



Then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Vladimir Putin, Moscow, 2018. Photo: Kremlin, CC BY 4.0

The Evolution of Russian Strategy toward Israel: From Non-Recognition to Pragmatic Engagement

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Offering an overview of the last thirty years of Russia-Israel relations, the article focuses primarily on the Kremlin's strategies, tactics, and interests toward Israel, as well as points of friction between the two states, under Boris Yeltsin and especially under Vladimir Putin. The article first reviews Russia's approach to the Middle East and Israel in the 1990s as an extension of Russia's overall domestic and foreign policies. It then turns to Putin's Russia and the relations with Israel within the broader scope of Russia's Middle East policy and Putin's personal outreach to Israel, with the further expansion of economic, cultural, political, and other ties. The article looks at issues of counterterrorism, World War II, cultural ties, religious interests, and the rehabilitation of Stalin and Stalinism that Putin pursued out of a pragmatic aim to build influence, and considers how these domestic narratives fit into the Kremlin's foreign policy. Finally, the article discusses how the Syria intervention affected the power dynamic and interests of both Russia and Israel.

Keywords: Russia, Israel, US, Yeltsin, Putin, Stalinism, Iran, Hezbollah, Syria, World War II

Introduction

Relations with Moscow have played an important role for Israel since the country's very inception. Both Harry Truman and Joseph Stalin supported the founding of the Jewish state, even as the motivations of the two leaders were fundamentally divergent. Indeed, the Soviet Union's vote in favor of the partition of Palestine on November 29, 1947, seemed diametrically opposed to Stalin's worldview. As early as 1913, Stalin, who subsequently labeled Jews as disloyal, wrote "The National Question and Social Democracy" (Stalin, 1913), which generated the famous postulate "Jews are not a nation." The underlying reason for the vote in 1947 was likely *realpolitik*. Stalin prioritized pushing the British out of the Middle East (Kramer, 2017) and saw the creation of Israel as an instrument to achieve this at a time when the Cold War had already unveiled in the Mediterranean.

Russia's domestic politics and overall foreign policy orientation, and more specifically its approach to the Middle East, framed Moscow's relations with Israel during Yeltsin's tenure throughout the 1990s.

Soon after the vote, the Soviet Union began to turn against Israel, as David Ben Gurion's Mapai party chose to "openly identify with the West" (Aharonson, 2018). The Kremlin first suspended relations with Israel for five months on February 11, 1953 (United Press, 1953) and ultimately broke off relations on June 10, 1967, following the Six Day War. Soviet leaders came to see Israel as a pariah state and the fulcrum of American, and more broadly Western "imperialism" in the Middle East. In this context, hostility toward Israel and the West became the USSR *raison d'être* for promoting Arab unity. The KGB trained and otherwise supported not only Arab armies, but also anti-Western terrorist groups throughout the Middle East, as well as Palestinian nationalist and terrorist movements in the West Bank and Gaza. "Airplane hijacking is

my own invention," one Soviet general bragged in 1971 (Pacepa, 2006).

Mikhail Gorbachev, last to take over the reins of Soviet leadership, sought to improve the relationship with Israel to benefit the Kremlin. He concluded that the Soviet Union failed to translate its position in the region into bigger diplomatic and political gains, and sought more options *vis-à-vis* the United States. Thus, Gorbachev moved to expand the diplomatic dialogue with Israel and soon eased restrictions on Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union to Israel. The two countries restored full relations in October 1991 (Haberman, 1991), but two months later, the USSR ceased to exist. During its final months, the Soviet Union also joined the US as a co-sponsor of the Middle East peace talks that began in October in Madrid, though in reality, Moscow's role was marginal. After the Russian Federation succeeded the Soviet Union, the overall trajectory of bilateral relations has been one of accelerated improvement, first under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s and even more so during Vladimir Putin's tenure. Relations are built primarily on pragmatism, and thus can weather points of disagreement and friction.

Looking at the grand scope of the last thirty years, this article takes a panoramic view of this evolution, focusing on Russia's strategies and interests toward Israel.

Russia's Domestic and Foreign Policy in the 1990s

Russia's domestic politics and overall foreign policy orientation, and more specifically its approach to the Middle East, framed Moscow's relations with Israel during Yeltsin's tenure throughout the 1990s. Thus Russia-Israel relations should be understood within the broader context that influenced them. Yeltsin and his government oriented themselves firmly toward the West, but domestic liberalization went only so far. "By the end of 1993 I knew that the chance to radically transform Russia into a modern democracy with an open-market economy could well have been missed,"

wrote Russia's first Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev, who pursued a generally pro-Western orientation (Kozyrev, 2019, p. 250). In the mid-1990s Russia began "reviving the system of personalized power under the guise of liberal slogans," wrote prominent Russia analyst Lilia Shevtsova and former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor David Kramer (Shevtsova & Kramer, 2012). Moreover, in the early years, Russian foreign policy lacked cohesion, as discordant voices in both government and the private sector (including energy and banking) pulled it in different directions. In line with his overall foreign policy orientation, Yeltsin took a primarily pragmatic but disjointed approach to the Middle East (Freedman, 1998, pp. 140-169). While Yeltsin's primary interests lay in domestic issues rather than this region, the emergent picture showed several key priorities.

Israel within Broader Middle East Interests

Despite its partial retreat from the region, Russia continued to value the importance of Turkey and Iran, both as an extension of a shifted priority on Central Asia and the Trans-Caucasus, and in their own right, for commercial and historic geopolitical reasons that long predated the Soviet Union. Regarding Turkey, Moscow focused on building a commercial relationship. Iran for its part became one bone of contention between Russia and the West on the Middle East, even during the most pro-Western focus of Yeltsin's earlier years. Specifically, Moscow wanted to sell weapons to the Islamic Republic, building on the earlier thaw of relations with the USSR that began in June 1989, following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. Moreover, Moscow and Tehran signed an initial bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement in August 1992 and a follow-up in 1995, whereby Moscow agreed to build a nuclear power plant at Bushehr, on the Gulf coast in southwestern Iran.

