>27</sup> Trade between the two states began and, by the late 1990s, Israel had become Russia’s largest trading partner in the Middle East. The two discussed Russian pipelines to Israel to promote energy security and worked jointly on an early-warning aircraft. On 17 October 1996, Moscow reinstated the Jewish agency’s ability to operate in Russia.<sup>28</sup> The Jewish agency was helpful in Russian Jew immigration: “very well organized, teaches the Jews about Israel and Hebrew, buys them tickets, and helps them leave.”<sup>29</sup> Russia certainly had motives to engage with the Israeli government, but Israel enjoyed benefits from the relationship as well. Israel received a steady flow of immigrants, developed a beneficial and lucrative trade relationship, believed Russia could prove an even-handed mediator in the conflict with Palestine, and hoped the relationship would dissuade Russia from providing nuclear assistance to Arab nations.

The Israeli-Russo relation was only fully normalized in 1997, though the process was not without conflict. Russia opened a mission to Palestine Authority in an attempt to be fair, and even invited both Palestine and Israel’s leaders to Moscow to demonstrate their

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<sup>26</sup> Freedman, “Russia and Israel under Yeltsin,” 142.

<sup>27</sup> Freedman, “Russia and Israel under Yeltsin,” 150.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 156.



centrality.<sup>30</sup> Despite Israel's motivation to continue their alliance with Russia, Moscow continued to provide nuclear technological support to Iran as well as send missile technology to Syria. This angered Israel, but the economic ties were too important to warrant an end to the alliance. In 1997, Russia denounced Israel's actions against Hezbollah and blamed Israel for deadlock in the Arab-Israeli peace process.<sup>31</sup> Without a relationship with Israel, Russia would still have a legitimate role in the peace process considering its proximity, security interests, and "long-standing connections with many other states in the region."<sup>32</sup>

Even so, the Israeli-Russian relationship continued without as much as a hiccup. In addition to the large number of immigrants, extensive tourism between the two began. Russian newspapers began publications for the Russian-Jewish diaspora in Israel; in October 1996 Jerusalem agreed to build a house of Russian culture in Israel.<sup>33</sup> Boris Yeltsin became the first Russian head-of-state to visit Israel, though he was no longer in office during his 2000 visit.<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Putin was the first serving president to visit Israel; his 2005 trip signified a complete reversal in the Soviet-Israeli relationship.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>31</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "Israeli-Russia Relations since the Collapse of the Soviet Union," *Middle East Journal* 49 (1995): 244.

<sup>32</sup> Reich and Gotowicki, "The United States and the Soviet Union."

<sup>33</sup> Freedman, "Russia and Israel under Yeltsin," 164.

<sup>34</sup> "A Hazy Landmark."

## Modern Relations

In early 2014, Vladimir Putin expressed his wishes to continue support for Israel: “the development of a mutually advantageous and constructive relations with Israel in the political, economic, humanitarian, and other fields will remain the priority of Russia’s foreign policy.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, since Putin took power in 1999, the Russian relationship with Israel has grown firmly into a strategic alliance. Trade has grown, the two states have signed numerous cultural and technological agreements, and an enormous number of Russian Jews have immigrated to Israel. The connection is undeniable, though the two seem unlikely allies, especially as Israel remains resolutely planted in the hands of the United States. Israel’s Western allies may be part of Putin’s attraction; Mark Katz suggests that most of Russia’s foreign policy is, “actually predicated on a desire to spite the Americans.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, Putin may favor Israel because it can be used as a political tool against Western Europe and the United States.

Some experts suggest that Russia’s tilt toward Israel has to do with the two states’ similar hardline policies towards perceived terrorism. For example, the Chechnya region of Russia has held multiple revolutions, leading various Russian leaders to invade and take military action. Yeltsin invaded the region to squash the revolt in 1994, and Putin did so in the late 1990s.<sup>37</sup> Most of the Western world has spoken aggressively against these actions, but Israel has vocally supported Putin’s policy of “not negotiating with terrorists and defeating them militarily instead.”<sup>38</sup> Israel may see similarities between the Russian issue with the Chechens and their own “issue” with Palestine, Hamas, and the PLO, thus leading Israel to

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<sup>35</sup> Jared Feldschreiber, “An Alliance of Necessity: Putin’s Russia Enjoys a Strategic Partnership With Israel,” *Berggruen Institute on Governance’s The World Post*, 1 July 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Katz, “Putin’s Pro-Israel Policy,” 57.

