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The Relations between Russia and Israel: Focus on the Syrian conflict

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INTRODUCTION

The bilateral relations between the Russian Federation and the State of Israel have historically represented a thorny issue in international relations. The relevance of these ties appears evident if we account for, on the one hand, Moscow's leading role during the Cold War and its re-emergence after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, on the other, Israel's centrality in Western Asia, its international alliances and its technological and military power. Their regional and global influence is unquestioned, and they represent two opposing paradigms that succeeded in finding their common ways repeatedly throughout history, while also facing periods of tension and indirect confrontation. With a 21st-century Russia aspiring to the reaffirmation of its Great Power status, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region arguably represents one of the most relevant and lively theatres to implement a similar policy. While the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation repeatedly asserted its geopolitical priorities to be represented by the post-Soviet space first and foremost, the MENA is located in direct proximity with Moscow's sphere of influence, making the region's (in-)stability resonating onto the borders of the former USSR.

The two countries are historically intertwined by social and cultural aspects, with the Russian territory having hosted one of the largest and most prolific Jewish communities, which massively relocated to Israel in various waves of emigration, leading to the constitution of a 1,3-million-strong Russian-speaking population in the Middle-Eastern country¹. Commercially and economically, their relations improved with Israel's import of Russian gas and export of food, but what stands aside is their technological, intelligence and military cooperation. Indeed, Israel provided strategic support to Russia in its struggle against Chechen terrorism and Moscow has been frequently buying its state-of-the-art technology.

Fruitful ties were expected between the two as the USSR was the first international actor to fully recognize the Jewish state's legitimacy in 1948. Alas, the unraveling of the Cold War led Jerusalem²

¹ *Immigrants,(1) by Period of Immigration, Country of Birth and Last Country of Residence*, Central Bureau of Statistics, August 16th, 2018. Retrieved [here](#) on May 10th, 2019.

² For the rest of this work, we will refer to Israel interchangeably as: The State of Israel, the Jewish State and, as a metonymy, Jerusalem. This choice is not intended to take a side on the international debate regarding the status of Jerusalem and the capital of Israel. While Russia recognized West Jerusalem as capital in 2017, Israel recognizes the whole city as the United States do since 2017, and the UN recognizes

to tie unmistakably with the Western powers, and the United States in particular, asserting its non-Communist alignment. Tense relations followed, with diplomatic relations being severed twice in the 20th century, and cooperation being alternated with indirect confrontation. This notwithstanding Moscow's overarching strategy in the Middle East remained focused, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, on one specific point: the ambition to play the role of the regional mediator, in particular with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in order to assert its Great Power status. On this note, even when no official relationship with Israel was in place, the USSR had always pushed for a Palestinian recognition of the Jewish State aimed at reaching a diplomatic resolution of the conflict. This struggle was attempted to be carried out in the framework of the United Nations, enacting a concerted settlement of a long-standing confrontation. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian Presidents N. B. Yeltsin, D. A. Medvedev and V. V. Putin all aimed at establishing an open dialogue with the State of Israel, and with the premierships of A. Sharon and B. Netanyahu in Israel the bilateral ties became deeper, more solid and fruitful. Two main culprits in Russian-Israeli modern relations can be identified: the Chechen war and the Syrian conflict. In the occasion of the former, bilateral cooperation on security issues highly benefitted Moscow's effectiveness in curbing the terrorist threat. As for the latter, tactical cooperation has been established in order to allow both powers to carry out their otherwise incompatible policies in the country: the Russian military intervention in support of the Assad regime, in coordination with Israel's enemy Iran; and the Israeli targeted strikes against pro-Iranian forces in Syria. This explains why the Syrian conflict has been chosen as the focus of this work: it has enhanced enormously the existing bilateral cooperation, causing the two countries to establish an open and frequent dialogue on all-ranging issues of international policy. This work will aim at shedding a light on this thorny relationship, ranging from a historical overview of their relations up to a geopolitical vision of their most recent ties. Thus, the chronological framework will be the one from the birth of Zionism until the most recent times. Naturally, the period preceding the fall of the Soviet Union will be overviewed more generally, with deeper attention being laid on the 21st century's developments. As for the Soviet times, specific attention will be given to the attitude of Communism towards Zionism and its development, Moscow's evolving strategy in the region of the Middle East and the recognition of the Jewish State in 1948. Following this, after showcasing an apparently positive and promising relationship, several structural issues will be analyzed leading up to the severing of the relations twice, once in 1953 and again in 1967, as a result of anti-Semitism and anti-Russian terrorism first, and the Israeli victory of the Six-Day war after. This work will also

no city with this role in the country, given the international status of Jerusalem. We will refer to the city to indicate Israel in general for pure stylistic reasons, as well as to represent the place where the Israeli Knesset, as well as the ministries and official institutions are located.

focus on the two fundamental questions that pulled Moscow and Jerusalem together in the 20th century: the Palestinian issue, as mediated by Russia, and the controversy of Jewish emigration from the USSR, the category of *refuseniks* and all related diplomatic exchanges. After a geopolitical analysis of the Gorbachev era, we will chronologically proceed with the study of the Russian Federation's foreign policy, its leadership and the approach to the Middle Eastern Affairs. Particular attention will be given to the Primakov *era*, where a prominent Jewish Arabist held the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs in Moscow. While looking in parallel at the political developments in the Jewish State, a light will be shed on the Chechen Wars in Russia and the Intifadas in Israel, with political and strategic comparisons between the two. In order to fully grasp the Kremlin's foreign policy approach, a publication by Professor Igor Pellicciari (2018)³ will be used as reference to understand the evolution of the Russian élites steering the political decisions of the country since the beginning of the 21st century. In order to shift the attention from a historic analysis to a deeper, geopolitical and strategic overlook, a comparison between the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation and the Israeli National Security Strategy will be made. With the aim of understanding the similarities and differences between the two, both in practical geographic areas as well as in policy theory, it will be seen how both powers share a strong *Realpolitik* which allows them to fruitfully communicate, even when lacking common interests or objectives on the ground. On this very basis, the last chapter will look into the Syrian conflict, the forces involved and the stakes at hold. It will be proved how – albeit with opposing partners – Israel and Russia have found means of cooperation in one of the most active, crowded and chaotic conflicts of the decade.

Given the overarching approach of this work, the references studied ranged from historic monographs on the bilateral relations of the last century, up to more recent publications on the Syrian theatre, and specific attention was reserved to the diversification of sources. An acceptable balance between Russian, Israeli, Western and neutral authors was researched, with the aim of demonstrating what is closest to the truth. The works of notable academics, professors and former officials have been examined, such as Aleksey Vasiliev, Gaia Golan, Dmitri Trenin, Gadi Eizenkot, and the official sources of the UN, Foreign Ministries, interviews as well as several reliable media outlets, both local and international. A solid bibliographic study was made in order to provide the work with the utmost factuality and reliability, while at the same time avoiding subjective views of either the author or biased publishers.

³ I. Pellicciari, *Thank you or tank you: the rise of diplomats in the Putin era (2000-2017)*, The Review of International Affairs, Vol. LXIX, No. 1169, pp. 36–50, 2018

CHAPTER I - The Soviet-Israeli relations: a historical perspective

*“Confirming receipt of your telegram of May 16, in which you inform the government of the USSR of the proclamation [...] of the independent State of Israel and make request for the recognition of the State of Israel and its provisional government by the USSR, I inform you in this letter that the government of the USSR has decided to recognize officially the State of Israel and its Provisional Government”*⁴.

In this way, on May 17th, 1948, the USSR became the first country to officially and fully recognize the State of Israel and its government. The Soviet Union’s prompt and benign response was the earliest and most remarkable of its kind. As for Israel’s original patron, the United Kingdom, whose former Foreign Minister Lord Balfour expressed the support for *“The establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”*⁵ 31 years earlier, London refused to fully recognize the Jewish state on the basis of the lack of fulfillment of *“basic criteria”* for statehood⁶. Correspondingly, the major Israeli ally and supporter, the United States, only recognized the *“Provisional Government as the de facto authority of the new State of Israel”*⁷.

Thus, the newborn state could enjoy a diversified international support, with the USSR presumably representing its major advocate. This notwithstanding, only a year later, Israel’s prime minister David Ben Gurion declared that: *“Israel welcomes Russian support in the UN but will not tolerate Russian domination. Not only is Israel Western in its orientation, but our people are democratic and realize that only through the co-operation and support of the US can they become strong and remain free.”*⁸, vividly expressing Israel’s aversion towards Soviet influence.

The previous quotations aim at empirically demonstrating how, since the foundational moments of Israel’s history, the bilateral relations with Moscow have represented a thorny and entangled issue. Indeed, tracing the lines of diplomatic alliances of the state of Israel has always proved a challenging task. After the end of World War II, while the Soviet Union was developing its Cold War strategy in

⁴ Letter from USSR’s Foreign Minister Mr. Molotov to Israel’s foreign minister Mr. Shertok, 17/05/1948.

⁵ Declaration of U.K.’s Foreign Minister Lord A. J. Balfour to Baron Rothschild, 02/11/1917

⁶ P. M. Brown, *The Recognition of Israel*, The American Journal of International Law, Vol. 42, No. 3, July 1948, pp. 620-627.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ The Jewish Agency’s Digest, II, 18 (288), February 27, 1950, pp. 782-783.

parallel and net opposition with the United States and its allies, Israel most certainly wished for itself the strong and wealthy support of the US.

The USSR in the Middle East

What were, therefore, the motives for the Soviet support to the Israeli independence? It is important to notice how, not only did the USSR almost immediately and fully recognized the State of Israel and its government, but also, through Czechoslovakia, Moscow had provided to the Jewish belligerents in the upcoming war of independence \$28 millions worth of weaponry⁹, almost directly supporting the Zionist cause.

In order to understand the factors that led to the full recognition of the Jewish state by the Soviet Union, the State's interests in the region will be first analyzed; secondly, the evolution of the relationship between the Zionist movement and Communism will be given and, lastly, the motives for the Soviet support in the establishment of the state of Israel will be investigated.

Through a comprehensive analysis, 4 major areas can be determined for the understanding of Soviet interests in the Middle East after World War 2: geographical, strategic/military, economic/energetic and political factors that were pressing on the *Red* agenda. Navigating through the Soviet interests in the Middle East, we will be able to better comprehend its relationship with the Jewish State.

As far as the geographical motive is concerned, the immense territory of the Soviet Union, albeit carefully patrolled, bordered directly Iran and Turkey in a particularly delicate area. The Caucasus region and South Russia, representing the southern pit of the Union neighboring the Middle East, have been historically rich in oil reserves and used to represent a major energy-producing hub for the country¹⁰.

As a matter of fact, in 1942, Hitler's Nazi Germany attempted at seizing the region from Stalin's Soviet Union in operation Eidelweiß¹¹ in order to ensure the expanding territory of the Reich a prolific land. Hence, to ensure the stability of the oil- and gas-rich South, the Soviet Union urged stability in this Muslim-majority region to be ensured through bilateral diplomatic relations, as well as economic and political agreements with the neighboring countries. On the strategic/military note, the Soviet

⁹ Y. Roi, *Soviet Decision Making in Practice: The USSR and Israel, 1947–1954*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1980, p. 152.

¹⁰ *Soviet Energy Data Resource Handbook*, CIA Historical Review Program, Directorate of Intelligence, Washington D.C, USA, 1999.

¹¹ A. Donohue, *Adolf Hitler and German Military Intelligence on the Eastern Front: Operations Blau and Edelweiß (January–November 1942)*, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 2018.

Union strongly needed (and so does the Russian Federation today) access to a *warm water port*^{12,13} - a year-round-accessible harbor¹⁴ - and a connection to the Mediterranean Sea. A positive relationship with the State of Israel, which develops its territory along the Eastern Mediterranean shore and even has access to the Red Sea through the city of Eilat, could have guaranteed the USSR a role in the Mediterranean trade and, eventually, a military presence. Moreover, through the southern tip of the newly independent country, Russia could have access to the Indian Ocean and act in geographical proximity with the newly independent Gulf monarchies.

On this note, cooperation with said states was fundamental for the economic interests of Moscow. Prior to the *Great Patriotic War*, as the second World War is known in Russia, the Soviet Union had supported most of the independence movements of Arab states. While backing these countries' demand for withdrawal of Western troops from their territories, Moscow was also extremely interested in their newly discovered oil reserves. The German invasion of the Caucasus, despite having been promptly countered by the Red Army, had caused great damage to the Soviet energy facilities, drastically diminishing their productivity¹⁵. For this reason, in 1943, on the occasion of the Tehran summit, General Secretary of the USSR Y. Stalin proposed that Middle Eastern oil be controlled communally by the *Big Three*¹⁶ (the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Kingdom), but his proposal was rejected by Roosevelt.

By focusing especially on the economic interests of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, it is easy to understand the importance of stable relations between oil-rich Arab countries and oil-stripped USSR. As a matter of fact, 1948's sudden Soviet recognition of the State of Israel, official enemy of the majority of its neighboring countries, surprised many as an unexpected move.