At the time, the US and Israel coordinated their policies vis-à-vis Moscow to limit Russia's nuclear, missile, and dual-use technology

supplies to Iran. Then-US Vice President Al Gore signed a secret agreement with then-Russian Prime Minister Viktor S. Chernomyrdin to limit Russia's sale of conventional arms to Iran. The agreement stipulated that the US would not sanction Russia for supplying arms and technology to a state-sponsor of terrorism while Russia would complete all sales of existing contracts by December 31, 1999 and would not seek new weapons contracts. Due to overall US pressure, Yeltsin agreed to scale back nuclear cooperation with Iran, but American officials believed that "individual Russian scientists and institutes assisted Iranian engineers in sensitive areas of the nuclear fuel cycle, and with the construction of a 40MW heavy water research reactor at Arak" (Iran Nuclear Overview, 2020).

The Persian Gulf, a region with crucial geostrategic waterways and trade routes, emerged as a second key Kremlin regional priority. The Arab-Israeli theater became third, and this is where Israel fit in. Here, Moscow began to see Israel as a partner.

Diplomatic, Economic, and Cultural Ties

For years, among Israel's sharpest objections was Russia's assistance to Iran's nuclear program and its connection with Iran and Hezbollah, as well as with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad—in other words, radical forces in the region. These connections raised serious security concerns in Israel, and Israeli officials repeatedly urged the US to increase pressure on Russia regarding arms sales to Iran, and especially assistance to its nuclear program. Other points of concern included Russia's ties with Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Assad in Syria. Still, a degree of convergence on several select issues emerged. As Robert Freedman wrote, the Kremlin's interests with regard to Israel primarily focused on economic, cultural, and diplomatic interests—the latter both general and focused specifically on the Arab-Israeli peace process (Freedman, 1998). Relations evolved in several stages, even as tensions and disagreements remained.

First, bilateral trade accelerated, more than doubling from 1992 to 1993, from \$123 million to \$308 million. It continued to rise steadily each year, reaching \$867 million in 1995 and hovering at just over \$600 million by the end of the 1990s (International Monetary Fund, 2021a, 2021b). Regarding Russia's trade in the Middle East, only trade with Turkey was higher in those years, and indeed, by the end of the 1990s Turkey was Russia's top regional trade partner. Another point of reference is Russia's overall trade with the entire region (excluding Turkey), which ranged in this decade from \$1.2 to \$1.7 billion (International Monetary Fund, 2021a, 2021b). Israel's controversial \$1 billion planned sale to China of the Phalcon early warning radar system largely derived from AWACS technology (eventually halted due to US pressure) had Russian input (Boese, n.d.): Israel Aircraft Industries integrated the Phalcon with a Russian airframe (Rodan, 1998, p. 22; Fisher, 1998; Pike & Sherman, 2000).

On the diplomatic front, overall engagement increased, and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin came to Moscow for a historic visit in April 1994 to discuss the Middle East peace process, the first state visit to Russia by an Israeli head of state. The process was still US-led, but Russia remained interested in playing a key role, or at least cultivated an image of a key actor. Rabin's visit came after a visit by Yasir Arafat, then-leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Influence Opportunities amid Cooled Relations

By the end of the 1990s and against the backdrop of the stagnating US-led Middle East peace process, Russia-Israel relations lost their previous warmth. Yet paradoxically, in public, the Israeli government expressed greater support for Russia. For example, a degree of ambivalence colored the initial Israeli position toward Serbian atrocities in the former Yugoslavia and the subsequent NATO campaign. Some suggested at the time

that then-Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon was, *inter alia*, "interested in smoothing Israel's budding relations with Russia, an ally of Serbia, and that he had rebuffed subordinates who urged him to explicitly condemn the Serbs" (Greenberg, 1999). Earlier Sharon also suggested that NATO intervention would breed Islamic fundamentalist terrorism in Kosovo (Associated Press, 1999.) In an official clarification, Sharon said he "takes a harsh view of all acts of murder, injury or deportation directed against innocent civilians," while "Israel was rendering aid to the war casualties" (157. Statement, 1999.) At approximately this time, the Israeli government also supported the IMF extension of loans to Russia following the 1998 financial crisis.

One possible explanation for Israel's support (or non-denunciation) lies in the large wave of Jewish immigration to Israel from Russia and the former Soviet republics (Theodorou, 2016). The approximately one million Russian speakers created an enduring cultural bond, which was an important influence in Israel in its own right, but also increasingly mattered in Israeli politics. Foreign Minister Sharon told the *Washington Post* in the spring of 1999, against the backdrop of the Israeli ambivalence toward the NATO campaign, "The Russian vote will decide the outcome of the [Israeli] elections" ("Little Russia," 1999.) Indeed, on a subtle level, this cultural connection provided the Russian state with more influence opportunities. For example, Russia's then-Prime Minister, hawkish former intelligence chief and skilled Arabist Yevgeny Primakov said at a luncheon in Moscow in 1999, "I don't really want to interfere in Israeli politics...but if I were an Israeli citizen, I'd vote for Mr. Netanyahu in these coming elections" (Hockstader, 1999). Netanyahu did not fail to leak the comment to the Israeli press.

Moreover, in Israel Russian is the third most common first language, while the Russian-speaking community, including Israelis with origins in this community, retains ties to Russia and an interest in developments there. They are often an avid consumer of the Russian-language

press, even as views within this community are divided. The Kremlin has eyed this community as only one among several tools of influence in Israel. Certainly the Kremlin knows it has far more control in the post-Soviet space than in Israel, and that cultural ties do not necessarily bear the same weight within the Israeli political establishment, but nonetheless it is steadily trying to cultivate the Russian language community (“Russian Prime Minister,” 2011). Putin for his part has said several times over the years that Israel is “practically a Russian-speaking state” (“Israel is a ‘Russian-speaking country,’” 2019).

Primakov’s “Multipolar World”

Yevgeny Primakov, who succeeded the more pro-Western Andrei Kozyrev in 1996 as foreign minister and then became Prime Minister in 1998, shifted Moscow’s policy from a more balanced attitude toward the Arab-Israeli conflict back to one leaning more toward the Palestinians and Arabs. Primakov especially criticized Israel for Operation Grapes of Wrath in Lebanon in April 1996 (“Tel Aviv,” 1996; and according to the daily *Kommersant*, Israel was suspicious of Russia’s subsequent offers of mediation and preferred the US), and in late 1997 Primakov blamed Israel for the collapse of the peace process.