<sup>37</sup> Freedman, “Russia and Israel under Yeltsin,” 144.

<sup>38</sup> Katz, “Putin’s Pro-Israel Policy,” 58.

continue relations and have increased sympathy for Russia. As few countries appreciate Moscow's realpolitik and frequent military interventions, Israel's role as an ally that approves has become important to Russian domestic and foreign politics. A poignant example of this importance came in January 2004 when Russia abstained from a United Nations vote condemning a security barrier Israel had constructed between Israel and the disputed territories.<sup>39</sup> Moscow feared the implications of the vote for its barriers in Chechnya. By protecting itself, Russia also inadvertently supported Israel.

A similar situation arose with Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea. Few states approved of Russia's move, though Israel stayed mysteriously quiet. If Israel condemned Russia, as the United States was urging Jerusalem to do, the government would also be convicting its own actions with Palestinian land.<sup>40</sup> Israel took a neutral stance, neither for nor against Russia, though silence was a sufficient indicator. Israel was purposefully absent for the 27 March 2014 United Nations vote which officially condemned Russia's annexation.<sup>41</sup> The absentee decision has become economically beneficial for Israel, as trade between Russia and Israel has increased since the Crimean annexation. When the EU, United States, Australia, Canada, and Norway began sanctions, Moscow banned certain food products from these countries.<sup>42</sup> Israel has taken up this trade gap by largely increasing its exports of fruit to Russia. Additionally, both Israel and India have been approved to begin importing meat and dairy products into Russia.<sup>43</sup> These agreements mean more money for Israel, security for

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<sup>39</sup> Katz, "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy," 55.

<sup>40</sup> Feldschreiber, "An Alliance of Necessity."

<sup>41</sup> Azriel Bermant, "Israel should beware ally Russia," *The Jewish Chronicle Online*, 23 September 2014.

<sup>42</sup> "Russia to import meat and dairy products from Israel." *Food Processing Technology*, 29 October 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Russia, and a stronger alliance against Western European will. Before these changes, Russian-Israeli bilateral trade was worth over two billion USD.<sup>44</sup>

Cultural diplomacy has also increased under Putin's leadership. When Putin first visited Israel in 2005, the trip was highly publicized and aimed primarily at awareness of both Russian and Israeli people. Putin made symbolic trips to multiple holocaust memorials and met Russian Jews who fought in World War II.<sup>45</sup> He also met with multiple Russian-Jewish émigrés; one of these was his old schoolteacher whom now lives in Israel. Anti-Semitism in Russia has decreased slightly since the 1990s<sup>46</sup>, though only because the number of Jews remaining in Russia is a mere shadow of what it used to be: only 230,000 Jews live in Russia.<sup>47</sup> The cultural sensitivity during his visit, therefore, was used as a platform for Putin to discuss his protection of all Russian Jews, as well as his plans to combat anti-Semitism in Russia.<sup>48</sup> The visit, as seems a trend in Russian politics, was a combination of Russian domestic and international realpolitik. More recently, Israel transferred an area called the Sergei Courtyard, which was previously part of a compound belonging to the Moscow patriarchy, back to Russia. This 2008 move was an act of cultural acceptance and goodwill.<sup>49</sup> Moscow has also established a Jewish museum.

As with the Gorbachev and Yelstin administrations, Putin is using Israel as a method of penetrating the Middle East and achieving influence. Moscow's attempt to be involved can be described as acting as the "honest broker"<sup>50</sup> in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Putin has visited both Palestine and Israel to show legitimacy, as well as invited envoys from both

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<sup>44</sup> Dorit Goldender, "Russia and Israel: Strategic Partners that Sing the Same Folk Songs," 120.

<sup>45</sup> "A Hazy Landmark."