Lastly, as the most explicative factor of Soviet interests in the Middle East in its purely Cold-War understanding, is the extent of the Western involvement in the region. Before the waves of independence, all of the Middle Eastern states had been under the direct control of a major European power. With the end of the second World War, these states proved having conflicting relations with their former colonizers, albeit lacking the economic resources to cut their ties with them altogether. In this framework, and in a Messianic vision of spreading Communism and the Soviet model in the

¹² W. C. Green, *The Historic Russian Drive for a Warm Water Port: Anatomy of a Geopolitical Myth*, Naval War College Review 46, no. 2, 1993, pp. 80-102.

¹³ While a highly regarded concept in Western academia and polity when referring to the USSR and Russia, the *warm water port* concept finds no foundation in any statement, document or expression of Russian policy-makers. It is, therefore, a preeminently Western interpretation of a Soviet/Russian attitude.

¹⁴ A. Krammer, *Soviet Motives in the Partition of Palestine, 1947-48*, Journal of Palestine Studies, 1973, Vol. 2, No. 2 pp. 102-119, University of California Press on behalf of the Institute for Palestine Studies.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

so-called *Third World*, the Middle East became a new target of potential allies who would step away from capitalism and join the Eastern Bloc. Without necessarily a direct military confrontation, the region was going to become the ideological battlefield of the *Eagle* and the *Bear*. As for the importance of the Middle East compared to other geopolitical areas, history will demonstrate, the Soviet Union never took a decisive stance in the region to violently impose itself – it never represented the top priority of the USSR’s foreign policy strategy.

The USSR and Israel: Zionism and Communism

When investigating the bilateral relations between the USSR and the State Israel in the period around its foundation, it is necessary to dive into the ties and distances between Zionism and Communism. The two ideologies, not necessary in contrast with one another, were born in the same historical and cultural milieu¹⁷, and the evolution of their relationship is far from being straightforward.

In its early years, both Lenin and Stalin expressed their negative stances against Zionism. Lenin’s opinion was that Herzl’s movement was an ideology only representing rabbis and the bourgeoisie, the classes to be opposed by the Revolution, and therefore a Jewish assimilation process was deemed necessary to avoid clashes with them¹⁸. Yosif Stalin, on the same note, in 1913 maintained that Zionism was isolating the Jewish working-class from the communist struggle of the proletariat, representing a nationalist and reactionary movement – incompatible with the Revolution¹⁹. While the Jews always represented a significant and influential part of the Soviet population, such a movement was feared to divert the loyalty of the Israelites in the USSR’s territory, drawing them away from Communism²⁰. It is important to notice, however, that Zionism did not attract many Jews in its first years, at least not until 1917, when Balfour’s declaration, with the idea of a Jewish State in Palestine, previously perceived as too far-fetched, started appearing increasingly more feasible.

Between 1917 and 1929, while the Bolsheviks were ideologically opposing Zionism, the latter’s activities were never banned or shut down, as was true for most of the non-communist initiatives in the Soviet Union²¹. In this period, “*Soviet officials were unclear and often confused about the official stand to take on Zionism in the 1920s, which led to some contradictory approaches*”²².

¹⁷ A. J. Klinghoffer, *Soviet - Israeli Relations*, Contemporary Jewry, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1990.

¹⁸ V.I. Lenin, *The position of the Bund in the party*, 1903, in: Lenin on the Jewish Question, New York: International Publishers, 1974.

¹⁹ Y.V. Stalin, *Marxism and the national question*, in: Y.V. Stalin: Works. Volume 2, 1907–1913, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1953.

²⁰ A. J. Klinghoffer, 1990.

²¹ P. Mendes, *Socialism, Zionism and the State of Israel*, in: Jews and the Left. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014.

²² P. Mendes, 2014. Ibidem.

In a revolution/counter-revolution dichotomy, the following words, being said by a leading Bolshevik to a member of the Central Committee of the Zionist organization in Russia, can be easily understood: “*You are obliged to fight with us [...] against our enemies. We do not oppose the idea of Palestine. The Zionists can be tolerated as long as they do not engage in counter-revolutionary activities*”²³.

A change in trajectory of the Soviet policy towards the Palestinian Jews happened in 1929, when the Arabs of Hebron massacred the city’s Jewish residents. The Soviet Union praised the event as a revolutionary act against British and Zionist imperialism²⁴.

Through the end of the 1930’s, while continuing to oppose the Zionist movement and after directly supporting the Arab states’ struggle for independence, the Soviet Union was becoming increasingly wary of the leaders of the region. In 1937, the Arab leadership was defined “*reactionary and fascist*”, while the Kibbutzim of the Palestinian Jews, the socialist collective communities, were highly praised²⁵.

The beginning of the active support for the future State of Israel on behalf of the Soviet Union can be identified in the year 1941. With the *Operation Barbarossa*, as well as the cited *Operation Eidelweiß*, the USSR clearly understood the threat of Nazi Germany – which could be defined as the most anti-Semitic power of all. In this light, Moscow called for the Jewish support, both at home and abroad, against the scourge of Nazism and successfully involved the Palestinian Jews. In August 1941, in Palestine, the *V League* was founded: a Zionist committee with a balanced pro-Soviet policy, supporting the USSR through medical and military equipment²⁶. Moreover, 450,000 Soviet Jews fought in the Red Army²⁷, and it is the Soviet Army who in 1945 liberated most of the extermination camps where Jews, among others, had been deported by the Nazi regime.

As a result, after the end of World War Two, the Palestinian Jews had proved a wishful and loyal ally – as opposed the Arab Palestinians, whose national movement leader’s alleged strong ties with Hitler are to date object of discussion²⁸.

In 1947, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko made a speech at the UN Special Committee on Palestine, where he unambiguously supported the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine.

The core of his remark can be found in the following words: “*The fact that no western European State has been able to ensure the defense of the elementary rights of the Jewish people, and to*

²³ A. L. Tsentsiper, *Esser Shanot Redifot: Ten Years of Persecution*, Tel Aviv, 1930.

²⁴ M. Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party 1919–1948*, Ithaca Press, London, 1979.

²⁵ W. Zukerman, *The Jew In Revolt*, Martin Secker and Warburg, London, 1937.

²⁶ S. Reidlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism*, Harwood Academic Publishers, Luxembourg, 1995.

²⁷ M. Belenkaya, *Les Juifs soviétiques dans la guerre* (Soviet Jews during the war), *RIA Agency – Novosti*, Moscow, 2005.

²⁸ J. Herf, *Haj Amin Al-Husseini, the Nazis and the Holocaust: The Origins, Nature and Aftereffects of Collaboration*, *Jewish Political Studies Review* 26, no.3/4, 2014.

safeguard it against the violence of the fascist executioners, explains the aspirations of the Jews to establish their own State. It would be unjust not to take this into consideration and to deny the right of the Jewish people to realize this aspiration. It would be unjustifiable to deny this right to the Jewish people, particularly in view of all it has undergone during the Second World War."²⁹

The Soviet Motives for the Recognition of the State of Israel.

The Soviets' purely pragmatic motives for the recognition of the State of Israel can be summarized as follows, in three major points: Firstly, the birth of the Jewish State had a significant impact on the imperialist presence of the United Kingdom in the Middle East. By supporting the Zionist struggle for a Jewish home in Palestine, the USSR was advocating the withdrawal of the British troops from the area and, in order to do so, it was championing the side (Jewish) it believed to have the most chances to succeed³⁰. In other words, the Soviet Union was betting on the Israelis to withstand the Britons in Palestine. On the other hand, the birth of a Jewish state in a highly hostile and majority Muslim neighborhood, would create a situation of unrest in a historically Western-influenced area, aimed at undermining the imperial interests of London.³¹

Secondly, following the "*albeit half-hearted*"³² support for the Arab independence movements in 1936-1939 by the USSR, said states did not return the hoped loyalty and took anti-communist stances in many cases³³. Lastly, moving the Soviet support for the State of Israel was the not-unfounded belief that the future Jewish government would sympathize for the USSR, in the vision of a leftist government³⁴. As a matter of fact, many prominent Soviet Zionists were necessarily communists in the USSR, and the totality of the Prime Ministers of Israel (from 1948 until today) were either born in Soviet Union or Poland, or were sons of Soviet citizens³⁵. Hence, at least on the basis of nationality, the USSR was a significant presence in the Jewish State. This notwithstanding, Soviet Jews did not in most cases inherit a positive legacy from the communist country.

In addition, it must be stated that few officials in the Soviet Union could claim a sound knowledge of the Palestinian situation. In 1947, Natan Peled, Political Secretary of Israel's left-wing party Mapam,

²⁹ Remarks by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to the UN Special Committee on Palestine, May 14th 1947.

³⁰ P. Mendes, 2014.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² A. Krammer, 1973.

³³ P. Mendes, 2014.

³⁴ R. Ginat, *Soviet policy towards the Arab world*, Middle Eastern Studies, 32(4), 1996.

³⁵ Until 1999, only Yitzhak Rabin was born outside the territories of the Soviet Union and Poland, and to this date, all the *Sabra* prime ministers (Jews who were born in the territory of Israel) have parents who were born and escaped the USSR.

was in New York to influence Communist officials' opinions towards the recognition of the state of Israel. In the occasion, he befriended a member of the Russian delegation, Aleksandr Krasilnikov, and reported the following about the Soviet official: “*He didn't know much about the Palestine problem so that our future meetings became briefings about Zionism and Socialist-Zionist Nationalism. [...] Generally, Krasilnikov and his colleagues would write their requests very precisely, asking information about a few specific questions [...]. I knew that the information was going directly to Moscow and that it would determine their future attitude about us, but I couldn't even guess what that attitude would be. I don't conceal the fact that Gromyko's speech was a surprise even to me.*”³⁶. This statement aims at proving how Soviet knowledge of the Zionist cause was limited, and its policy unpredictable for many.

In conclusion, the Soviet motives for the recognition of the Jewish state were coherent with the *Realpolitik* of the Soviet Union: pragmatism and the protection of national interests predominated by far over the rhetoric of ideological affinity. In this light, the stance of Communism towards Zionism is no enigma: as the framework in which the latter operated was evolving, so was the Soviet attitude towards it. As a result, the Soviet foreign policy could equally uphold its support in 1936-1939 for the Arab independence movements, and about ten years later support – not only through statements, but also through the supply of military equipment – the Jewish cause for an independent state of Israel in Palestine. Numerous scholars³⁷, when confronting the Soviet relationship with Palestinian Jews, would attribute to the anti-Semitic sentiments of the USSR *intelligentsia* a major role in the decision-making process. However, albeit psychologically influencing part of Moscow's officials, such alleged prejudice did not impede the Communists from openly supporting Israel when it proved advantageous.

The Post-war Relations

After Israel's independence and the establishment of bilateral relations in June 1948, cooperation between the parties commenced, albeit superficially. Moscow permitted Soviet and Israeli Jews to exchange mail; a Russian-language magazine was published in Israel, where the formation of a Communist party was allowed, and the USSR was given jurisdiction over Russian orthodox churches in the territory³⁸. Nonetheless, Israel firmly defended its democratic status, and increasingly oriented

³⁶ H. Canaan, *Betzeit Ha'Britim (When the British Left)*, Tel Aviv, 1958.

³⁷ C. Sulzberger, *An Age of Mediocrity*, Macmillan, New York, 1973; Quoting Henry Kissinger: “The Russians, however, are not completely rational on Israel. There is an hysterical edge. They are basically anti-Semitic and hate being licked by the Jews”.

³⁸ A. Klinghoffer, 1990.

itself westwards, to the point of supporting the United States in the United Nations on the North Korean issue. At the same time, the Jewish state was receiving aid by Western Jewish donors, while the Soviet Union was trying to curb the contacts of Israeli diplomats in Moscow with Russian Jews³⁹. On July 4th, 1950, Israel passed the Law of Return, which states in its first article that: “*Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an oleh*”⁴⁰. This turned the attention of the Israeli delegation in Moscow primarily on immigration issues, as the USSR was not willing to let its numerous Jewish population expatriate. As a matter of fact, despite the law being in force, between 1948 and 1951, only five Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union to move to Israel⁴¹, and in the following years the *Refusniks* or *Otkazniki* (Soviet Jews who had been denied their application for emigration by the USSR) were more than the actual emigrants⁴². With the advent of Stalin’s purges, anti-Semitic tones were becoming stronger, only to reach its apex in 1953 with the so-called *Doctors’ Plot*. This conspiracy theory was exposed on the January 13th edition of the newspaper *Pravda*, in a first-page article titled “*Despicable spies and assassins under the mask of medical professors*”⁴³. The article maintained that 9 doctors were indeed spies of a “*Jewish-bourgeois nationalist group*”⁴⁴, whose goal was to purposefully shorten the life, or even kill, the high officials they were supposed to cure. More specifically, the article claimed that these doctors’ (mis-)treatments directly caused the death of two *tovarishchi*, A. A. Zhdanov and A. S. Shcherbakov, members of the Politburo who deceased eight and five years earlier, respectively.