More broadly, Primakov defined Russian foreign policy away from the West as he charted a vision of a multipolar world (Russian sources also refer to it as “polycentric world”). Primakov first articulated this idea in 1996 and then in 1998, entailing a vision of a strategic triangle comprising Russia, China, and India (Primakov, 1996). To be sure, Kozyrev had also expressed a vision of a multipolar world as early as 1992 (Kozyrev, 1992), but Primakov articulated the idea more explicitly as a foreign policy priority, and certainly his approach, unlike that of Kozyrev who talked of a partnership with the US, carried greater anti-Western implications. At its core, Primakov’s idea assumed the US-led global order put Russia at a disadvantage

where it could no longer compete alone, but it could contend as part of a Russia-China-India triangle. Indeed, Russia, as a great power, needed pushback against the West, including in the Middle East, and Primakov was eager for Russia to return to the arena. “You have to understand, we will never leave the Middle East because we are part of the Middle East. We—are part of the Middle East!” Primakov once told Rabin after the latter told him that Israel does not want a Soviet presence in the Middle East, as Efraim Halevy, former Mossad director, noted. Indeed, Halevy recalled that Primakov repeated this phrase after their car broke down between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv; Primakov felt so strongly, Halevy said, that he forcefully banged his fist on the car and drew his own blood. This concept of Russia in the region was not merely Communist but quintessentially Russian, Halevy observed (Magen & Rakov, 2022, p. 43.)

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On Primakov’s watch, the Russian government began to demonstrate increased interest in projecting great power status in the Middle East. Yeltsin personally made a few trips to the region—in March 1996 to a Middle East peace summit in Egypt and in February 1999 to King Hussein’s funeral in Jordan. However, he only visited Israel in January 2000, after stepping down from Russia’s presidency, a week after naming a little-known former KGB officer Vladimir Putin acting president (“Boris Yeltsin,” 2000).

Putin’s Russia: A Return to the Middle East and Greater Focus on Israel

Putin embraced Primakov’s vision of a multipolar world and worked resolutely to return Russia to the Middle East in a zero-sum

anti-American approach (Abner, 2017). With regard to Israel, Putin initially took a pragmatic realpolitik stance, though ironically a more pro-Israel approach than Primakov himself pursued several years earlier. Yet while this approach found few takers in his own government (Katz, 2005), Putin's overall strategy for the region still reflected Primakov's vision of building ties with all major actors on the ground, a strategy rooted in lessons from the failure of the Soviet Union. To be sure, Putin was not going to bring back the Soviet Union, but he was determined to win vis-à-vis the US where the USSR had failed. The loss of the Cold War continued to haunt Russian elites not because they wanted a return of Communism, but because Russia lost and the world order changed as a result—and they sought an alternate outcome. Thus, the lesson the Kremlin extracted was about what tactics it used to pursue its goals, rather than fundamentally rethinking the goals themselves. Now, however, it was about traditional geopolitics, not ideology. As James Sherr posits, Putin's overall approach reflects pragmatism in the *chekist* understanding of the term. In the Western mind, the term "pragmatic" invokes images of reasonableness, but for a *chekist* (i.e., affiliated with a Soviet state security organization) it is about a cold, cynical calculation of national interest, and a utilitarian approach to ends and means (Sherr, 2013).

When it came to Israel, one lesson internalized the strategic mistake of internal anti-Jewish policies of the Soviet Union, which led to the creation of the "refusenik" movement that connected with Western elites and extended pressure that resulted, inter alia, in the passage of the powerful Jackson-Vanik amendment that pressured the Soviet Union on its human rights policy. More broadly, the refusenik efforts also helped expose the true evil character of the Soviet regime, in which there was no moral equivalence between the West and the Soviet ideology. The fact is, in private Moscow was not blind to the strategic

(though not necessarily moral) failure of this approach, even during the Cold War. As noted in the famous Mitrokhin Archives, "Even Brezhnev occasionally complained about the lack of proportion evident in the KGB campaign against refuseniks, 'Zionism is making us stupid'" (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2006, p. 143). Furthermore, breaking diplomatic ties with Israel led to the Kremlin's loss of intelligence access within Israel, another disadvantage during the Cold war.

The way the Kremlin came to see it, it would achieve more by working with the Jews. Indeed, the core premise here was exactly the same as Putin's broader Middle East strategy of actively building good relations with all—often conflicting—major actors in the region to pursue Russian interests as Putin defined them, and position Russia as a mediator and peacemaker. Putin consistently pursued this flexible approach since coming to power to strengthen the Russian position in the region. He arguably achieved greater success than the Soviet Union (Freedman, 2018, pp. 102–115).

Pragmatic Flexibility and Economic Ties

From the very beginning of his rule, Putin championed Russia in the Middle East far more than Yeltsin had done, often through personal involvement. In October 2000, soon after taking office, Putin publicly repealed the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin pact; press reports indicated that in practice, the agreement regardless did little to limit Russia's arms sales to Iran, even as the US fulfilled its side of the bargain. Moreover, the December deadline passed and Russian sales to Iran continued, but the public cancellation of the deal sent a message that Putin wanted closer cooperation with the Islamic Republic (Chernomyrdin, 2000). After the collapse of the Camp David II talks in July 2000, Moscow attempted to assume a larger role as a mediator, at least rhetorically. Yasir Arafat traveled to Moscow the following month and met with Putin, who said Russia was ready to "co-sponsor" the Middle East agreement ("Vladimir Putin," 2000).

In April 2005, Putin became the first Kremlin leader to visit Israel (“Visits to the State of Israel,” 2005). This trip came as Russia began to pursue a generally more aggressive foreign policy in the wake of the so-called color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space—events that Putin blamed on the West—that also touched the Middle East. In these years the Kremlin’s fear of color revolutions was primarily focused on the post-Soviet space rather than the Middle East, but Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution could not have escaped its attention. As ties with Israel continued to grow, in September 2008 the two countries launched visa-free travel (Keinon, 2008). Russian and Israeli officials increasingly held meetings and telephone conversations on a regular basis and maintained multiple open channels of communication. At the same time, pursuing ties with Israel did not stop Putin from building closer ties with Tehran, inviting Hamas to Moscow, or failing to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization; Hezbollah representatives also eventually visited the Russian capital.