<sup>46</sup> Alex Safronsky, interview by Megan Bailey, 12 November 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Katz, "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy," 57.

<sup>48</sup> "A Hazy Landmark."

<sup>49</sup> "Vladimir Putin and the Holy Land; Russia, Israel, and the Middle East," *The Economist* 406 (2013): 54.

<sup>50</sup> "A Hazy Landmark."

administrations to Moscow for peace talks. Carefully toeing the line, Russia has even offered to replace Palestinian helicopters that have been damaged in various conflicts and sell the Palestinian Authority armored vehicles.<sup>51</sup> However, both groups seem to appreciate Russia's involvement. Palestinian President Abbas referred to Russia as "our precious friend and comrade,"<sup>52</sup> while multiple Israeli leaders have incredibly positive personal and diplomatic relationships with President Putin. Former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon referred to Putin as a "true friend," and this claim seems truthful as Ariel Sharon's family emigrated from Russia and he and Putin often spoke fluent Russian together.<sup>53</sup>

Israel has reservations about Russia's continuing relationship with other Arab countries, specifically Syria and Iran. In Syria, Russia has continued selling a multitude of weapons, including missiles, which Israel fears may end up in the hands of Hezbollah or other terror organizations.<sup>54</sup> However, Russia has continually assured Israel, to no avail, that the Syrian arms are short-range only, implying Israel is safe from threat. Russia has also outwardly promoted Iran's nuclear program, including vocal support and supplying both funds and technology for the endeavor. Moscow has claimed that the "nuclear sector sales to Iran are vital to the survival of the Russian atomic energy industry,"<sup>55</sup> so the sales have continued despite Israel's discomfort. Israel remains the biggest advocate for far-reaching sanctions against Iran and, and as the Israeli ambassador to Russia recently suggested, "sometimes defensive weapons can become offensive weapons."<sup>56</sup> Russia shows no signs of slowing relations with either Syria or Iran.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "A Hazy Landmark."

<sup>53</sup> Katz, "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy," 58.

<sup>54</sup> Noel Howell, interview by Megan Bailey, 9 November 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Katz, "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy," 52.

<sup>56</sup> Goldender, "Russia and Israel: Strategic Partners that Sing the Same Folk Songs," 124.

Overall, Israel's current pursuit of a steady relationship with Russia may be attributed to four major components. First, Russia has provided first a flood, and then a steady flow of immigrants since opening the borders in the late 1980s. As a small and new country, new, highly skilled citizens are necessary for growth. Next, Russia provides Israel with oil and, therefore, energy security. In the future, energy and water security will be some of the biggest Israeli existential crises, so this security is imperative.<sup>57</sup> Third, though Israel fears Russia's relationship with other Middle Eastern states, Israel hopes their alliance with Moscow may act as a buffer in future conflicts. As Moscow hoped, Russia may have the opportunity to play a strong, negotiator role in the Middle East. Finally, over one-fifth of the Israeli population is Russian émigrés.<sup>58</sup> A majority of these men and women still have connections to Russia and their families; positive relations with Russia mean a pleased population in Israel.

For Russia, the relationship is focused on pragmatism and money. Realistically, Russia still plays *realpolitik*, Putin's specialty, and the Middle East is an essential region in world politics. To have some semblance of presence in the region, Russia must partner with as many states and governments as possible. In the case of any conflict, Russia wants to have as many allies as possible. As Israel has traditionally embraced the West, Russia's infiltration of the Israeli government seems promising as a path to Western Europe and the White House. Second, the relationship with Israel provides Russia with a valuable trading partner and a large amount of wealth. Israel buys Russian oil and the two trade a variety of other products. The revenue created from bilateral trade is essential for Russia, too. For both Israel and Russia, full diplomatic and economic relations have proved worthwhile.

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<sup>57</sup> Goodarzi, 11 November 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Howell, 9 November 2014.