³⁹ Y. Goldstein, *Doomed to Fail: Golda Meir's Mission to Moscow (Part II)*, Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs, 6:1, 2012.

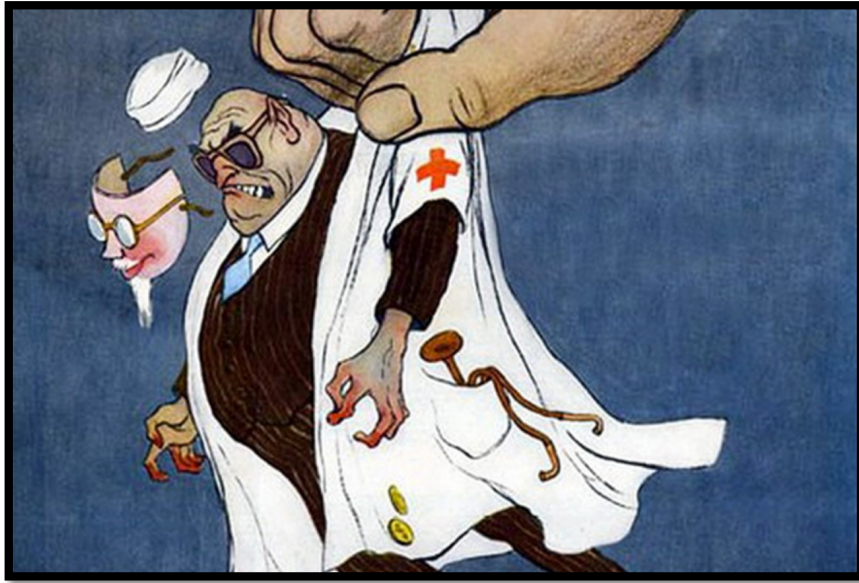
⁴⁰ *The Law of Return 1950 (5710)*, Passed by the Knesset on the 20th Tammuz, 5710 (5th July, 1950) and published in Sefer Ha-Chukkim No. 51 of the 21st Tammuz, 5710 (5th July, 1950), p. 159. The term “oleh” (in Hebrew עולה) comes from the Hebrew verb La’alot (לעלות), literally meaning ‘to rise’ or ‘to ascend’, is used to define a Jew immigrating in Israel, as if he or she was metaphorically entering (rising to) the Temple of Jerusalem, which is located on top of a hill.

⁴¹ B. Schectman, *The U.S.S.R, Zionism and Israel*, in Lionel Kochan, ed., *The Jews in Soviet Russia Since 1917*, third edition, London: Oxford University Press, 1978.

⁴² P. Razoux, *The keys to understanding the Israel-Russia relationship*, NATO Defense College, 2008.

⁴³ Personal translation of the title “Подлые шпионы и убийцы под маской профессор-врачей”, first page of the *Pravda* newspaper, 13th of January 1953.

⁴⁴ *Pravda*, 13th January 1953, p.1.



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As a response to such an overt expression of anti-Semitism, the following February 11th, a bomb was placed in the yard of the Soviet consulate in Tel Aviv⁴⁶. Despite receiving an official apology letter from the President David Ben-Gurion, the Soviet Union severed its diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. With the death of Yosif Stalin on March 5th 1953, the tension eased and diplomatic relations were restored in July. Alas, the Soviet Union did not find in Israel a *comrade* willing to share its fight against Capitalism and Imperialism.

Yet, across Israel's south-western border laid Egypt: an Arab country that was desperately trying to obtain weapons from the West to protect itself, among others, from the Israeli potential threat.

The 1955 Czech-Egyptian Arms Deal

Briefly, the path towards Egyptian foreign policy's "Sovietization", as opposed to its leaning towards the West, will be put in context and analyzed.

As a matter of fact, one of the first actions that the President of the newly born Arab Republic of Egypt Mohammed Naguib took was to urgently request defensive weapons from London and Washington to modernize the army: both powers, however, denied such request⁴⁷. The main reason behind the denial was the high tensions between the UK and Egypt and Winston Churchill's concern that these arms would be later utilized against London, whose troops were stationed in the Suez Canal. Thus, the British prime minister convinced his U.S. counterpart to refrain from providing the required support. The UK-Egypt relationship, moreover, was becoming increasingly delicate, as in early 1955

⁴⁵ A soviet poster on the Doctor's Plot depicts the unmasking of a spy-doctor with his hands dirty in blood

⁴⁶ A. Shlaim, *Israel between East and West, 1948-1956*, International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 36:4, November 2004.

⁴⁷ M. H. Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, NJ, 1973.

London signed the Baghdad Pact (or CENTO, Central Treaty Organization/METO, Middle East Treaty Organization) with Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Turkey⁴⁸. The main goal was to form an anti-Communist Arab alliance, although the project proved to be one of the least successful of the Cold War⁴⁹. As a result of the British initiative, Nasser feared that the Pact was an attempt to form a coalition of Arab States against Egypt. At the same time, the Soviet Union observed with apprehension the growing influence of the West in the neighboring Middle East, and sought to act in opposition to it.

Finally, Egypt's desperate need for weaponry, denied by the United States because of the latter's alliance with London, was met by the Soviets' interest in opposing the British in the region. On September 27th, 1955, Nasser announced that an arms deal with the Soviet Union had been signed⁵⁰, once again using Czechoslovakia as a go-between.

In this case, the Soviet strategy in the Middle East, clearly not foreseen, but rather a response to the international framework, changed once again: Moscow was now militarily supporting Israel's archenemy Egypt. The Middle East was slowly but surely becoming the center of the East-West confrontation.

In 1956, Nasser decided to nationalize the Suez Canal Company, owned primarily by French and British investors. Since its creation and until that moment, the two European powers retained almost complete control of the shipments from the Mediterranean into the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. With Nasser's move, as a response to the Western interference in Egyptian business, came Israel's invasion of the Sinai, followed by London's and Paris' involvement. Thanks to the Soviet support for Egypt, as well as the U.S.'s divergences with its European allies⁵¹, the invasion resulted in a withdrawal of the attacking troops and a de facto victory of the Arab Republic. After this conflict, where Israel (directly) and the USSR (by proxy) laid on the opposite sides of the battlefield, the hostility between the two countries started escalating. In particular in 1965, when Israel recognized West Germany's sovereignty, and the following year, when the Soviet Union aligned with Syria after

⁴⁸ *The Baghdad pact*, The Round Table, 47:187, 215-224, retrieved from TandF, at this [link](#).

⁴⁹ R. van Dijk, W. G. Gray, S. Savranskaya, J. Suri, Q. Zhai, *Encyclopedia of the Cold War*, Taylor and Francis, May 15th, 2008.

⁵⁰ Nasser is reported of having given the United States numerous opportunities to rethink its strategy and support Egypt. After discussing the arms deal with the Russian Ambassador, Nasser informed the US Ambassador Byroade, who "conveyed this message to Washington; there was no official reaction. Dulles [U.S. Secretary of State, *auth.*] even asked the Russians if they were willing to sell arms to Egypt. They of course answered "no"." G. H. Bradford, *The rise and fall of Soviet influence in Egypt*, Naval Postgraduate School, California, 1976.

⁵¹ *The Suez Crisis: a Test for the USSR'S Middle Eastern Policy*, Soviet Staff Study, Central Intelligence Agency, January 3rd 1957.

its left-wing Baathist coup, whose commander of the air force and future leader came to be Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current Syrian president, Bashar.

In June 1967, the Six Day War broke out between Israel, the offender, and a coalition of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. While both Washington's and Moscow's motives for the 1967 conflict are to date object of debate⁵², in this occasion it became clear that the two belligerents were reflecting the opposition of the two superpowers. With Lyndon Johnson endorsing, supporting and funding Israel's defense, it became undeniable that the Jewish State was "*Western in its orientation*"⁵³, and a major ally of the United States of America.

Israel's stance was no longer to be interpreted: It was a Western country and a (major) ally of the United States of America. Upon the victory of the Jewish side, inflicting historic territorial losses to the neighboring countries, the USSR officially severed, for the second time, diplomatic relations with Israel.

Starting from this date, until 1987, all Soviet-Israeli meetings were deemed as unofficial and, therefore, at times not strictly in line with the official stances of the respective governments⁵⁴. The main issues of confrontation were the following three: the conditions for a renewed normalization of the diplomatic relations; the prospects for a Palestinian-Israeli peace settlement (in which process the USSR aspired to play a central role) and lastly, but perhaps most importantly, the question of Soviet Jewish immigration⁵⁵.

The issue of Aliyah

As for the issue of Jewish emigration to Israel, Soviet displayed a certain degree of reluctance, fearing that entitling a national group with a right to flee would set a dangerous precedent for the other numerous national communities of the country. On this note, the 1960's and the early 1970's first represented an opening for the Soviet Jews' possibility to emigrate to Israel, in light of the policy of détente that was shyly thawing the relations with the United States. On this occasion, Moscow allowed 130,000 Soviet Jews to leave the USSR between 1970 and 1974. Of these, 80% settled in Israel, while the rest opted for the U.S., Canada or Western Europe as soon as they managed to exit

⁵² U. Bar-Noi, *The Soviet Union And The Six-Day War: Revelations From The Polish Archives*, Wilson Center, e-Dossier No. 8, 2003, retrieved [here](#); and W. B Quandt, *Lyndon Johnson and the June 1967 War: What Color Was the Light?*, Middle East Journal, Spring, 1992, Vol. 46, No. 2, Spring, 1992.

⁵³ The Jewish Agency's Digest, II, 18 (288), February 27, 1950, pp. 782-783.

⁵⁴ A. J. Klinghoffer, 1990, p. 95.

⁵⁵ A. J. Klinghoffer, 1990. P.96.

the Soviet Union⁵⁶. As a result, a set of laws were emanated with the aim of regulating (as well as minimizing) Jewish emigration. Firstly, on August 3, 1972, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR adopted the Decree "On the reimbursement by USSR citizens traveling abroad for permanent residence of education costs."⁵⁷ The law provided a list of prices that each emigrating citizen was requested to pay, in proportion with his or her level of education. The more a citizen was educated, the more it was required from them to pay in order to leave the country. Although the law has not been applied after Brezhnev presidency⁵⁸, starting less than a year after its entrance into force, it expressed the understanding of the Soviets that such emigration could cause a significant *brain-drain* to the country – thus the officials attempted at de-incentivizing said process. Indeed, the Jews who applied for an exit visa would lose their Soviet citizenship and expose themselves to discrimination both socially and institutionally. In order to avoid the loss of educated citizens, access to most universities was restricted to Jews, who were seen collectively as potential emigrants⁵⁹. The presence of Jews in the most influential and educated ranks of Soviet society is noteworthy. Since the 1920's, the Israelites had been investing in education and were representing the most educated ethnic group in the Soviet Union. By ethnicity, the Jews represented those with the highest share of high-educated individuals, well four times higher than the Russians and six times higher than Ukrainians and Kazakhs. In 1966, and with little flexion until today, 15% of doctors, 10% of judges, 8% of journalists and artists were Jews. Of all the Lenin awards received between 1941 and 1981, more than 10% were awarded by citizens who recognized themselves officially as ethnically Jewish⁶⁰. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and, thus, the end of *détente*, the cited category of *refusniks* grew exponentially. While in the period 1972-1979 almost 140 thousand Soviet citizens successfully obtained a visa and moved to Israel, in the following decade (1980-1989) less than 30 thousand Jews managed to make *Aliyah*⁶¹ – a drop of around 80%. With a frequent motivation for the denial of the visa being “*Inconsistency with State interests*”⁶², the *refusniks* were identified as traitors of the

⁵⁶L. Remennick, *The Two Waves of Russian-Jewish Migration from the USSR/FSU to Israel: Dissidents of the 1970s and Pragmatics of the 1990s*, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 2009, Vol. 18, No 1-2 (published Winter 2015), pp.44-66.

⁵⁷ Указ «О возмещении гражданами СССР, выезжающими на постоянное место жительства за границу, затрат на обучение». In Russian: A. I. Lushin, *K voprosu ob e'migratsionnoy politike sovetskogo gosudarstva v 1960-1980-h godah*, Yuridicheskaya nauka, 2014 n.1, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁸ A. I. Lushin, 2014, p. 16.

⁵⁹L. Remennick, 2009, p.8.

⁶⁰ S. Rabinovich, *Les Juifs en Union Sovietique*, Editions A.P.N., Moscow, 1982, p.26.

⁶¹ Central Bureau of Statistics, *Immigrants, by period of immigration, country of birth and last country of residence*, publ. August 16th, 2018.

⁶² In Russian “Несоответствие интересам государства”. Source in Russian: The Jewish Agency for Israel, *Evrei Bor'by. Evreyskoe natsional'noe dvizhenie v SSSR (1967-1989 gg.)*, August 5th, 2008.