By 2010, Putin had built good relations with all governments in the Middle East and the major opposition movements, and although he briefly lost clout after the Arab spring—another event Moscow was convinced the US orchestrated, along with subsequent domestic protest in Russia—he soon regained these contacts and influence. Moreover, despite good relations with everyone in the region, it was clear that Putin leaned closer to Iran and more broadly to the anti-American forces in the region. Putin never failed to capitalize on American missteps or its overall retreat from the region (both real and perceived). For example, in June 2012, Putin exploited the tension between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government and visited Israel a second time, nine months before Obama made his first presidential visit. For his part, Prime Minister Netanyahu traveled to Moscow more frequently than to Washington during Obama’s presidency.

Economic relations between the two countries improved on Putin’s watch, exceeding \$3 billion in 2014, a figure slightly higher than Russia’s trade with Egypt the same year, and has roughly hovered at this number since. Putin pursued hi-tech commerce in areas including nanotechnology; tourism became another important sector. More recently, Israel (and ironically Iran) discussed with Russia the possibility of joining a free trade zone with the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (Ahren, 2019). In reality, it is difficult to see Israel joining this zone anytime soon given the state of relations between Western democracies and Russia; moreover, it is hard to see Iran and Israel joining the same organization given Tehran’s position toward Israel. Still, the very fact that these discussions took place at all is important.

Lastly, military relations improved somewhat. In early 2009, Russia began to cooperate with Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) including on UAVs (“Russia Confirms,” 2009), and by the following year reportedly purchased \$100 million worth of equipment. The daily *Vedomosti* further reported that in late 2015, Russia’s Defense Ministry purchased ten additional Israel-designed UAVs assembled in Russia (Nikolsky, 2015). This cooperation occurred even as Israel consistently remained concerned by Russia’s support of Iran’s nuclear program and fears that Russia would supply advanced air defense systems to the Islamic Republic. Indeed, over the years, US and Israel pressured Russia to halt the sale of the S-300 to Iran; Moscow eventually froze the deal (though never canceled it) in exchange for major concessions from the West rewarding Russia for its support of sanctions against Tehran (Baker & Sanger, 2010). The S-300 deal eventually went through, after the JCPOA on the Iranian nuclear program was adopted in October 2015.

Russia as Peacemaker

Putin was determined to recapture Russia’s status as a great power on the global arena. As part of the multipolar world vision, he styled

Russia as a country crucial to resolution of all key global issues. Within this framework, he inserted Russia into the Middle East Quartet from its inception in 2002, which recalled the 1991 Madrid Conference. It is hard to imagine that the memory of the US as the sole convener of a crucial global peace conference did not haunt Putin and his circle (Borshchevskaya, 2021, pp. 29-32), and certainly Putin's behavior over the years suggested he was determined to avoid a repeat scenario. As for the Israeli-Palestinian issue, senior Russian officials have consistently publicly underscored the joint US-USSR nature of the Madrid Conference, most recently in October 2021 (TASS, 2021). Russia has a firm official position on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which also references Madrid (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, n.d.). Top Russian officials have spoken repeatedly about the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and to this day official Russian statements refer to the resolution of this conflict as central to peace in the Middle East (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020).

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By some accounts Putin's Russia has been the only country that has regularly attempted to breathe new life into its Middle East activity. In this context Moscow retained close ties with Fatah and Hamas leaders, as well as Islamic Jihad, all of whom paid official visits to Moscow in recent years. Indeed, Moscow does not consider Hamas a terrorist organization, and although this point frustrates both Israel and the Palestinian Authority, it has not prevented any party from engaging in dialogue with Moscow. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas described Russia in late 2019 as "one of the main friends of the Palestinian people," to whom they do not need to explicitly turn to for support,

since Russia "always stood and is on the side of our people" (Belenkaya, 2019). Later that year Abbas also sought Russia's mediation (Melhem, 2021). During Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021 Moscow itself offered mediation, which some Russian analysts highlighted would be a better alternative to that of the US (Kulagin, 2021). Moreover, Putin at the time described the escalating conflict as one that "directly affects [Russia's] security interests" (Fung, 2021).

Moscow's April 2017 recognition of West Jerusalem as Israel's capital encapsulated some key themes of Putin's strategy. First, this decision came before the US recognized Jerusalem as the capital. Second, in practice, unlike the US decision, it obliged Moscow to do little, especially as the Russian embassy remained in Tel Aviv. Putin's real goal may have had less to do with Israel than serving as a signal to US that it will need to deal with Russia even on this issue. Third, it cast Putin further in a positive light when it came to the Israeli government.

Although the Israeli-Palestinian issue is certainly not high on anyone's agenda at this time, including Moscow's, the Kremlin has made it consistently clear it will play an integral part in it.

Terrorism, World War II, and Other Narratives

Terrorism

Putin also pursued several narratives to build ties with Israel—beyond simply cultivating Russian-speaking Jews—with an eye toward a more enduring connection. He repeatedly drew parallels between Russia's struggle with Sunni Islamist extremism and Israel's own terrorist struggle. Perhaps due to Putin's outreach, Israel was one of the few countries (ironically, Iran was another) that didn't criticize Putin for his brutal crushing of Chechen separatists; most others condemned Moscow's human rights violations that helped turn what originally began as a secular separatist struggle into an Islamist extremist one. Israel was also among

the first countries to offer Moscow support in September 2004 after a group of armed Chechen and Ingush terrorists seized a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, bringing 18 children and their parents on a three-week healing trip to Israel. Many inside Russia, by contrast, especially relatives of the hostages, criticized the Russian government's botched rescue attempt, which led to the deaths of 380 hostages, 186 of them children. (Putin would subsequently use Beslan as a justification for Russia's democratic backslide.)

World War II and Cultural Ties

Over the years Putin repeatedly emphasized—and at times exaggerated—Russia's cultural ties with Israel. He also emphasized the Red Army's heroism against Nazism, while occasionally recalling Stalin's initial recognition of the Jewish state but omitting Stalin's subsequent antisemitic policies, to say nothing of Putin's obsession with whitewashing Stalin's initial pact with Hitler.