## The Russian Diaspora

In the creation of Israel, one of the main purposes was to make a state “open to Jewish immigration and the Ingathering of Exiles.”<sup>59</sup> On 5 July 1950, Israel enacted the Law of Return, which essentially gives every Jew the right to immigrate to Israel. Though the Soviet Union absorbed over two million Jews during World War II, none were allowed to immigrate to Israel; the Russian government had declared the Jews under *otkaznik*, meaning they were not permitted to leave the country. This situation continued until Gorbachev declared *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the 1980s.<sup>60</sup> Before then, fewer than one thousand Russian Jews had gotten to Israel.

After relations began to improve, however, Russia’s immigration floodgates opened. Over one million Russian Jews have arrived at Israel’s borders since 1989, increasing Israel’s population by close to eighteen percent.<sup>61</sup> Gideon Lichfield illustrated this concept best: “imagine the United States absorbing France, that is the comparison made with Israel’s intake of immigrants...from the collapsing Soviet Union.”<sup>62</sup> This number of immigrants is enormous, especially considering that each of these immigrants must find a home, job, community, and establish ties with Israeli culture. Assimilating a flood of people is not easy, though the Soviet/Russian diaspora remains in Israel. In Russia, just above 200,000 Jews remain, merely a shadow of the previous population. From the most recent numbers, it appears that about one-fifth of the Israeli population is émigrés from the Soviet Union or Russia.<sup>63</sup> As the first generation came during the 1990s, Israel is just beginning to experience

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<sup>59</sup> Shelese Emmons, “Russian Jewish Immigration and its Effect on the State of Israel,” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 5 (1997): 341.

<sup>60</sup> Safronsky, 12 November 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Remennick, “Transnational community in the making,” 525.

<sup>62</sup> Gideon Lichfield, “Russia Invades the Middle East,” *New Statesman* 134 (2005): 35.

<sup>63</sup> “A Hazy Landmark.”

the first generation of children with Russian-Jewish heritage, but born in Israel. Israel survives on immigrants bringing new ideas, skills, and economic demand. In the grand scheme, the Russian immigration has benefited Israel.

Migration has become part of transnationalism, a concept of globalization in which nations can reach farther than states' borders. Due to transnationalism, as well as the waves in which these Russian-Jewish immigrants came, most have maintained ties with their homeland and their language.<sup>64</sup> The sheer size of the Russian population caused whole Russian towns and villages to appear in Israel. Integration is unnecessary for these migrants, as they can speak Russian and find a community with all the comforts of home without becoming Israeli. Still, surveys report that over sixty percent of immigrants say their dressing styles, eating habits, and other cultural markers have drifted towards Israeli patterns.<sup>65</sup> These immigrants also brought their media with them, an additional way in which to stay connected with the Russian network. There are over thirty local and national Russian newspapers and magazines, as well as numerous radio and television channels and films.

The Russian-Jewish diaspora has also permeated the Israeli political structure. As these immigrants have full citizenship in Israel, they vote in elections and tend to be quite active in the political process. In Alex Safronsky's words, the Russian-Jewish voters tend to be right wing and "hawkish," more traditional than the standard Israeli.<sup>66</sup> This group has formed a kind of ethnic political party, Israel ba-Aliyah, which effectively lobbies for the interests of Russian immigrants.<sup>67</sup> Israel ba-Aliyah has formed blocs with other right wing parties; this strategy was successful in 2013 when the group led the polls. This immigrant

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<sup>64</sup> Remennick, "Transnational community in the making," 520.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 526.

<sup>66</sup> Safronsky, 12 November 2014

<sup>67</sup> Philip Reeves, "On Multiple Fronts, Russian Jews Reshape Israel," *National Public Radio*, 2 January 2013.



political party and the subsequent bloc has held major influence on the coalition government of Prime Minister Netanyahu.<sup>68</sup> Russian Jews themselves have climbed the ranks, enjoying leadership positions in the Israeli military structure and Israeli politics. For example, Avigdor Lieberman has served multiple roles in the Israeli government. Now, he is Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs and leans heavily towards friendly relations with Russia.<sup>69</sup> Lieberman was born in the Soviet Union, served in the Red Army, exiled to Siberia, and then immigrated to Israel. Numerous other political leaders share his Soviet heritage.