<http://archive.jewishagency.org/ru/russian-aliyah/content/22929>

homeland⁶³. Immigration to Israel of Soviet Jews represented the most significant issue in Soviet-Israeli relations for the government of Jerusalem. Not only did the State of Israel want to “call home” its brethren, but it was also being influenced by the demographic projections developed in the late 1980’s: based on the fertility trends of the Palestinians as opposed to the Israelis’, it was forecasted that by the end of the 21st century the Jewish and Arab numeric strength in Israel and Palestine would be equalized⁶⁴. If this trend were to be actualized, the Jewish State would necessarily become a contradiction in terms, and the risk for revolts and groundbreaking uprisings would become extremely high and potentially destructive. For this reason, Israel negotiated firmly a more open policy for Jewish emigration from the USSR, which was eventually positively welcomed in the years of Perestroika. As a matter of fact, in 1987, 10-12,000 *refusniks* were allowed to permanently move to Israel, and 8,000 more exit visas were granted. In the following months, the numbers reached 10-12,000 exit visas per month and between 1990 and 1992, Israel welcomed 400,000 Soviet Jews⁶⁵ as *olim khadashim*⁶⁶. Significant steps in the still-unofficial⁶⁷ bilateral relations were being made.

The Soviet Union and the Palestinians

In order to fully understand the Soviet Union’s stance towards the State of Israel, it is necessary to investigate Moscow’s relationship with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

In the statement of Proclamation of the PLO, in 1964, the right of the Palestinian Arab people to the land of Palestine, and its commitment to be embodied in the League of Arab States were declared. Moreover, in its second paragraph, the “*Will and determination of [the Arab Palestinian] people to wage the battle of liberating its homeland forcefully as the effective and fighting vanguard of the sacred march*”⁶⁸ was stated, in fierce opposition with the existence of the Jewish State. In this sense, the Soviet Union could not recognize such an organization, as the relationship with Israel, albeit thorny, was still officially active.

⁶³ Z. Gitelman, *Exiting from the Soviet Union: Emigrés or Refugees?*, Michigan Journal of International Law Volume 3 Issue 1, 1982, p. 47

⁶⁴ A. Vasiliev, *Russia’s Middle East Policy: from Lenin to Putin*, Durham Modern Middle East and Islamic World Series, Routledge, New York, 2018, p. 257.

⁶⁵ A. Vasiliev, 2018. P.257

⁶⁶ Plural of *oleh khadash* (Heb. עולה חדש), literally meaning “newcomer”, is the term with which Israelis refer to those who have recently made Aliyah to Israel.

⁶⁷ The Soviet Union will officially recognize the State of Israel on October 18th 1991 – one and a half months prior to its collapse.

⁶⁸Statement of Proclamation of the Palestine Liberation Organization, First Palestinian Conference, Jerusalem, May 28th, 1964.

After the Six Day War in 1967, and with the Soviet-Arab relations growing firmer in their anti-Western stance, the USSR changed its posture in the region. The main criticism brought about by the Soviet Union was in relations with Israel's expansionistic attitude in the region, aimed at enhancing its territory; its position as an occupying power in the Palestinian territories and its relationship – rather, confrontation – with the “*progressive trends in the Arab world*”⁶⁹.

Thus, in 1974, the Soviet Union (as well as the Ukrainian and the Belarussian SSRs) voted favorably in a General Assembly resolution (A/RES/3236 (XXIX)) affirming the “*right to national independence and sovereignty*”⁷⁰ of the Palestinian people⁷¹. Four years later, in 1978, the USSR recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization as the legitimate representative of Palestine⁷².

Two main reasons can be identified for the Soviet interests in the PLO. Firstly, the organization represented the major focus of attention of the Arab world, with the support of the quasi-totality of these states⁷³. Hence, in the effort to sustain its own *propaganda image*⁷⁴, the Soviet Union linked itself with the nationalistic endeavors of the region, and therefore wished to be perceived as a benevolent patron of the Arab cause. The second reason, coherently with the Cold War's *weltanschauung*, was once again in fierce opposition with America's imperialistic (or so perceived) drive – both regionally and locally. Thus, Moscow was supporting the antagonists of the *pawn of the United States* – as Israel was perceived at that time among Soviet Officials⁷⁵. The USSR stressed the relevance of the PLO's involvement in the Arab-Israeli dialogue, as it opposed to the US policy of refusal to negotiate with the Organization⁷⁶.

As several scholars have observed (Golan, 1986; Dannreuther, 1998)⁷⁷, the relations between Moscow and Ramallah⁷⁸ have never gone beyond the mutual tactical advantages – leaving the ideology outside the picture. While a Communist component existed in the PLO, the People's Front

⁶⁹ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 267.

⁷⁰ United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/3236 (XXIX), 1 (b).

⁷¹ For the results of the voting, in Arabic: Palestinian return center, *Qarār raqm 3236 (29), 22 tishrīn alththānyy 1974*, retrieved July 21st, 2020 at this [link](#).

⁷² Pravda, November 2nd, 1978

⁷³ G. Golan, *The Soviet Union and the PLO since the War in Lebanon*, Middle East Journal, Spring, 1986, Vol. 40, No. 2 Spring, 1986, pp. 285.

⁷⁴ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 267

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ G. Golan, 1986, p.285.

⁷⁷ G. Golan, *The Soviet Union and the PLO since the War in Lebanon*, Middle East Journal, Spring, 1986, Vol. 40, No. 2 Spring, 1986, pp. 285; R. Dannreuther, *The Soviet Union and the PLO*, St. Anthony's Series, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1998, p. 142.

⁷⁸ The city of Ramallah has been hosting the headquarters of the PLO since 1993, and is commonly identified as the governmental center of the organization. However, before moving to Palestine, the PLO's headquarters have been in: Tunis (1982-1993), Beirut (1971-1982), Amman (1967-1970) and Cairo (1964-1967).

and the Democratic Front, these were considered too extremist for the Soviet Union⁷⁹, as they would not recognize the importance of a bipartisan dialogue with Israel.

Among the most important themes on which the Soviets and the Palestinians would disagree was the recognition of Israel by the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Kremlin had supported the establishment of two independent and sovereign states in Palestine – one Jewish and one Arab – since Gromyko’s speech before the General Assembly of the UN in 1948. However, this required mutual recognition of the state authorities in the Palestinian territory in order to open a balanced dialogue, possibly with the good offices of Moscow and Washington. *Au contraire*, Ramallah aimed at a secular state of Palestine, to be obtained with the armed struggle against the occupying forces of Israel – a project that was perceived, at best, as unrealistic by the Soviets⁸⁰.

As a testimony of the USSR’s position and support (or lack thereof) towards the PLO’s armed struggle, are two historically crucial moments. Firstly, after the forceful relocation of Palestinians to Jordan, as the Hashemite Kingdom had lost control of the West Bank in the Six Day War, the Palestinian National Resistance Movement (PRM) attempted at overthrowing the Amman-based monarchy. In September 1970, the events known as “Black September” occurred: the PRM attacked various members of the Royal Family and caused unrest and a civil war in the streets of Jordan⁸¹. The Soviet Union did not get involved with any sort of aid. As a matter of fact, on September 23rd, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko declared that he was in contact with the governments of Jordan, Syria and Iraq and stated that the ongoing conflict needed to be stopped, as it would only “*play into the hands of forces not interested in establishing peace in the Middle East*”⁸² – implying the PLO’s inclusion in such category. Moscow would not support an armed struggle for the Palestinian cause, rather it encouraged a politically mediated resolution.

A second event in which the Soviet position is made clear is the 1982 Lebanon War. Among the objectives of Israel’s operation “Peace for Galilee” was the destruction of the PLO forces and the expulsion of the Syrian army from the Beqaa valley, in northwestern Lebanon⁸³. The main Soviet concern in the conflict was to avoid an all-out war between Israel and Syria: as soon as Moscow was reassured that this scenario was unlikely to occur, it decided to support minimally its ally in Damascus, and rejected the Palestinians’ requests for heavy weaponry and military intervention⁸⁴.

⁷⁹ R. Dannreuther, *The Soviet Union and the PLO*, 1998, p. 271.

⁸⁰ G. Golan, 1986, p. 286.

⁸¹ I. Fruchter-Ronen, *Black September: The 1970-71 Events and their Impact on the Formation of Jordanian National Identity*, Civil Wars, 2008, p. 241

⁸² Pravda, September 24th, 1970.

⁸³ A. Oren, *With Ariel Sharon Gone, Israel Reveals the Truth About the 1982 Lebanon War*, HaAretz, September 17th, 2017. [Link](#).

⁸⁴ G. Golan, *The Soviet Union and the Israeli Action in Lebanon*, International Affairs (England), Winter 1982/83, pp. 7-16.

Moscow wanted to avoid an interference that could possibly lead to a Cold War confrontation. Moreover, it was unwilling to provide extensive support for a non-state actor, such as the PLO. High Fatah Official Salah Khalaf explicitly criticized the Soviets' "*silence and sluggishness*", their "*passiveness*" and "*symbolic encouragement*"⁸⁵.

A perfect account on the USSR-PLO relationship is given by Khalid Al-Hassan, head of the Palestinian National Council's Foreign Affairs Committee: "*They support our goal but our friendship with them is limited to their interests.*"⁸⁶. The PLO never became a *satellite* or *client* organization of the USSR, nor was this Moscow's goal: the parties limited their relationship to a mutually beneficial cooperation.

With the advent of Mikhail Sergeevič Gorbachev as General Secretary of the CPSU in 1985, towards the end of Cold War, the PLO's anti-Westernism "*ceased to be an asset*"⁸⁷, while the Soviet Union remained an important partner for the Organization.

Gorbachev and the Perestroika

The USSR under Gorbachev was changing its face, with structural reforms and development plans aimed at revolutionizing the economic and political outlook of the socialist country. In this framework, the foreign policy of the Kremlin, too, needed to evolve and transition out of its Middle Eastern stalemate. Incidentally, the 1980's represented a peak in the Soviet involvement in the Middle Eastern region – excluding, as it was, Israel. The US Department of Defense, in its 1984 publication on Soviet Military Power displayed levels of concern with regards to Moscow's presence in the Middle East, reporting that: "*The USSR has greatly increased its offensive military capability and has significantly enhanced its ability to conduct military operations worldwide [...] Since invading Afghanistan 4 years ago, the USSR has established bases within striking distance of the Persian Gulf oil fields. The Soviets continue to deliver a growing arsenal of weapons to Syria, Libya, Cuba and Nicaragua. The number of Soviet personnel in Syria has grown from 2,000 to 7,000 [...] The USSR has increased its influence in the Third World through the presence of over 21,000 military advisers and technicians in nearly 30 countries. An additional 120,000 Soviet troops are stationed in Afghanistan, Cuba and Syria. The result is that the Soviets are able to cultivate pro-Soviet sentiments and influence local military policies.*"⁸⁸. However, the US American perception appeared to be misled, as already one year earlier the Soviet leader Andropov had declared that the Afghan problem

⁸⁵ Le Monde interview with Salah Khalaf, June 23rd, 1982.

⁸⁶ Al-'Alam (Morocco), December 20, 1982.

⁸⁷ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 274.

⁸⁸ Department of Defense, Soviet Military Power, Washington D.C., 1984, retrieved [here](#).

was causing an unbearable damage to Moscow internationally – particularly in its relations with the West, with the socialist countries, the Islamic world, the Third World, and the Soviet society itself⁸⁹, who had to bear the blunt economically as well as militarily for the youth losses in the conflict.

In this historic moment, the Soviet MID, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had three major priorities, among others: firstly, to find an acceptable balance in the Soviet relationship with the United States and the West in general; secondly, to put an end to the costly and mutually destructive Cold War and, lastly, to settle the long-standing issue of Jewish emigration⁹⁰. As a matter of fact, Gorbachev's New Political Thinking (*Novoe Politicheskoe Myshlenie*), which originated in Andropov's skepticism towards intervention in the Third World, entailed constructiveness and international collaboration⁹¹ as its core values, with a strong focus on the economic development, at the expenses of the military build-up. *Global interdependence* and *multilateralism* were the keywords, as opposed to a single Great Power's control. The new leadership rejected the previously held assumption that the world was slowly transitioning towards socialism, and that the Soviet role was to help said process and impede foreign interferences to it⁹². Rather, a conclusion was drawn: the attachment to a specific ideology usually leads to conflicts. Therefore, the question arose on what was to take priority: peace or socialism? Gorbachev's response to this question was made clear by his declaration in October 1986: "*The priority [shall be] of the all-human value of peace over all others to which different people are attached.*"⁹³. It was now clear: peace superseded socialism.