"We fought Nazism together—I want to emphasize this....This means that we have common humanitarian values—this is the most solid basis for interaction," Putin said in June 2012 while meeting Israeli President Shimon Peres, and adding, "It is not by accident that the Soviet Union was among the initiators and supported the creation of the state of Israel" ("Meeting," 2012). Next day, speaking at an unveiling of a monument in Netanya dedicated to the Red Army Victory over the Nazi Germany, Putin said that Russia "put an end" to the Holocaust by saving "the world" (Stern Shefler, 2012). In September 2019 Putin said, "Citizens of Russia and Israel are connected by ties of family, kinship and friendship. This is a real network, a common family, I say without exaggeration....we consider Israel a Russian-speaking state" (JTA, 2019).

For all his talk about humanitarian values, Putin's intentions were far more prosaic and self-serving. Thus, in 2018 an agreement went into force stating that Russia would pay \$83

million in pensions to former Soviet citizens now living in Israel ("Putin Awards," 2017)—even as it had no money to adjust pensions for inflation for Russian citizens, while the meager pension allotment of just over \$17 a month again shows a preference for style over substance ("Medvedev's Awkward Crimea Moment," 2016). It would be inaccurate to assume that his efforts to cultivate the Russian-speaking diaspora went entirely unnoticed, but pragmatic realpolitik ultimately gained Putin, on balance, greater leverage. Indeed, many have described Netanyahu, who perhaps capitalized in political terms on these developments, as a "master campaigner" with Israel's Russian-speaking public (Galili, 2019).

That said, ironically, Israeli civil society over the years—including those of the recent aliya, often referred to as the "Putin aliyah"—consistently pushed back against strengthening ties with Russia. They organized protests near the Russian embassy over Russia's human rights violations, while almost every official Russian state visit to Israel was met with demonstrations. Israel's younger Russian speakers especially opposed the illegal Crimea annexation; this author was told in Israel that the Crimea annexation divided Israel's Russian speakers. Moreover, Netanyahu's pro-Putin campaign alienated these voters, especially later in Netanyahu's political career. However, as Lily Galili pointed out, the campaign may not have meant to target Russian speakers but "the Israeli public writ large, which is uninterested in internal Russian politics and is impressed by seeing the leader of their small country playing in the big leagues with the likes of Trump and Putin" (Galili, 2019). For their part, the civil society protests did not appear to have impacted the course of Israel's foreign policy with regard to Russia.

Rehabilitation of Stalinism

That Putin pursued rehabilitation of Stalinism along with Stalin's pact with Hitler speaks volumes about his priorities, worldview, and

how it colors his approach to Israel (Aderet, 2021). Russia, as an old Soviet joke goes, is a country with unpredictable history. Putin's Russia is no exception and has engaged in historical revisionism and suppression. In the last twenty years, over one hundred statues to Stalin have appeared throughout Russia, most after 2005 (Yakovleva, 2018). Most recently, on July 1, 2021, Putin signed a law that made it illegal to compare publicly goals of the USSR to that of Nazi Germany and the European Axis powers, as well as denying the decisive role the USSR played in liberating Europe from Nazism ("Putin Approved," 2021). "History should not be touched," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on August 30, 2021 at a meeting with Russia's War II veterans, adding that "attacks" on Stalin as the main perpetrator of evil are "attacks on our past" ("Lavrov: Attacks," 2021). Indeed, the Russian state punishes historians who do touch history, such as Yury Dmitriev, who worked to document mass executions: in 2020 the court sentenced Dmitriev to thirteen years in prison ("Reuters in Moscow," 2020). The latest closures of Memorial International and its sister Memorial Center leaves no doubt of the direction in which Russia is headed. Memorial is the most respected Russian human rights umbrella organization in Russia, consisting of several branches; Memorial International was the archival branch. Memorial documented Stalin's crimes and in more recent years began a tradition of public gatherings on October 29 to read aloud names of victims of political repression, in commemoration. The Russian Supreme Court closed it on spurious charges of failing to properly display the "foreign agent" logo and for creating a "false" image of the USSR as a "terrorist state" (Interfax, 2011).

Indeed, Putin's rehabilitation of Stalinism has nothing to do with a search for genuine nuance that could better enhance the understanding of the past, but everything with crafting a misleading narrative that serves a political purpose, domestically and internationally. For many in Israel, there is no contradiction between

complete repugnance to Stalinism and gratitude for a key contribution to creation of the Jewish state, but as far as Putin is concerned this is a useful opportunity. It allows, for example, pushing a narrative of Russia's victimization by the West, which purportedly does not give Russia enough credit for the role the Soviet Union played in defeating Hitler. And even if all sides ultimately understand the cynicism that underlies these actions, appearances matter.

Thus, in 2018, Netanyahu attended the May 9 parade in Moscow to commemorate victory over the Nazis—the biggest, most important event of the year in Russia, one that Western leaders have shunned since the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea. Under Putin, the Kremlin uses this event for political purposes to stoke militarism, so much so, that Russians themselves dubbed it *pobedobesiye* ("victory frenzy"). While attending the parade, Netanyahu donned the controversial St. George ribbon, outlawed in Ukraine after the Crimea annexation (Roth, 2017). "There was little that Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could do more to ingratiate himself with Mr. Putin than flying to Moscow to participate in Wednesday's Red Square military parade," wrote the *Wall Street Journal's* Yaroslav Trofimov (2018). Netanyahu's visit came at a time when Israel remained concerned about Iranian entrenchment in Syria, where Israel to some extent had become dependent on Russia and where Netanyahu believed Putin could limit Iranian influence. A recent article by Russia's ambassador to Israel Anatoly Victorov is illustrative of how the Kremlin uses World War II narratives in its relationship with Israel to gain greater legitimacy for itself. "In Israel, we find complete mutual understanding, which is especially important against the backdrop of how in a number of states cynical attempts are made to rewrite and distort the history of the war...[with] a blasphemous attitude toward the memory of Soviet soldiers-liberators," he wrote (Victorov, 2021). Lavrov repeated this point in a joint publication on the 30th anniversary of Russian-Israeli relations,

writing that “categorical rejection of attempts and historical revisionism....and generally recognized international legal results of World War II have always united Russia and Israel (Magen & Rakov, p. 15).