The Russian diaspora has not assimilated perfectly into Israeli culture; there have been numerous problems with this group. First, the Russian immigrants are generally poorer than the Israelis and tend to face difficulties in finding work.<sup>70</sup> The skills they learned and jobs they held in the Soviet Union and Russia are incongruent with the current structural opportunities in Israel. Though the immigrants are generally highly educated, they still face difficulties in securing permanent work. Second, Israelis do not regard the Russian immigrants highly; the Russian Jews are generally stereotyped as criminals and cultural snobs. This stereotype may be caused by a cultural superiority the Russians feel over the Jews.<sup>71</sup> The Russian homeland has been the center of empires, as well as part of the high European culture. The immigrants feel as though they are part of something bigger, something better than the upstart, technically history-less Israel.

The largest tension between the Russian Jews and the Israelis has been the perceived "Jewishness" of the immigrant group. The Law of Return applied to all Jews even if they were married to someone with one Jewish grandparent, which is a rather wide consideration

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<sup>68</sup> Emmons, "Russian Jewish Immigration," 351.

<sup>69</sup> "Vladimir Putin and the holy land: Russia, Israel, and the Middle East," 54.

<sup>70</sup> Anonymous, 14 November 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Lichfield, "Russia Invades the Middle East," 35.

of Judaism.<sup>72</sup> In addition, most of the Russians Jews are secular, being ethnically but not religiously Jewish. They do not speak Hebrew and are generally weary of Zionism. Some Israelis believe that the Russian are diluting the “Jewishness” of Israel, that they have created an “erosion of Israel’s Jewish definition.”<sup>73</sup> The Russian immigrants are often referred to as non-Zionists and sometimes treated as second-class citizens. For example, the law states that only Orthodox Jews may be married in Israel, thus the immigrants must leave the country to be married or be married by mail.<sup>74</sup> The non-Jewish, Russian subculture has caused additional problems to the perceived Jewish culture. First, the growing economy has attracted the Russian mafia, which now launders money in Israel against Israeli will.<sup>75</sup> Next, the Russian groups have established their own communities that have specific restaurants and stores, most of which do not keep Kosher. This small change has become a bigger irritation for religious Jews who live nearby. In the near future, Israel will need to grapple with the tension between secular and religious Jews.

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<sup>72</sup> Reeves, “On Multiple Fronts.”

<sup>73</sup> Boas Evron, “Israel’s Shifting Identity,” *Palestine-Israel Journal Of Politics, Economics and Culture* 8 (2002): 106.

<sup>74</sup> Remennick, “Transnational community,” 521.

<sup>75</sup> Safronsky, 12 November 2014.

## Strategic Partnerships

Israel and Russia have cultivated their relationship beyond the political realm. These strategic partnerships cater to each of the state's strengths, enhancing their bond and increasing their security in the relationship. First, Israel is considered a world superpower in military technology. Moscow has recognized the potential, inquiring into numerous collaborative military deals with Israel.<sup>76</sup> Russia began buying drones from Israel in 2009 and was quite pleased with the result; Moscow ordered an additional thirty-six drones later in the year.<sup>77</sup> In September 2010, Vladimir Putin and Ehud Barak signed an agreement securing future military development and purchases between the two states. The largest deal, however, came just a month later when Israel Aerospace Industries signed a 400 million USD contract with Russia's state-owned Oboronprom for the creation of spy drones.<sup>78</sup> The Russian company will utilize Israel intelligence and design to produce the drones in Russia.

Russia has also called Israel a world power in the space and space technology fields.<sup>79</sup> Israel has reduced the size and weight of their satellites and have a singular unique practice: they launch their satellites westward, against the pull of Earth's revolution, while all other space programs launch satellites eastward. Russia has sought to capitalize on these innovations, signing a space cooperation agreement in 2011. The agreement is far-reaching, including "areas like astrophysical and planetary research, space biology and medicine, navigational satellites and launching services, and other technology."<sup>80</sup> Russia hopes to send a manned mission to Mars by 2035, and Israel seems to be Moscow's most likely ally in

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<sup>76</sup> Feldschreiber, "An Alliance of Necessity."

