

RUSSIA AND ISRAEL

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There exists a special relationship between Russia and Israel, albeit of a different kind than the one linking Israel to the United States. The Russia-Israel connection is old and multifaceted, including interstate diplomatic and military relations, business and technology links, tourism as well as cultural and media interface.

Israel's links with Russia pre-date the establishment of the state; they extend from the origins of the Zionist settlement at the turn of the 20th century to the current role played by Russian-speakers in Israel's politics, arts, technology and sciences. Not only did most pioneer settlers originate within the confines of the Russian Empire, but the ethnic roots of all of Israel's prime-ministers, including the current one, Benjamin Netanyahu, can be found in that country as well. Four current ministers, including the foreign minister and the tourism minister, are Soviet-born Russian-speakers. This reflects the fact that these "new Israelis" account for nearly one quarter of Israel's non-Arab population. They are reported to be more unabashedly nationalist and socially conservative than native Israelis. The initiative of the Soviet-born parliamentarians to launch an official investigation of Israel's human-rights organizations in early 2011 further consolidates the anti-liberal image of Russian-speaking immigrants in Israeli society.

Israel is usually believed to be more interested in cooperation with Russia, namely in access to Russia's market and to her fossil fuels as well as in using her political influence to moderate the

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growing anti-Israel public opinion in the region. Russia is mainly interested in harnessing Israeli technologies for industrial modernization. In the twenty years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, each has been attentive to the other's concerns and often taken a common stand in international organizations. Thus President Medvedev cancelled the sale of S-300 missiles to Iran, making that country more vulnerable to a possible attack. At the same time, Russia has repeatedly warned Israel not to bomb Iran, and has expressed concern about the plight of the Palestinian population, particularly in the Gaza strip. Israel is visibly displeased with the continuation of Russia's contacts with the elected administration in Gaza, including President Medvedev's meeting with Hamas leaders in Damascus.

Israeli officials in Russia portray their country as a bulwark of European civilization in the Middle East, thus capitalizing on the growing anti-Islamic sentiment in Russia. Israel also abstains from criticizing Russia's armed forces' conduct in the Caucasus. It can be expected to maintain the moratorium on arms sales to Georgia, which initiated a brief conflict with Russia in summer 2008. As a politically friendly gesture, Israel is also scheduled to erect in Netanya a Russian-designed monument to Soviet soldiers fallen during the Second World War, which, in Russia's public opinion, favourably demarcates Israel from several post-Soviet republics where monuments to the Soviet Army have been dismantled. Finally, both Russia and Israel, referring to their respective 'special circumstances,' are ambivalent about their adherence to Western democratic values.

Military and strategic cooperation continues to increase, both in terms of joint production of weaponry and regular official consultations on security issues. Active cooperation has developed in several high-tech areas, including work on dual-use technologies. Israel and Russia also collaborate in supplying security materiel to

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third countries, such as India, which partly compensates Russian arms industry for self-restraint in sales in the Middle East exercised to accommodate Israeli and American concerns. Bilateral links are likely to intensify in nanotechnology and energy storage/transmission. Business cooperation may also include gas supplies on the part of Russia's Gazprom, which would compensate for the fragility of the Egyptian gas pipeline to Israel. There exists a joint business council, and a bilateral innovation fund to be launched in 2012 is meant to create a matrix of interlinks between Russian and Israeli technology producers.

Israel includes the largest Russian-speaking diaspora outside of the former USSR, Russian tourists constitute the second largest segment of visitors to Israel, and Russian citizens consider Israel the second most attractive tourist destination. There is no visa required for travel between the two countries, which has led over 560 000 Russian tourists a year to visit Israel. Over 60 daily flights link several Russian cities with Israel.

There exists an active cultural exchange between Israel and Russia, going back to the establishment of Habima, Israel's official national theatre today, in Moscow in 1917. Several Israeli plays are currently staged in Russia, while Russia's most prominent theatre companies, singers, and orchestras regularly perform in Israel. Russian electronic and printed media are readily available in Israel. The coverage of Israel in Russian media is mostly done by former Soviet citizens settled in Israel, many belonging to the right of Israel's political spectrum. This is having a long-term effect on Russian public opinion. Over two-thirds of Russians view Israel favourably, a higher percentage than in most European countries, and this appears to be a steady trend as 90% of the respondents in a recent survey claim to have improved their opinion of Israel. Vladimir Putin expressed the sentiment of many of his compatriots

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when he said: “There is a little piece of Russia in Israel” (*Израиль – это немного Россия*).

These are long-term trends that are likely to remain stable in spite of the turmoil that plagues the Middle East. Russia’s well-established contacts in Iran and Syria may play an important role in Israel’s policy making in the region. Russia will insist on treating Iran with respect and consideration, and may continue countering Israeli and American efforts to marginalise that country. Russia can be expected to support Palestine’s campaign for recognition on the part of the international community. While the impact of dual citizens of Russia and Israel has been crucial in strengthening the right-wing nationalists in Israel, their impact on elections in Russia, which, unlike Israel, upholds her citizens’ right to vote regardless of their place of residence, is numerically insignificant.