In 1986, both the Soviet Union and the Palestine Liberation Organization were marginalized in the Middle Eastern arena. As for the USSR, the Afghan war was burning the bridges it had built over the years in the region (besides causing national discontent); on the other hand, Arafat made the PLO "*almost universally friendless*"⁹⁴, after refusing the US-Jordanian proposal to recognize the State of Israel in order to access the international peace conferences. As a response, Jordan, with the backing of the Arab States and the USA, initiated a campaign to regain control over the West Bank, ostracizing the Tunis-based organization. At this point, Arafat could only turn to Gorbachev for support. Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze insisted that an internal unification of the PLO was a pre-condition for a constructive relationship with the Soviets. Indeed, the Organization was experiencing low popular support, as well as a fragmented internal outlook: the rejectionists were quite influential and they radically opposed any agreement with Israel. It was in order to manage this crisis that Gorbachev

⁸⁹ G. M. Korniyenko, *Holodnaya voina. Svidetelstvo ee uchastnika*, Moscow, OLMA-Press, 2001, pp. 392-393.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, p. 273.

⁹¹ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 153.

⁹² D. Holloway, *Gorbachev's New Thinking*, Foreign Affairs, February, 1st 1989. [Link](#).

⁹³ Pravda, Oct. 21, 1986

⁹⁴ R. Dannreuther, *The Soviet Union and the PLO*, 1998, p.145

met with Arafat in East Berlin on April 18th, 1986, requiring from the Palestinians to accomplish a ‘national unity’, which was declared less than a month later during the 18th PNC’s session⁹⁵: even the harshest rejectionist George Habash decided to give in to a political settlement of the Palestinian issue, and accept a common Palestinian orientation.

In July 1986 a new peace plan for the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict was proposed by the Soviet Union⁹⁶. After accomplishing its set goal of Palestinian unity, Moscow was ready to bring forward a new proposal, which did not differ profoundly from its pre-*New Thinking* doctrine, except for two aspects. Firstly, the proposed plan aimed at diminishing Soviet-American direct interference: the 5 Permanent Members of the Security Council collectively would be the co-chairmen of the conference. Thus, multilateralism would be ensured, a 5-to-7-state-strong⁹⁷ balance of interests provided, and the Soviets could display their unselfish posture in the resolution of the conflict. The second disrupting aspect of the proposal was the establishment of a preparatory committee to the negotiations. This had to be created within the framework of the United Nations, “*to work jointly, through multilateral discussions and bilateral contacts and with flexibility and a constructive approach, to involve all the parties immediately concerned in business-like and serious negotiations*”⁹⁸, as Gorbachev declared. Although the peace plan did not eventually take shape, in 1987 the General Secretary of the PCUS met Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, urging him to achieve political stability with the State of Israel, as the USSR would interrupt the aid flows to the Arab state⁹⁹, whose main aim was the military equalization with Jerusalem. In 1988, Arafat made a groundbreaking declaration in which he “accepted”¹⁰⁰ the state of Israel. The *de facto* recognition of the Jewish State by the PLO had three major implications. Firstly, it had a groundbreaking effect. As a matter of fact, the Palestine Liberation Organization had been waiting for the right, strategic moment to “*play the recognition card*”, as it was well aware of the leverage it entitled them. By informally recognizing the Jewish state, such leverage was spent. Secondly, the recognition paved the way to the participation of both powers – Israel and the PLO – in international peace conferences. This mirrored the Soviet plan for a stable region, namely a multilaterally-negotiated conflict settlement. Lastly, Arafat’s concession represented the organization’s first step towards a normalization of the relationship, and, hence, the end for the rejectionist movement at any official level.

⁹⁵ R. Dannreuther, *The Soviet Union and the PLO*, 1998, p. 149.

⁹⁶ Tass in SWB-USSR, July, 11th, 1986; Special to The New York Times, *Soviet Offers A 6-Point Plan For Peace In The Middle East*, Sept. 16, 1982, section A, p. 14.

⁹⁷ The five members of the Security Council, the State of Israel and the PLO.

⁹⁸ Radio Moscow in SWB-USSR, February, 10th, 1987.

⁹⁹ Pravda, April 25th, 1987.

¹⁰⁰ S. Lohr, *Arafat Says P.L.O. Accepted Israel*, Special to the New York Times, December 8th, 1988, section A, p.1.

In parallel, in August 1986, Soviet and Israeli negotiators met in Helsinki for official talks¹⁰¹. This was the first time since 1967 that representatives of the two states officially encountered, and although the meeting only lasted 90 minutes instead of the agreed-upon two days, it resulted in the thawing of bilateral relations. As a matter of fact, the path to the normalization of the relationship truly started in Helsinki, as it was agreed that Soviet officials would visit Israel the following October to deal with “consular matters” – mainly Soviet property in Israel and protection of USSR citizens in the Jewish state. In fact, the Soviet delegation which arrived in Tel Aviv in October 1986 never really left, and in 1987 consular relations were established (both in Moscow and in Tel Aviv). While Moscow was gradually allowing *refusniks* to emigrate to Israel and curbing its support to the most extreme factions of the Arab states¹⁰², Israel was publicly endorsing Gorbachev’s policy¹⁰³.

Thus, the perestroika can be defined as a groundbreaking period in the bilateral relations between the Soviet Union and the Jewish State. In its Middle Eastern struggle, the USSR under Gorbachev gave up the overt confrontation with the United States and the West, and focused pragmatically on the strategic interests it needed to safeguard. Among those, was a stable relationship with Tel Aviv, and a peaceful and concerted resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Aliyah was again permitted and unrestricted¹⁰⁴, and the process of gradual rapprochement climaxed in October 1991 with the Madrid Peace Conference. Eventually, the Soviet Union co-chaired the talks with the United States, hosting representatives of Israel, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation¹⁰⁵. Although, as history reminds us, no final resolution to the conflict was (ever) accomplished, the Madrid Conference showed the willingness of Israelis and Palestinians alike to settle the issue. The Jewish state and the USSR had re-established diplomatic relations on the same month, with an official exchange of Ambassadors. At a news conference, the (last) Soviet Foreign Minister Boris D. Pankin stated: “*In the past, the Soviet Union tended to sort of side with the Palestinians and the Arab states, while the United States sided with Israel, [...] This did not bring any tangible fruit.*”¹⁰⁶, declaring the 24 year-strong rupture of diplomatic relations a “*historic mistake*”¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰¹ *Israel and Soviet Hold First Talks Since '67 Rupture*, The New York Times, August 19th, 1986, Section A, p.1.

¹⁰² P. Razoux, *The keys to understanding the Israel-Russia relationship*, NATO Defense College, 2008, p. 3.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ Council of Ministers of the USSR, *Postanovleniye ot 28 avgusta 1986 goda N. 1064, “O vnesenii dopolneniy v Polzhenie o v’ezde v Soyuz Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik i o vyezde iz Soyuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik*, August 28th, 1986. This Soviet law ended the quota-based system of emigration and allowed all Soviet citizens (with few, merely legal exceptions) to leave and enter the USSR.

¹⁰⁵ *The Peace Conference*, Journal of Palestine Studies, Winter, 1992, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1992, pp. 122-123. The presence of the Palestinian delegation was conditioned by Israel: the

¹⁰⁶ C. Haberman, *Israel and Soviets Restore Full Relations*, The New York Times, October 19th, 1991, Section 1 page 5

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

The Soviet Union collapsed less than two months later, but the trend had been officially set: Moscow and Jerusalem could cooperate, and tensions could be overcome.

Chapter II – The Jewish State and the Russian Federation

The First Years of the Federation

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, its successor state the Russian Federation had to carefully decide which trends in policy it would perpetuate and which ones it would distance itself from.

The heir of this 7-decade strong legacy was Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin, who was elected President in July 1991, while running without a party affiliation. This move had a powerful significance, both nationally and internationally, as to mark a Russian rupture of sorts with the ideologico-centric past, and a proof of a no-longer communist country¹⁰⁸. Nevertheless, the new resident of the Kremlin needed to demonstrate the Russian Federation's global authority in order to be recognized as the sole heir of the UNSC veto-holder – the Soviet Union. At this point in history, Moscow wanted to prove to the West – and the United States in particular – its eligibility to be a respected global power, with no confrontational aspirations such as those characterizing the Cold War.

Under this lens, it is possible to interpret Yeltsin's attitude towards the Third World and the Jewish State in the initial period of his presidency.

As a matter of fact, the first year of the Russian Federation was identified as the *Honeymoon*¹⁰⁹ in its relationship with Israel. Most of the mutual interests of both powers were being fulfilled in this period. On the one hand, for Israel, a florid relationship with the Russian Federation was necessary for four main reasons in that given geopolitical framework. Firstly, the Kremlin was a necessary diplomatic tool in Israel's game in the Middle East: it represented an honest mediator, both for the settlement of the Palestinian question, as well as for its privileged role particularly with Syria – an Arab country that has not, to date, recognized the State of Israel, while being historically close to the USSR and the RF. Russia was perceived as a non-biased actor, given its previous support for both the Arab and the Jewish cause, and therefore was oftentimes more warmly accepted in negotiations than the United States.

¹⁰⁸ H. Oversloot, R. Verheul, *Managing democracy: Political parties and the state in Russia*, Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics, 22:3, 2006, pp. 383-405.

¹⁰⁹ R. O. Freedman, *Russia and Israel under Yeltsin*, Israel Studies, Spring, 1998, Vol. 3, No. 1, Indiana University Press, Spring, 1998, pp. 148-151.

Secondly, again in the realm of diplomacy and regional balance of power, Jerusalem recognized the need of Moscow as a friend, for its enmity would have represented a significant risk. Apart from Damascus, the Kremlin has always held particularly close ties with Teheran, which harshened its posture against Israel over the course of the 20th and 21st century, being met by equal hostility on the Jewish state's side. Not only were Moscow and Teheran close, but, most worryingly for Israel, the nature of the relationship was mainly depending on their arms trade, being supplied by Russia, and based on a set of deals regulating heavy weaponry and nuclear development¹¹⁰. Israel, then, needed to maintain a positive relationship with the Federation in order to limit, where possible, the latter's involvement in the Middle Eastern armament. In a regional strategic understanding, it was better for Israel to have Russia as a friend than as an enemy.

The third interest of Israel was, as it is natural, trade. Specifically, the territory of the Russian Federation is rich in raw materials which Israel desperately needs, among which are oil and gas, as well as uncut diamonds – meeting perfectly the well-developed Israeli diamond industry's demand – and, of course, technologic and military equipment. Moreover, Russian partnership could also offer an immense market for Israel's agricultural export.

The Jewish state had one more reason pressing on its policy-makers to maintain a positive relationship with Russia: emigration. As quotas on Aliyah had finally been removed, it was necessary that both countries' borders remained open and viable, so as to allow the Jewish population in the land of Palestine to continue growing at the expenses of the Arab residents, whose fertility rates remained significantly higher¹¹¹.

On the other hand, the Russian Federation initially abandoned completely the anti-Semitic discourse in internal politics, media and institutions¹¹², and focused on the mutual advantages of the relationship. Despite a discontinuous opposition inside the State Duma over Yeltsin's approach to Israel, the Kremlin was well aware of the advantages that a positive relationship with the Jewish state would entail. Those were previously enumerated in this chapter, as they coincide mainly with the Soviet's, and will be object of further analysis when discussing Putin's presidency. However, the Russian interests in its relationship with Israel can be summarized as follows: *trade*, in terms of energy, raw materials, technology and military equipment, and at the same time intellectual and technological trade to help Russia transition efficiently to the market economy¹¹³; *security*, with Israel

¹¹⁰ A. Kassianova, *Russian Weapons Sales to Iran*, PONARS Policy Memo No. 427, CSIS, December 2006.

¹¹¹ D. Friedlander, *Fertility in Israel: Is The Transition to Replacement Level in Sight?*, Department of Population Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, retrieved [here](#).

¹¹² H. Spier, *Russian anti-Semitic propaganda from Brezhnev to Yeltsin*, East European Department, Institute of Jewish Affairs, 24:2, 1994, pp. 131-140.

¹¹³ Aleksey Vasiliev's interview with A. E. Bovin, first Russian ambassador to Israel, April 1992

as a stabilizer in the Middle East, which is dangerously close to the Russian sphere of influence and FSU borders; *international stature*, as a primary role in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict (or at least its peace conferences) would enhance Russian global power. In addition, a social-cultural factor plays an important role, as Israel hosts one of the largest Russian diasporas outside the territory of the Former Soviet Union¹¹⁴, making cooperation between the two countries essential.

The Phases of the Relationship (1991-2000)

As anticipated, the first phase (January to December 1992) of the Russian-Israeli relationship after the collapse of the Soviet Union has been named the *Honeymoon* because of the lack of attrition and the positive results of bilateral diplomacy. In 1992, it was in the intentions of the Russian President as well as his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrey Kozyrev, to align the Moscow' foreign policy to Washington's. It is no wonder that the *duo* was identified as the highest example of Westernism in Russian foreign policy¹¹⁵: they argued the natural affinity of Russia with the West and even shared the western prejudice towards the former Soviet allies (those outside Europe)¹¹⁶. The implication of this *Weltanschauung* in Moscow's decision-making was that, as anticipated, it would follow the steps of the United States in the international arena, with few – albeit remarkable – exceptions. Russia, indeed, was supporting the US sanctions against Iraq and Libya, but it did not cease from exporting significant amounts of weaponry to Iran – which represented a major source of income and activity for the Federation's heavy industry¹¹⁷.