Ironically, Stalin himself did not hold World War II celebrations. He had aimed to suppress the war’s traumas, so that the people would forget it—in large part because he himself played a major role in causing this trauma through lies, mismanagement, and utter disregard for the lives of his own people. Soviet leadership only began celebrations under Leonid Brezhnev, to use them as a glue to hold the country together and legitimize Soviet rule at the time of stagnation. Putin, like Brezhnev, has used these narratives both domestically and with regard to Israel. To broaden the aperture further, Soviet nostalgia has been one key pillar of how Putin has framed Russia’s national idea. It has been part of his unifying vision of security and militarization, both domestically and internationally (Borshchevskaya, 2020). This vision emerged as a reaction against the 1990s and blended a toxic mix of militant and anti-Western patriotism, along with Soviet nostalgia and religious orthodoxy.

The Orthodox Church

Jerusalem always mattered to the Russian Orthodox Church, both to czarist and especially imperial nineteenth century Russia, when the Church exercised influence over Greek, Armenian, and Arab Orthodox communities in the Ottoman Empire. It funded schools, churches, and hostels in Palestine and Syria. Under Putin, the Russian Orthodox Church attempted to revive the idea, along with broader historic notions of Russia as the “Third Rome,” with its own spin in terms of connections to state foreign policy of expansion into the Middle East. The church in this context presented itself as a unifying force for all Christians in the region and the main pillar of stability protecting Christian communities. This was among the reasons why the church and the Kremlin cultivated ties with

Israel. Israel’s beginning the transfer of the Alexander Courtyard in Jerusalem’s Old City to the Russian Orthodox Church in January 2020 (“Israel Begins,” 2020), and Lavrov’s accusation that the US was making it a “goal” to break the “unity of world’s Orthodoxy” (“Lavrov: USA Out,” 2021) should be seen in this context. To be sure, the precise judicial process when it comes to the Alexander Courtyard is complex and involves a longstanding legal dispute that goes back to the 1917 Russian revolution, but that is not the main point. (And, it should be recalled, Putin himself is not only a KGB operative, but also a lawyer by training.) The key issue is that in the Kremlin’s distorted perception, the West is looking to weaken and divide Russia—including not only through “attacking” Stalin and Russia’s World War II history, but also by dividing the “Orthodox unity,” and Russia is bolstering its position—including in Israel. Significantly, the name of the Courtyard refers to not any Alexander, but Alexander Nevsky, the historic patron saint of the Russian army. Indeed, the order of Alexander Nevsky, one of the highest awards for political or military service in czarist Russia, was revived both by Soviet and Putin’s Russia.

These narratives of the West allegedly trying to weaken Russia serve as a rallying cry to unite Russian society and make citizens put internal issues aside in the name of a perceived greater common threat, thereby strengthening Putin’s grip on power. The fact is, church-state relations in Soviet Russia and the element of religion in Russia’s foreign policy is deep and broad. A full discussion is beyond the scope of this article, but in brief, a messianic turn occurred in post-Soviet Russia with the collapse of Communism. Russian foreign and especially security policy historically had an ecclesiastical dimension, as did post-Soviet Russia, especially under Putin, part of the state-driven militarization of the Russian consciousness used as a tool of cohesion. Although analysts over the years asserted that Putin’s Russia has no ideology, these were superficial readings of reality.

Putin offered an ideology—one of state paternalism and patriotism based on appeals to a glorious past and the rejection of liberalism (Borshchevskaya, 2021, p. 44). Religion has a direct role in this narrative, while the Church itself also maintains ties to the state. As Dima Adamsky writes in his book about how the Church came to permeate the Russian military-industrial complex, the penetration of the Russian Orthodox faith into politics has been wide, deep, and ongoing and will likely outlive Putin, while narratives of obedience, loyalty, duty, and sacrifice have become intertwined with faith (Adamsky, 2019). Consequently, Israel, the cradle of Christianity, will always have an especially important place in Russian state interests as Moscow continues to pursue its messianic mission of protector and savior, a mission that also transcends borders.

Putin's 2015 Syria intervention brought Russia to Israel's doorstep, a reality Israel had no choice but to confront, especially in the context of Western ambivalence toward the crisis.

The Intervention in Syria

Putin's 2015 Syria intervention brought Russia to Israel's doorstep, a reality Israel had no choice but to confront, especially in the context of Western ambivalence toward the crisis. Indeed, it soon became clear that Russia is in Syria for the long haul and could limit Israel's freedom of action to strike Iran-linked targets inside Syria. Thus, engagement between Russian and Israeli figures, from the most senior to lower levels, only increased. The two countries also set up a coordination and deconfliction mechanism to avoid clashes. The Israeli government came to see Russia as a country that could contain Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, a perception that Moscow actively encouraged. Furthermore, like other countries in the region, Israel saw Russia as a channel of communication with the Assad regime, which joined the reasons to cultivate Moscow. Moreover, some Israeli

officials privately claimed that Putin has a "soft spot" for Jews and Israel, noting that they felt reassured when Moscow gave Israel freedom of action.

Moscow did not directly restrict Israel's freedom of military action, and as of the time of this writing, the two countries maintain coordination. That said, a number of obstacles highlighted the fragility of this situation, even as Israeli officials have said over the years they do not ask Russia's permission to conduct their airstrikes. As early as March 2017, Moscow "summoned" Israeli Ambassador to Moscow Gary Koren and "demanded" clarification about a strike in Syria, highlighting Moscow's preference to treat even a partner as a subordinate rather than an equal (TOI Staff & Agencies, 2017).

Certainly tensions between Russia and Israel continued on a deeper level than official statements suggested over the years. Moscow remained unhappy with Israel's support for an American presence in northern Syria to support Syrian Kurds. For one, the American presence limited Iranian options in terms of control of the Syrian-Iran border; implicitly, this situation once again highlighted Moscow's preference for Iran. Moscow of course also simply wanted the US out of Syria. Israel, for its part, while concerned about Russia's presence in Syria over the years, remained hopeful that Russia would limit Iranian influence in Syria, a hope that over the years failed to materialize.