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Asaf Shtull-Trauring, "Israel, Russia sign space agency cooperation agreement," *Haaretz*, 28 March 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

accomplishing this task. Israel has also shared on Russia's nuclear technology, including medical breakthroughs and dental imaging.

Israel and Russia are also linked through energy cooperation. This part of their alliance is vital; energy security is becoming more and more crucial, and their connection is essential for the Russian energy market and for Israel's peace of mind. In fact, Russia is Israel's largest supplier of crude oil.<sup>81</sup> With the increasing problems between the European Union and Russia, the Middle East, especially Israel, has become a more viable market for Russia. As of February 2013, Moscow has also invested in Israeli liquefied natural gas, a future boom in the energy game.<sup>82</sup> The Russians have already advanced loans worth over 3.5 billion USD for excavation of the Tamar and Dalit fields, just offshore of Israel. Russian money has become essential to this Israeli project, and Israel is happy to oblige in the permanent energy partnership. At the beginning of 2014, Russia and Israel began talks about a contract for joint renewable energy research as well.

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<sup>81</sup>Peter Glover and Michael Economides, "Russia's new Middle Eastern energy game," *The Commentator*, 24 August 2013.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

## Russia, Israel, and Geopolitics

The Israeli-Russo relationship has implications beyond the two states. As Russia has made a point of becoming involved in the Middle East, Moscow has significantly impacted the region's geopolitics. As discussed earlier, Russia has created a number of "friends" in the Middle East: Israel, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, among others.<sup>83</sup> All things considered, Russia has balance these relationships fairly well considering the tensions between multiple countries in the Middle East. Russia's alliances range from technological, like Iraq, military, like Syria, commercial, like Turkey, or some other combination. Essentially, Russia has made the Middle East dependent on its participation in regional politics. Moscow supports the economies of Middle Eastern countries and plays the "good cop" to the West's "bad cop" in many situations.<sup>84</sup>

Though not located in the Middle East, Russia has done its best to become an important player in the Arab-Israeli conflict. For example, Russia has loudly described itself as the honest broker between the two sides, hoping to become indispensable to both the Arab nations and Israel.<sup>85</sup> Putin has visited Israel multiple times now and both sends and receives diplomatic envoys from the Israeli government.<sup>86</sup> However, Moscow has also received leaders from the Palestinian side, including the Palestinian Labour Organization and Hamas. Russia typically sympathizes with the Palestinian perspective in United Nations' votes and has replaced helicopters destroyed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>87</sup> Still, Israel has made few complaints about Russia's "double agent" role. As per his goal, Putin has made his government indispensable in the peace process. Because the Middle East is such a volatile

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<sup>83</sup> Goodarzi, 11 November 2014.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> "A Hazy Landmark."

<sup>86</sup> "Vladimir Putin and the hold land; Russia, Israel and the Middle East," 54.

<sup>87</sup> "A Hazy Landmark."

region, whatever country or whoever's government can manage to mitigate tension will have power on the global stage: Russia's end goal.

The United States should also be concerned of the geopolitical implications of Russia's influence in the Middle East. As many experts have described, Israel has always been tucked firmly in the United States' pocket,<sup>88</sup> allied with the West. Israel's relationship with Russia challenges this perception. This effect was already seen in the condemnation of the Crimean annexation; Western Europe and the United States pressured Israel to condemn Russia's actions, but Israel was conveniently absent from the United Nations vote doing so.<sup>89</sup> This example is not completely telling, though it does show the interesting position that Israel has been placed in, balancing the support of, arguably, two world powers who do not have good relations. Western Europe's sanctions were Israel's gain, so there may even be an incentive for Israel to hope for tension between its two allies.

Russia's relationship with Israel allows Putin and Moscow leverage of the United States. As Freedman described, "by maintaining good ties with Israel, Russia apparently hopes to keep an open door to the White House even when Russian-American ties become strained."<sup>90</sup> The alliance between Russia and Israel means the United States must consider its future in the Middle East and how it will market itself as a broker in the Israeli-Arab peace process, among other relevant Middle Eastern issues. Moscow has made many more Middle Eastern connections than the United States and has better geographic proximity, which means Russia may make a better ally in time-sensitive situations. Overall, both Russia and the United States are utilizing the Middle East in an attempt to define and sustain their

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<sup>88</sup> Goodarzi, 11 November 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Bermant, "Israel should beware ally Russia."