At the beginning of his Presidency, B. N. Yeltsin showed little interest in the Middle Eastern affairs, as he was all too busy concentrating on the outlook of the new country, its internal reform program, and his own struggle for power. As a result, the Russian Federation was supporting the United States, among other issues, in the Arab-Israeli conflict – upholding the exclusion of the PLO, a former Soviet ally, from the peace talks, as suggested by both the US and Israel¹¹⁸. In this period, the groundwork initiated by Gorbachev, both diplomatically and politically, was rapidly evolving and improving. In

¹¹⁴Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, *Monthly bulletin of statistics*, http://www.cbs.gov.il/archive/200701/yarhon/e4_e.htm

¹¹⁵ A. P. Tsygankov, P. A. Tsygankov, *National ideology and IR theory: Three incarnations of the 'Russian idea'*, *European Journal of International Relations* 16(4), 2010, p. 668. It is noteworthy to add that, while Kozyrev represents a Westernist *per se*, Yeltsin changed his attitude towards the West numerous times during his presidency.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁷ L. Beehner, *Russia-Iran Arms Trade*, Council on Foreign Relations, November 1st, 2006. Retrieved at this [link](#).

¹¹⁸ Moscow Radio, January 29th 1992 (Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report: Former Soviet Union, January 30th 1992, p. 30).

April 1992, Russian Vice-President Aleksandr Rutskoi visited Israel, and the Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres reciprocated the visit three months later. It was the first time in the history of the Jewish state that a Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Moscow. Statements of mutual appreciation were made, and particularly noteworthy for an understanding of Israeli interests in Russia were Peres' words during said visit. He stated that Russia had been playing a stabilizing role in the Middle East, and that the State of Israel hoped Moscow would continue bridging the gaps in the region between the Jewish state and its neighbors, thanks to its close ties with both sides¹¹⁹. Accordingly, Kozyrev stated: "*We want peace in the Middle East and are playing the role of honest brokers, trying to help the sides bring their positions together*"¹²⁰ – marking the Russian interest in remaining an even-handed and relevant influence in the peace settlement.

Demonstration of the stability of the relationship, or at least of the Russian intention in maintaining it as such, was provided in December 1992, when Israel deported (the Rabin government rather called them "*temporary removal orders*"¹²¹) nearly 400 Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, in an attempt to curb Hamas terrorist activities. The Russian response to the event, that had been condemned by the United States, too, was explicated in a MID communiqué: "*The Russian side is counting on the sides to show maximum restraint in their actions and hopes that the problem with the deportation of hundreds of Palestinians will be humanely settled very soon, taking into account the genuine interests of both the Israelis and Palestinians.*"¹²² – displaying its impartiality in the conflict, and the interest in a fair resolution of it.

A steady improvement: 1992-1995

The second phase spanned from December 1992 till December 1995, and was highly influenced by the Russian domestic political situation. In this timeframe, while continuing to support the enhancement of bilateral relations with Israel, Yeltsin started taking the distance from the United States. Due to widespread disapproval in the State Duma over the American-leaning policy, the President announced a shift towards a "*balanced*" Russia as a "*Eurasian state*"¹²³ – no longer merely looking up to the world hegemon, the Kremlin wanted to turn Russia into a regional great power,

¹¹⁹ The Jerusalem Post, August 21st, 1992

¹²⁰ The Jerusalem Post, August 23rd, 1992

¹²¹ C. Haberman, *Israel expels 400 from Occupied Lands; Lebanese deploy to bar entry of Palestinians*, The New York Times, December 18th, 1992.

¹²² Itar/Tass, December 18th, 1992, Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report: Former Soviet Union, 21st December 1992, p. 22

¹²³ R. O. Freedman, 1998, p. 151.

while maintaining its global aspirations and stature. Internal conflict in the State Duma (particularly against the President) remained significant throughout the whole Yeltsin presidency, and in this particular period Ruslan Khasbulatov, the Parliament's Chairman, was among the starkest opponents. This notwithstanding, in his January 1993 visit to Israel, the Speaker of the Russian Lower House declared his support for bilateral economic, cultural and technological relations¹²⁴, while showing concern for the peaceful resolution of the conflict¹²⁵.

On September 13th, 1993, the Oslo accords were signed by the Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Mahmud Abbas as a representative of the PLO. The accord was also signed by the U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher and the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrey Kozyrev as witnesses. Establishing the basis for the future peace negotiations and stipulating the measures for the governing of the Palestinian territory, this important step for the peace process was proudly supported by the Russian Federation and its Minister, as it allowed Moscow to remark further its relevance in the Arab-Israeli conflict and its resolution.

As the relationship between the Parliament and the President grew stiffer, the opposition started involving the Russian-Israeli relations in the domestic discourse: the formerly CPSU newspaper Pravda reported harsh criticism towards Israeli influence in the Russian political system, as well as denouncing the Jerusalem-based government for its overt support for Yeltsin¹²⁶. After Yeltsin announced the dissolution of the Parliament, due to the extraordinary instability of it, a conflict erupted in Moscow against the Presidency, with the neo-Nazi political party Russian National Union (RNU) and the National Salvation Front (NSF) on the lead. The latter was a coalition of socialist and ultra-nationalist movements, and together with the RNU were reported for being overtly anti-Semitic and blaming "*imperialist-Zionist conspiracy*" for the decay of Russia¹²⁷. The curse of anti-Semitism, in fact, never really abandoned Russia, but no President of the Russian Federation, neither Yeltsin nor Medvedev or Putin, could be defined in the slightest as anti-Semitic.

The two-year-period of 1994-1995 saw a rapidly-increasing improvement and tightening of the Russian-Israeli relations. In fact, after the Cave of the Patriarchs massacre, in Hebron, 1994, where an American-Israeli Jew killed 29 Muslims and wounded 125 in prayer¹²⁸, despite extensive apologies and harsh measures of Israel against all those affiliated with the perpetrator, Yeltsin decided to unilaterally invite the parties to meet again in a Madrid 2 conference¹²⁹. As a matter of fact, it was

¹²⁴ Itar/Tass, January 5th 1993.

¹²⁵ Ibidem.

¹²⁶ Pravda, April 24th 1993.

¹²⁷ R. O. Freedman, 1998, p. 153.

¹²⁸ R. Paine, *Behind the Hebron Massacre*, Anthropology Today, Vol. 11, No 1., February 1995, p. 8-15

¹²⁹ R. O. Freedman, 1998, p. 154.

alleged that the Israeli mass-murderer aimed at curbing the peace process. Moreover, the Russian President urged international presence in Palestine to protect the local population, sent envoys to talk with both the Israeli and PLO authorities and invited both leaders to Moscow¹³⁰. This was a demonstration, besides of Russian relevance in the peace process, also of its neutrality in the conflict as it did not incline towards any side in particular. Eventually, the former critic of Yeltsin's foreign policy, Pravda, praised his international deeds, stating that: "*Russia's current activity in the Near East has been greeted with approval in the Arab World [...] and not just the Near East, but also other areas on our planet have been waiting for this a long time*"¹³¹ – endorsing and applauding the President for his contribute in improving the international stature of the Russian Federation.

In the personal relationship with Rabin, additionally, Yeltsin was successful in creating a bond of institutionalized friendship. Upon his visit to Moscow, the Israeli Prime Minister was reassured on the military ties between Moscow and Damascus. The Kremlin resident promised the Israeli Prime Minister that the arms trade with the Arab Republic would exclusively focus on "*defensive arms and spare parts*"¹³², as a result of the military agreement the two had signed on April 27th, 1994. Additionally, Yeltsin guaranteed Rabin that it would persuade Syria to help retrieve the Israeli soldiers that went missing 12 years earlier, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. These represented some of the most significant assurances Israel could be given: after the concern for Iran's nuclear armament (to which, indeed, Russia was actively and primarily contributing despite Jerusalem's attempted persuasion not to proceed so) and Palestinian terrorism, Hafez Al-Assad's Syria represented a major threat to the national security of the Jewish State. Damascus historically represented one of the staunchest opponents to Israel's right to exist. Russia was proving, indeed, an important and relevant asset in Israel's foreign policy as well as national security. In July 1995, a bilateral diplomatic working committee on the Middle East was established, although it did not prove to be a significantly successful tool¹³³.

Even more so, in the same year, economic trade between the Jewish State and the Russian Federation skyrocketed: \$500 million worth of imports and exports only made the relationship deeper and more profitable for both sides to maintain¹³⁴. Unfortunately, in November 1995, the Israeli Prime Minister was killed in what is since then called *Kikar Rabin* (Rabin square), in Tel Aviv. Once again, an extremist with little support from any official organization whatsoever, made a murderous deed in

¹³⁰ Ibidem.

¹³¹ Pravda, March 15th, 1994.

¹³² Qol Israel, April 26th, 1994.

¹³³ Interviews, Russian Embassy, Tel-Aviv, Israel, July 1st 1996 and the Israeli Foreign Ministry, July 2nd 1996

¹³⁴ R. O. Freedman, *Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Under Yeltsin and Putin*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Jerusalem Viewpoints, No. 461, September 2001.

order to impede a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In this occasion, the Russian Prime Minister Viktor S. Chernomyrdin declared that Russia had “*lost a friend, a real one*”¹³⁵.

The year 1995 was closed with a different tone from the way it evolved: in December, the Russian State Duma welcomed its new MPs as a result of general elections. To Yeltsin’s regret, the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia obtained highest share of votes, followed by the Democratic Choice of Russia and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. The balance of political forces in the Russian Parliament pressured Yeltsin to move further to the right, as the scheduled presidential elections were only six months away. In this light, the President fired his Pro-Western Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev, and replaced him with the Arabist Yevgeny Primakov. Despite being a Jew by birth, the new head of the MFA was perceived in Israel as a friend of the Arab dictators like Saddam Hussein¹³⁶.

The Primakov Era: an ideological framework.

The prevalence of ultra-nationalists and communists in the 1996-elected *GosDuma* required Yeltsin to adjust his foreign policy strategy. The President, by article 86.a of the 1993 constitution, should “*govern the foreign policy of the Russian Federation*”¹³⁷, hence Boris Nikolaevich was the one to be held directly accountable for the perceived fading of Russia’s international stature, especially with regards to the United States. As a response to an urging need to satisfy both the internal political demands and in an attempt to boost the decreasing confidence in the Federation’s leadership, President Yeltsin replaced, in December 1996, the pro-Western Kozyrev with the former director of Foreign Intelligence Service Yevgeny M. Primakov for the post of foreign minister. Primakov, who remained in office until 1998, when he replaced V. Chernomyrdin in the role of Prime Minister, marked a profound rift in Russian foreign policy, paving the way to the international approach of the coming Presidents and foreign ministers of the Federation. His vision emanated from the assumption that Russia was becoming increasingly weaker and was losing the privileged position it had gained over the years of the Soviet Union¹³⁸.

In fact, two core axioms can be identified as dominating Primakov’s foreign policy. In the first place stood the uttermost priority for the foreign minister to restore Russia’s Great Power status: The Federation was to deserve consideration, respect and acknowledgement for its international role and

¹³⁵ R. O. Freedman, 1998.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

¹³⁷ The Constitution of the Russian Federation, chapter 4, article 86.a.

¹³⁸ S. Blank, *The foundations of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East*, The Jamestown Foundation, October 5th, 2015. [Link](#).

specifically in the Middle East, where its interests were, directly or indirectly, at stake. It had to be accounted as a major power in the global arena, with no other *pole* to lean on or, worse, follow blindly as Kozyrev did with the United States. On this note, in an interview released in 1996, Primakov declared that: “*Russian foreign policy cannot be the foreign policy of a second-rate state. We must pursue the foreign policy of a great state*”¹³⁹. The second fundamental axiom related to Washington more specifically: the Russian Federation was to challenge the USA in its global and regional aspirations. In order to re-establish (or establish anew) a multi-polar international system, which represented “*a natural desire in the multipolar world*”¹⁴⁰, Russia needed to counterbalance the American attempts to a global hegemony. In the 1996 interview he added that “[...] *we should not align ourselves with any individual pole. Precisely because Russia itself will be one of the poles, the “leader-led” configuration is not acceptable to us.*”¹⁴¹

As a matter of fact, the Middle East became a region of confrontation in this new phase of a changed Cold War – one that had not been announced, but was strongly perceived as such by the Russian *intelligentsiya*, and not only. Primakov, together with Putin after 2000, aimed at what the US professor S. J. Blank identifies as *Strategic Denial*: the US should be denied dominance in the Middle East, as this could easily spillover towards the borders of the Russian sphere of influence. As a matter of fact, even years after the independence of the Caucasian and Central Asian republics, Moscow continued (and so does today), to perceive their borders as the *finis terræ* of Russian¹⁴² strictly-national interest, which therefore had to be protected as a matter of domestic security. The meaning of this being that, even though the southern SSRs had obtained full independence from Moscow in 1991, they are to date considered in Russia’s immediate sphere of influence (the *near abroad*, as they are called), which needs to be preserved as such and kept free of external interferences of sorts.