Moscow never took any meaningful action to limit Iran and Hezbollah, while a string of broken ceasefires on Russia's watch should have highlighted both its inability and lack of desire to rebuff Iran in Syria. Furthermore, a serious crisis erupted in September 2018, after the Assad regime accidentally shot down a Russian reconnaissance plane, killing all 15 people onboard, an incident that Moscow blamed on Israel. To be sure, the Russian Defense Ministry came out seemingly far stronger in its criticism, and the Israeli press was careful to highlight a perception that Putin

personally did not blame Israel, an incident he described as a “chain of tragic accidental circumstances.” The Defense Ministry blamed Israel directly, claiming Israel used the civilian plane as a “shield” against Syrian air defenses. This situation led some to suggest that the Russian Defense Ministry was more anti-Israel than Putin himself.

In the background of this incident stood the question of historic Russian antisemitism, and where Putin himself stood on this issue as compared to more far-right, ultra-nationalist members of the Russian government. To be sure, the Russian Defense Ministry might very well have been inclined to be more anti-Israel. Still, such hair splitting obfuscated more than it clarified because it was hard to tell how much of these reactions were genuine or mere theater. The Russian Defense Ministry had to defend itself to Putin, and the desire to shift the blame on Israel could very well have been the result of simple embarrassment in front of the boss, rather than a reflection of a genuine difference in attitude or policy. Putin himself, for his part, whatever his feelings toward Jews, still stressed, albeit in more gentle fashion than the Defense Ministry, that the earlier Israeli attack violated Syria’s sovereignty, along with Russian-Israeli agreements on avoiding clashes. Putin also said Netanyahu should “not allow such situations in the future” (Agencies & TOI Staff, 2018). Overall, his response ultimately highlighted his pragmatism toward Israel. At the same time, Russian state-run media featured a wave of online antisemitic comments (“On the Web,” 2018).

Ultimately, neither Russia nor Israel was interested in a full-blown bilateral crisis, but the incident illustrated how quickly relations can take a turn for the worse, and when they did, Israel voted in favor of several UN resolutions condemning the Crimea annexation (JTA & Liphshiz, 2018), unlike its initial reaction in 2014 when it ostensibly remained neutral. Even so, the Israeli government persisted in a naive hope that Russia would deter Iran in

Syria. Thus, for example, in March 2019, after the southern ceasefire failed to meet any of Israel’s security interests, Netanyahu announced to his cabinet, “President Putin and I also agreed on a common goal—the withdrawal of foreign forces that arrived in Syria after the outbreak of the civil war.” While over the years some of the Israeli hopes that Russia would limit Iranian-backed proxies in Syria appear to have ebbed, these hopes have not disappeared entirely, despite evidence to the contrary. As recently as December 2021 former national security advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat said, “There is a shared view between us and the Russians, beyond what’s publicly exposed...The Russians are striving for regional stability, particularly in Syria. I believe they would agree that Iran is the force challenging that stability” (Kubovich, 2021).

For their part, senior Russian officials, such as Ambassador to the UN Vasily Nebezia and Anatoly Viktorov periodically condemned Israeli activities as “destabilizing” Syria and the Middle East in the following years, but especially stepped up this rhetoric with the change of Israeli leadership after Netanyahu lost to Naftali Bennett. Thus, in July 2021, Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara issued a trilateral statement confirming “their strong commitment to [Syria’s] sovereignty” and “condemned continuing Israeli military attacks in Syria which violate the international law, international humanitarian law, the sovereignty of Syria and neighboring countries, endanger the stability and security in the region, and called for cessation of them” (“Russia, Iran, Turkey,” 2021). The same month, Rear Admiral Vadim Kulit, head of the Russian military reconciliation center in Syria (Egozi, 2021a), reportedly said that Russian forces assisted Syria in intercepting four missiles launched by Israeli F-16s (“Syria Shot Down,” 2021).

In this context, the Israeli leadership appeared concerned that Russia changed its policy toward Israel in Syria. Press reports over the summer of 2021 noted that Russia stopped the deconfliction line and linked

this change to Netanyahu's departure (Egozi, 2021b). The reports appeared to have been overblown (Kasnett, 2021); it is more likely that Moscow engaged in tactical messaging to test the new Israeli government. In October when Bennett met with Putin, he reaffirmed that the two countries will continue to implement the deconfliction mechanism. "It was decided to keep policies vis-à-vis Russia in place [regarding airstrikes in Syrian territory]," Housing Minister Ze'ev Elkin, who accompanied Bennett as a translator and advisor, said in a statement. Elkin also said the talks involved establishing continuity in the bilateral relationship with Russia after Bennett replaced Netanyahu as Israel's prime minister (TOI Staff, 2021). Israeli military analysts subsequently said on Israeli Channel 12 and 13 that while the coordination mechanism remains in place, Putin also asked for additional advanced warning of strikes.

Moscow's policy in the last thirty years, with the exception perhaps of the early Yeltsin years, shows a preference for pragmatism, as Moscow—not the West—understands the term, and in this context, cultivation of pragmatic leverage.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Russia-Israel relations have matured substantially over the past thirty years, even as tensions and disagreements remain. When meeting with Putin on October 22, 2021, Prime Minister Bennett discussed not only Israel's freedom of action in Syria but also the underlying basis for bilateral relations. Bennett said, "I want to tell you on behalf of our entire country, our entire people: we see in you a very close, true friend of the State of Israel, the Jewish people," and once again highlighted the Red Army's role in fighting the Nazis ("Meeting with Israel Prime Minister," 2021). The Israeli leadership continues to see it important to cultivate good ties with Russia, as does Moscow,

but the Kremlin has not been motivated solely by genuine friendship.