<sup>90</sup> Freedman, "Russia and Israel under Yeltsin," 149.

geopolitical power on a global scale. Both states often have the same goal, but differ in their methodology.

## Prospective

As the last component of my research, I would like to explore two future scenarios for the relationship between Russia and Israel. First, the possibility of the West and Israel turning away from each other; second, the possibility of Moscow's complete turn towards the Arab Middle Eastern countries.

The West turning completely from Israel seems highly unlikely, as the United States would find a difficult time ignoring Israel and their past relationship, as well as the loud Israeli lobby in Washington. However, some Western European countries have been more receptive to the idea of Palestine; consider Sweden as it has recently diplomatically recognized Palestine.<sup>91</sup> If this situation did occur, Israel would certainly turn to Russia as its protector, and most likely face additional pressure in reaching a deal with the Palestinians. If Israel did concede to the pressure, Russia would delight in this situation. Both Israel and Palestine would be likely to choose Russia to serve in a mediating capacity, further increasing Russia's involvement in the Middle East. Additionally, Moscow could claim credit when some semblance of an agreement was reached.<sup>92</sup> Regardless, economic, technological, and diplomatic ties with Israel would continue for as long as Russia saw beneficial for its own needs.

The second situation, Russia abandoning the relationship with Israel, is also unlikely due to the cultural and economic relationships between the two. However, if Russia were to streamline their Middle Eastern approach to only Arab nations, Israel would suffer more than Russia. As Russia provides energy as well as a trade market for the Israelis, the termination of the alliance would be quite harmful. If this situation were to occur, Israel would still be

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<sup>91</sup> Howell, 9 November 2014.

<sup>92</sup> Goodarzi, 11 November 2014.



pressured into reaching an agreement with the Palestinians, though Russia would be the party doing a majority of the pressuring. Russia would struggle very little and have fewer restraints in supplying Iran, Iraq, and Syria, as well as helping to arm the Palestinians. Still, Russia would face continued, and possibly stronger, opposition from Western Europe and the United States, as the West would surely continue their embrace of Israel. This situation is, perhaps, as unlikely as the first, though would certainly change the dynamics in the Middle East.

In the end, the most likely scenario for the future of the alliance is continued growth as is. Israel will continue to be allied with the West, while having a soft spot for Russia and Putin. Moscow will continue to build relationships with multiple states in the Middle East while holding Israel in a distinct position. The alliance between the two will grow, to the dismay of the West, though there will be no interference. When the time comes for an Arab-Israeli peace, I believe Russia will play a large role in mediating the conflict.

## **Conclusion**

From Israel's beginning in the 1940s, the Israeli-Russo relationship has been complicated and multi-faceted. Despite the Soviet Union's prevalent role in Israel's creation, ties soon disintegrated and did not fully return until the 1990s. Since Yeltsin came to power, Russia and Israel have enjoyed a swiftly growing relationship that includes economic, cultural, technological, environmental, and energy diplomacy. Israel and Russia are connected in numerous, permanent ways. Russians even make up close to fifteen percent of the Israeli population. The alliance is undeniable, though it has largely been ignored by both academia and other states.

Israel-Russo relations have implications beyond Israel and Russia's borders. Their alliance has affected politics across the Middle East, as well as in the United States and, to some degree, Western Europe. Their current diplomatic ties are relatively new, having developed within the past twenty-five years, but are sure to grow and become more complicated as time goes on. Russia enjoys relations with multiple countries in the Middle East, and Israel enjoys strong relations with the West. Still, their contradictory positions function to create an incredible strategic alliance between the two.

It is clear that Russia will continue to play a large role in the Middle East, including in Israel. The alliance is strategic, strong, and growing. Overall, the relationship between Israel and Russia seems unlikely and complicated, but must be considered in an accurate analysis of Middle Eastern geopolitics and the state of global power.

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