In this light, the policy of the Kremlin towards the *neighboring* Middle East is “*a critical component of a global multi-vector strategy to reassert Russia’s parity with the US globally and regionally*”¹⁴³: it represented the stance to take against its historic rival.

In addition, achieving the status of Global Power in the Middle East was perceived as a necessary means to deflect the internal demands that Russian people would pose to their leadership, with regards to the conditions of their country. In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union, which happened as a result

¹³⁹ *Interview with Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov*, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, in Russian, December 17, 1996, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Central Eurasia, Moscow, December 17, 1996.

¹⁴⁰ *Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*, in Russian, No. 7, July, 1996, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Central Eurasia, Moscow, 1996.

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴² *Russian* as in the definition of *Rossiyskiy* rather than *Russkiy* – meaning the land of the Russian Federation, as opposed to that of the Russian nation.

¹⁴³ S. Blank, 2015, p.3

of the leadership's, not the people's decision, left many unsatisfied with the domestic political situation in Russia. The promises for a greater democratization were not entirely fulfilled by what was perceived as a largely corrupt government, with a new constitution that only increased and stabilized the Presidential power. In conclusion: the international stature of the Russian Federation and its Global Power status, could help lower the popular resentment and enhance the legitimacy of its leader. Lastly, given the weakness of the Russian Federation in its first years of existence, the only means available to Primakov so as to assert his country's influence in the region was that of the *good offices*¹⁴⁴, besides the arms sales to specific countries. The ambition of being an alternative to the United States was tangibly overreaching. However, this went on to explain once again Moscow's activism in the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: an inexpensive and efficient method to portray a truly global and influential stature of the Kremlin, which moreover benefitted from its (albeit troubled) history of bilateral relations with both sides.

However, after navigating through the Primakov's approach to the Middle East, it is noteworthy to state that the Foreign Minister was perceived as biased against Israel, and more prone to consider the Arab stances instead¹⁴⁵.

In their bilateral relationship, Israel and Russia underwent particular tension since April 1996 when two events with major repercussions occurred. Firstly, the Russian newspapers *Pravda* and *Zavtra* started a right-wing campaign with marked anti-Zionist tones. Israelis in Russia were accused by the journals of "*spreading extreme nationalist rightist Zionist propaganda*", and denounced their alleged affiliation and active cooperation with the Russian Mafia¹⁴⁶. As a response, the Russian government refused to renew the accreditation of the Jewish Agency in Russia, accusing it of being a front for the Israeli Mossad in the Russian Federation¹⁴⁷. Earlier episodes of overt anti-Semitism by the Russian National Unity party had occurred, and the closure of the Agency had a major impact on Jewish life in Russia: it was the organization that provided the necessary arrangements for the Jewish emigrants, and they were therefore impeded to leave Russia during this period. The second major blow in the Israeli-Russian relations occurred on the occasion of the Operation Grapes of Wrath: the Israel air raids and shelling of Southern Lebanon in response to the Hezbollah rocket attacks that Israel had received. The Russian response was unequivocal: Yeltsin declared the operation "*totally unacceptable*" and Primakov denounced it as "*inappropriate action*"¹⁴⁸. The Russian reaction was not positively accepted by Prime Minister Shimon Peres. In fact, upon Primakov's arrival in Israel to

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁵ R. O. Freedman, 1998, p. 155.

¹⁴⁶ R. O. Freedman, 1998, p. 156.

¹⁴⁷ The Jewish Agency Timeline, 1996, The Jewish Agency. Retrieved at this [link](#).

¹⁴⁸ Itar/Tass, 21 April 1996.

settle the situation as a mediator with the Lebanese, the Israeli PM noted: “*I prefer efforts in this direction to be concentrated in single hands*”¹⁴⁹, namely, the United States’ hands. In this way, Russia was being marginalized in the Middle East, and the US Secretary of State Warren Christopher managed to resolve the confrontation without the Kremlin’s support. Izvestiya called the Primakov’s performance a “*palpable defeat*”, and insisted that the Israeli and American decision to act in this way was due to the Russian relationship with Libya, Iran and Iraq¹⁵⁰. It was speculated that Yeltsin tough stance was due to the upcoming presidential elections, as he wished to demonstrate resolve when dealing with the international system¹⁵¹, and maybe even give in, albeit partially, to the growing anti-Zionism sentiments in the political arena.

The 1996 Russian presidential elections resulted in yet another victory for Yeltsin. However, the same year saw various overtly anti-Semitic actions in the Russian Federation. In August, a bomb blast damaged the Moscow Choral Synagogue of Marina Roshcha¹⁵², the center of Jewish religious life in the capital, after a fire had been started at the Center for Judaic studies, only one month earlier¹⁵³. Moreover, the same year, Israel also held general elections which saw Benjamin Netanyahu as the victor for the post of Prime Minister. The new PM called for a strengthening of the bilateral relations with Russia, and paved the way for a continuation of positive exchange, at least until summer 1997. The world’s most famous Refusnik, Natan Sharansky, founded his own party named Israel Be’Aliyah and obtained 7 seats in the Israeli Knesset¹⁵⁴. He was nominated Minister of Economy for the legislature, and aimed at improving the bilateral trade and industrial relations. As a matter of fact, he visited Moscow in 1997 with a delegation of 70 Israeli businessmen in order to boost the economic exchange between the two countries¹⁵⁵, whose strong connection he was the living proof.

Following the success of the Protocol Concerning the Redeployment in Hebron, the Israel-PLO agreement on the security provisions to be followed around the territory of the city, Yeltsin met Arafat in February to reassure him that Moscow would support the Palestinian claims “*including their right to self-determination [which] does not harm Israel's legitimate interests.*”¹⁵⁶. Only one month later, Netanyahu was invited in Moscow, where the Russian President initially praised the quality of the

¹⁴⁹ Itar/Tass, 22 April 1996.

¹⁵⁰ Izvestia, 30 April 1996.

¹⁵¹ R. O. Freedman, 1998, p. 158.

¹⁵² *Bomb Blast Damages Synagogue in Moscow*, The New York Times, August 24th, 1996.

¹⁵³ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁴ *Factional and Government Make-Up of the Fourteenth Knesset*, The Knesset official website, retrieved at [this link](#).

¹⁵⁵ R. Bouton, “*Ex-Dissident Back in Russia as Official*,” Reuters Report, Washington Times, 28 January 1997.

¹⁵⁶ Cited in a report by Pyotr Fedin, Kommersant Daily, 20 February 1997.

relationship as it was evolving: “*Our countries and their leaders have finished a period of biased attitudes and have energetically moved toward each other. This regards political, economic, and trade relations.*”¹⁵⁷. However positive the state of relations seemed and, in fact, was between the two countries, Netanyahu did not refrain from raising the fundamental question of Russian nuclear supply to Iran, which Primakov dismissed as being of a purely economic nature and for peaceful means only¹⁵⁸.

Because of the blooming of the relationship, the ease of doing business in both countries improved, and thus came the involvement of the Russian Mafia: a new opening had been made for yet another market in money laundering. As a result, security cooperation between Russia and Israel increased, and permanent offices of the respective interior ministries were established in the Russian Embassy in Tel Aviv, and in the Israeli Embassy in Moscow¹⁵⁹. On the military side, agreements were signed between aviation industries for the joint production of military aircraft, as well as the modernization of Russian air-force planes as supported by the Israeli technology¹⁶⁰. One ulterior field of cooperation remained at the core of the bilateral discourse: energy. Given Gazprom’s active interest in building a pipeline to transport natural gas from Russia to Israel, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu decided to use the issue as leverage to force the Kremlin into curbing its nuclear and military technology sales to Iran¹⁶¹, which, however, only succeeded in chilling the bilateral relationship. Moreover, the leader of the center-right wing party Likud approved the construction of the Jewish Har Homa neighborhood in East Jerusalem, causing a Palestinian discontent that led to major terror attacks over the summer of 1997¹⁶². As a result of the internal tensions in Israel, Russian Foreign Minister Primakov proposed yet another initiative for peace, including the disposition of a Russian envoy in the Middle East, the Diplomat Viktor V. Posuvalyuk¹⁶³. In this occasion, the MID’s positions were made clear by bitter statements like the following: “*The present deadlock is a result of the fact that the Israeli government deviated from the agreements and understandings concluded by its predecessors*”¹⁶⁴.

¹⁵⁷ A. Stanley, *Yeltsin and Netanyahu Meet and Talk Business*, The New York Times, 13 March 1997.

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁹ Izvestiya, May 26th, 1997.

¹⁶⁰ Izvestia, June 20th, 1997.

¹⁶¹ Segodnya, 13 September 1997

¹⁶² R. O. Freedman, 1998, p. 162

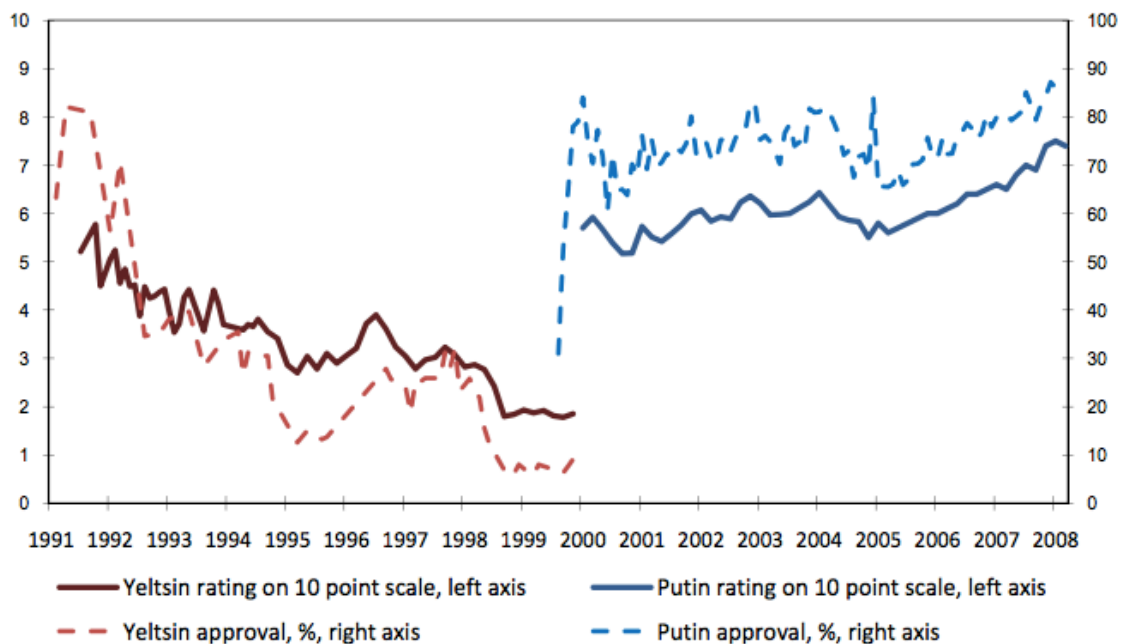
¹⁶³ The Jerusalem Post, 2 November 1997.

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem.

The Theory of the Three Elites¹⁶⁵: Russian Foreign policy 2000 - 2020

On August 9th, 1999, the Russian President nominated as Prime Minister former KGB and FSB official Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. Following Yeltsin's televised resignation during his New Year's speech, Putin took the post of *interim* President until the March 2000 elections confirmed him as the leader of the Russian Federation. As the following graphic shows (Figure 1), Yeltsin's approval rate as a President was at around 6% through the end of his term (1999) – largely justifying his resignation statement as a figure who had lost his nation's support. On the other hand, the Russian people's evaluation of V.V. Putin's work assessed higher both immediately upon winning the elections, as well as in the following eight years covered by the figure. The new and younger face of Russia, albeit directly endorsed by the previous (and despised) leader, gathered massive approval and laid the foundation to a change in the ruling system of the country.

(Figure 1: Presidential Approval, Russia, 1991-2000)¹⁶⁶



Sources: See appendix. Surveys of VCIOM and Levada Center. Yeltsin approval is percentage of respondents saying on the whole they approve of the performance of Boris Yeltsin. Likewise for Putin approval. Ratings on 10 point scale are average answer to: "What evaluation from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) would you give the President of Russia (name of president)?" Putin approval includes his period as prime minister.

¹⁶⁵ I. Pellicciari, *Thank you or tank you: the rise of diplomats in the Putin era (2000-2017)*, *The Review of International Affairs*, Vol. LXIX, No. 1169, pp. 36–50, 2018.

¹⁶⁶ VCIOM and Levada centers. Retrieved from D. Treisman, *Presidential popularity in a young democracy: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin*, Department of Political Science University of California, Los Angeles, November 2009, p. 6.