Moscow's policy in the last thirty years, with the exception perhaps of the early Yeltsin years, shows a preference for pragmatism, as Moscow—not the West—understands the term, and in this context, cultivation of pragmatic leverage. Indeed, this is also the Kremlin's goal as it seeks to strengthen the Russian position in the Middle East as a mediator that can talk to all sides and serve as a counterweight to the West, even during occasional instances when Moscow is helpful to Israel.¹ Of course Moscow is not looking for a bilateral crisis with Israel, a strong and developed pro-Western democracy, which Moscow considers a strategically vital country in the region. But that is precisely what makes Israel vulnerable to Moscow's broader efforts to corrupt and weaken democratic institutions and practices worldwide (TOI Staff, 2018). The case of Naama Issachar, a 26-year-old American Israeli, detained in 2019 by the Russian authorities on trumped up charges to obtain the release of an alleged criminal hacker, is also illustrative of how Moscow views international relations (Eglash, 2019). Greater Russian influence will not bring stability or improve security, but the bottom line is that Russia today sees the Middle East as a prime arena of competition with the US, and more broadly the West, and this is likely to present a greater challenge for Israel in the coming years. Moreover, the Middle East has and always will matter to Russian leaders, competition or no competition with the West.

In the Middle East, Putin, unlike Soviet leaders, is more pragmatically inclined and aware of his limitations, and his approach to the region has already shown him more resilient than many commentators predicted. He knows that Israeli leaders will not downgrade relations with Washington simply to appease Moscow. However, that is not the primary concern. Putin has shown he is committed to undermine pro-Western interests—indeed, many thought Russia would find itself mired in overreach in

Syria, but to the contrary, instead Putin achieved many key objectives without incurring crippling costs. The West meanwhile in recent years has looked to withdraw from the Middle East, and the Biden administration sees China more than Russia as a primary foreign policy objective and has even strengthened Russia by waiving sanctions that now allow Russia to construct the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The debacle of the Afghanistan withdrawal weakened the US and the West in the eyes of the Kremlin, which now pushes openly for a complete revision of the post-Cold War world order. Great power competition will continue to intensify in the Middle East, at least as far as Russia (and China) is concerned, while the American commitment to meet this competition specifically in the Middle East remains at best ambivalent. Nor are Russia and China likely to divorce anytime soon, despite years of analysis that suggests this is only a tactical marriage of convenience. Russia's strategic partnership goes back three decades, and it need not be a full-fledged formal alliance to demonstrate that Moscow and Beijing remain committed to erode the US-led global order, find ways to cooperate, and carve out spheres of influence.

Looking to the future, tensions within Russian-Israeli relations will presumably persist, but so will cooperation, as both sides will likely continue to calculate that cooperation, even if sometimes uneasy, is in their best interest. When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, it is unlikely that Israel will necessarily see Russia as a better mediator than the US, especially if Moscow continues to expand its influence with the Palestinian Authority, something that the latter has welcomed over the years. Still, Russia will also continue playing an integral role in discussions. When it comes to Russia's relationship with Iran, Israel will likely continue to hope that Russia will limit the influence of Iran-backed militias in Syria. Israel appears to remain committed in its preference to Russia over Iran in Syria, rather than see them together as one strategic unit.

Moscow, however, has shown time and time again that whereas the West aims to be proactive and look for solutions, it is content with an unresolved conflict, be it in Syria or elsewhere, especially if it entails obtaining prestige and other benefits of perceived power that it is seemingly working to resolve an intractable conflict. Syria for its part is poised to turn into a frozen conflict that Russia will manage, rather than aim to resolve. As it does so, it will slowly increase its influence in the Middle East, with Syria as a key focal point from which it projects power. Should a major conflict erupt between Israel and Iran or Iran-backed proxies, Moscow is likely to continue to style itself as the only mediator that has channels of communication to all sides. This position will not only ensure Russia's seat at the table and everyone's cooperation, even if begrudging, but depending on how events play out, could gain Russia a winning position, especially in the absence of sustained and focused US involvement.

In the context of growing great power competition, the United States and Israel have had a deep and enduring bond for seven decades, and now both need to look for ways to strengthen the alliance based on shared values and clearly articulated interests, especially at a time when political debate in the US has now shifted, compared to previous decades. Republicans and Democrats traditionally agreed on standing by Israel, but this dynamic is changing, which is worrisome.

Intensified emphasis on the US need not be zero-sum for Israel, but Israeli leaders should also acknowledge the limitations of Russian mediation and the Kremlin's ability—or interest—in genuinely pushing back against Iranian influence. In this context, as Assad is headed closer to normalization by Arab leaders who have shunned him for the last decade (Rogin, 2021), Israeli leadership should at the very least not rush to follow. The idea that Assad's shift closer to Arab, especially wealthy Gulf states will distance him from Tehran may

seem Machiavellian on paper, but in reality is just as unlikely to succeed as, for example, previous Gulf states' futile attempts to peel Russia from Iran by offering it investments. Assad owes his stay in power not only to Moscow but also to Tehran, and Iran's tentacles are spread throughout Syria too far for them to be recalled should the Gulf fund reconstruction. In this context, the ongoing discussion about a gas pipeline from Jordan and Egypt to Lebanon through Syria (Rose, 2021) is also just as unlikely to limit Iranian influence but will further serve to normalize one of the worst dictatorships in the world. Israel, a free nation, should consider this point as the Israeli government thinks through normalization with the region's worst tyrant.

A strong Russian presence in Syria is unlikely to limit Iran in a meaningful way; this influence may simply look different and perhaps less overt. Nor is Russian help on other issues necessarily altruistic. Ultimately Moscow is looking for leverage to bolster its own standing rather than take genuine responsibility of true leadership. Partnerships with authoritarian governments are often necessary, but such ties have limits, especially when democracies meet the challenges of their day with strategic and moral clarity. Russia's illegal February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has laid bare for the world to see how different its worldview is from that of the West. In less than two weeks, the war grew into the largest conflict in Europe since World War II and changed the world. With this war, Putin aims to quash a democratic competitor under his authoritarianism, and take apart the liberal post World War II rules-based global order he despises. Israel has a direct stake in maintaining this global order. Israel also has much in common with Ukraine. It cannot sit on the sidelines, nor fall for Putin's lies.

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Note

- 1 Noteworthy, for example, is that the Russian military helped Israel recover from Syria the remains of Israeli soldier Sgt. Zachary Baumel, missing since the 1982 war in Lebanon, on the eve of Israeli elections in April 2019.