As argued by the Russian scholar and Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center Dmitriy Trenin, Vladimir Putin's core objectives have been two, simple concepts: "*To preserve the unity of Russia and to restore its status as a great power in the global arena.*"¹⁶⁷. And, Trenin adds, "*He has achieved both.*"¹⁶⁸.

Putin's presidential terms, intermitted by a four-year period of Dmitriy Medvedev as Head of State, span from May 2000 until today, expiring on May 2024¹⁶⁹, and have been analyzed by both Russian and international scholars in a variety of angles. A common interpretation of the 21st century's foreign policy of the Kremlin among Western circles is the one that sees Putin as the new Tsar of Russia: a tyrannical leader who dictates law, acting according to his own personalist interests and whose direction is, therefore, highly difficult to foresee¹⁷⁰. This highly simplistic view is supported by a strong, and ill-based, prejudice against the Russian polity, identified as an enemy, or at least an opponent, of the Western liberal world. Oftentimes, no closure is seen between the former Soviet Union and the current Russian Federation, assuming that the ideological war against the West is still in place, and that Putin is no more than yet another General Secretary who makes decisions based on his own interests. It would be, as anticipated, highly inaccurate to portray and investigate Russian Foreign Policy as person-oriented. Contrarily, Professor Igor Pellicciari argues that, since May 2000, the leading roles in Russian institutions have been filled by three groups of élites: alternatively, but in synchrony with one another¹⁷¹.

The three élites identified by the author are those representing the central functions of the Russian government: intelligence agents (*spies*), experts of law (*jurists*), and enforcers of foreign policy (*diplomats*). They represent the main bodies in charge for the State's decision-making, as opposed to the allegedly single-handed and self-interested policy of the President. In this analysis, Pellicciari divides the years of Putin's presidency (rather, his *era*) into three separate phases, each characterized by defining priorities: the first phase spans from 2000, the election of Vladimir Vladimirovich, until approximately 2005. In this timeframe, the most powerful élite of the Soviet era gained new influence and power, as the now 10-year old Russian Federation felt the need to ensure national security. Intelligence operations were controlling the internal development of the State, and made sure that the

¹⁶⁷ D. Trenin, *20 Years of Vladimir Putin: How Russian Foreign Policy Has Changed*, Carnegie Moscow Center, August 28th, 2019, retrieved [here](#).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁹ Re-elected in 2018, Putin is now serving the second consecutive term, and fourth in total, which should come to a conclusion in May 2024. However, on the basis of the recently passed Constitutional Revision, it is likely (and legal) for him to run again for the Presidential elections. See A. Osborn, V. Soldatkin, *Russians grant Putin right to extend his rule until 2036 in landslide vote*, Reuters, July 1st, 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Gessen (2012), Kasparov (2015), Zygar (2016).

¹⁷¹ I. Pellicciari, *Thank you or tank you: the rise of diplomats in the Putin era (2000-2017)*, *The Review of International Affairs*, Vol. LXIX, No. 1169, pp. 36–50, 2018.

Kremlin be informed of the domestic situation in all fields, focusing especially on domestic stability. However foreseeable it was, in the Western conception, for the USSR's heir to concentrate on and allocate power to the intelligence services in order to govern the country, it is essential to understand how this trend only marked the first five years of Putin's presidency. As a matter of fact, the FSB's role was central in a historic moment in which the Russian Federation needed its internal stability to be ensured. Yeltsin succeeded in disappointing his country and disillusioning Russians in their relationship with the Federation: the country was risking to lose its precarious balance. As a result, Putin took advantage of a well-structured and deeply rooted institution to achieve his goal of national security, and later moved on to a new élite for a new priority.

In Israel, just one year after Putin's election, former IDF general Ariel Sharon was elected Prime Minister. Born a *sabra*¹⁷² by Jewish parents who emigrated in Israel from Russia, Sharon was a military officer for the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and became leader of the Likud in 2000, and held the post of Prime Minister between 2001 and 2006¹⁷³. Sharon's national security policy was mainly focused on the fight against terrorism and the suppression of Palestinian attacks. As a matter of fact, most of his presidency was marked by the unfolding of the Al-Aqsa Intifada: the uprising which began one year before the premier's election, when he "took a walk" on the Temple Mount with a delegation of Likud party members and hundreds of riot police officers. The act was perceived by the Palestinians as a further stepping of Israel on their territory, integrity and independence. In fact, in April 2001, an international fact-finding committee published the so-called Mitchell report (officially: the Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Report) inquiring the causes of the Intifada. According to the report: "*The GOI (Government of Israel, ed.) asserts that the immediate catalyst for the violence was the breakdown of the Camp David negotiations on July 25, 2000 and the "widespread appreciation in the international community of Palestinian responsibility for the impasse."*"¹⁷⁴; while the Palestinian Liberation Organization claimed that "*the failure of the summit, and the attempts to allocate blame on the Palestinian side only added to the tension on the ground...*"¹⁷⁵. It is noteworthy to observe how, in July 2000, the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and the PNA chairman Yasser Arafat had met in Camp David to find an agreement on several pressing issues of the conflict. While looked upon with feelings of hope and optimism, the meeting resulted in a failure which one more time disillusioned the Palestinians, as well as the peace-seeking Israelis. Moreover, being held with

¹⁷² An Israeli citizen who was born in the State of Israel, as opposed to those who migrated into the country in their later years (*Olim*).

¹⁷³ B. Wasserstein, *Ariel Sharon, prime minister of Israel*, Encyclopædia Britannica, last updated February 22nd, 2020, [link](#).

¹⁷⁴ G. J. Mitchell (Chairman), S. Demirel, T. Jagland, W. B. Rudman, J. Solana, *Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Report, "Mitchell Report"*, April 30th, 2001.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

the auspices of US President Bill Clinton, no representative of the Russian government had been invited to join the negotiations, excluding the Kremlin as a key mediator in the conflict. Camp David II had been a failure, and all parts of society acknowledged it.

On a different note, December 2002 marked the establishment of the Middle East Quartet, consisting in four major international players: The United Nations and the European Union as international organizations, and the United States and the Russian Federation as influential state actors. As the UNSCO reports, the Quartet's mandate was to "*help mediate Middle East peace negotiations and to support Palestinian economic development and institution-building in preparation for eventual statehood*"¹⁷⁶; indeed, it endorsed and promotes a two-state solution with the necessary establishment of a "*viable, democratic, sovereign and contiguous Palestine*"¹⁷⁷. It was born in a particularly delicate moment, with a specific aim (among other, general ones) to settle the ongoing violence in Palestine and Israel. However genuine the intentions for the establishment and the development of the Quartet, it has been defined as one of the clearest examples of *ineffective multilateralism*¹⁷⁸ bearing no fruit nor change in the peace-process. Though representing the long-awaited opportunity of a stable international forum, aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict multilaterally as the Kremlin had historically pushed for, the foursome has become a "*Quartet sans trois*"¹⁷⁹. It has been noted how "*the Quartet's early activities entirely revolved around engaging Washington rather than multilateralizing Middle East mediation*"¹⁸⁰, practically marginalizing the UN, EU and the Russian Federation. As a matter of fact, despite the fully-worded resolutions of international actors calling for an end of the uprising (and consequent Israeli repression of it), a long period of civil unrest and extreme violence endured, enhancing pressure on the Sharon government to curb Palestinian terrorism. In the four years and four months of its duration, the Intifada caused approximately 1'000 Israeli and 3'200 Palestinian casualties¹⁸¹. The Quartet, besides being only *de jure* multilateral, has also historically proved to be highly ineffective. Nevertheless, Russia stated repeatedly that "*There were no differences between the Russian and the U.S. approaches*"¹⁸² to the conflict.

¹⁷⁶ UNSCO, *Middle East Quartet*. <https://unsco.unmissions.org/mideast-quartet?page=4>

¹⁷⁷ *Secretary-General's opening statement at press conference following "Quartet" meeting*, New York, May 4th, 2004. [Link](#).

¹⁷⁸ N. Tocci, *The EU, the Middle East Quartet and (In)effective Multilateralism*, MERCURY E-paper No.9, June 2011.

¹⁷⁹ C. Patten, *Not Quite the Diplomat*, Penguin Books, London, 2006, p. 109.

¹⁸⁰ N. Tocci, 2011, p. 16.

¹⁸¹ B'Tselem, *Fatalities since the outbreak of the second intifada and until operation "Cast Lead"*, retrieved [here](#).

¹⁸² Izvestia, May 30, 2001.

Concurrently with the Middle Eastern events, the Russian Federation was also facing waves of terrorism as a result of the Second Chechen War. Starting towards the end of 1999, the conflict spanned over a period of almost 9 years and included open combat in the Chechen Republic – namely direct warfare against guerrilla combatants – as well as terroristic attacks all over the country against Russian civilian targets. A vague parallelism between the two conflicts (the Second Chechen War and the Al-Aqsa Intifada) can be drawn: they represented highly different situations with very distant histories, however, they did present common features. From a strategic point of view, striking similarities between the two conflicts were related to the means used by the opposing forces, as well as their structure and ideology. Firstly, both the Chechens and the Palestinians were fighting asymmetrical conflicts. Both controlling limited amounts of territory and weaponry, while the formers were opposing the world’s largest country, and the one with one of the highest military expenditure, the latter had to face the most technologically advanced country in terms of warfare. Both were fighting for long-standing causes, and neither Russia nor Israel had any intention to simply give in to these demands. As a result, both minorities resorted to terrorism. By doing so, not only were they operating the same offensive strategy, but also, they were *infiltrating* (legally, in most cases) inside the societies and the everyday lives of Russia and Israel. The conflict could not be ascribed to a specific area, and the states had to counter it extensively. Moscow and Tel Aviv were subjects to numerous atrocious attacks¹⁸³, and their enemies were increasingly difficult to track. Lastly, and perhaps most notably, both the Chechens and the Palestinians are majority Muslim populations, with significant extremist sub-groupings. Russia defined the Chechen resistance as influenced by Osama Bin Laden’s movement Al-Qaeda¹⁸⁴, ascribed several Dagestani and Ingushetian liberation movements in its list of Terrorist and Extremist Organizations¹⁸⁵; the same way as Hamas is in the Israeli list of Prohibited and Terror Organizations¹⁸⁶. Both countries were facing radical Islamic movements (by the respective states’ definitions of it).

In synthesis, three common features linked the Second Chechen War with the Al Aqsa Intifada: Terrorism, territorial infiltration and radical Islamism (called Wahhabism is the Russian narrative). As a result of the growing relationship between Israel and Russia, each of these three issues were jointly addressed. As for terrorism, Israel praised Russian policy of “*Not negotiating with terrorists*

¹⁸³ See the Moscow Theatre hostage crisis, the attacks in the Moscow metro, and the Tel Aviv outdoor mall bombing, among others.

¹⁸⁴ A. McGregor, *Distant Relations: Hamas and the Mujahideen of Chechnya*, Jamestown Foundation, Publication: North Caucasus Weekly Volume: 7 Issue: 8, [link](#).

¹⁸⁵ In Russian: *Terroristicheskiye i e’kstremit’skiye organizatsii i materialy*, Natsional’nyy antiterroristicheskii komitet, retrieved [here](#) on July, 30th, 2020.

¹⁸⁶ List of Declared Prohibited and Terror Organizations Ensuing to Defense Regulations (Emergency), 1945, and the Anti-Terror Financing Law, 5765-2005, Israeli Ministry of Justice.

*but defeating them militarily instead*¹⁸⁷ and in January 2001 the Israeli President Katzav visited Moscow, and jointly stated that no negotiation with terrorist could be possible¹⁸⁸. Moreover, after the atrocious Chechen terrorist attack against School No. 1 in Beslan, North Ossetia, which caused the death of 333 people, among which there were many children, Israel offered Russia support in its counterterror activities¹⁸⁹. Cooperation started in terms of intelligence sharing, training of counterterrorism special forces and others. Secondly, as per the *infiltration* of terrorist actors inside the states' territories, this proved a difficult issue to tackle, as both the Chechens and the Palestinians were allowed, albeit limitedly in the case of the former, access to the mainland. This is the reason why Ariel Sharon implemented the existing project of a "Security Fence" in strategic positions between Israel and the West Bank¹⁹⁰ and, on this example, the Russian envoy to the Southern Federal District Dmitry Kozak met with Israeli Prime Minister Sharon "*for talks on the effectiveness of the security fence and Israel's overall success in fighting Palestinian terror*"¹⁹¹ in 2005, as the Jerusalem Post reports. Although no fence has been built between the Chechen Republic and the rest of the Russian Federation, talks on its eventual efficiency were still held. Lastly, loose connections between Hamas and the Chechen Mujahideen did exist, as Shamil Basaev, then leader of the Chechen Mujahideen Military Command Council, announced the readiness of 150 Chechen fighters to join the Palestinians in their struggle against Israel¹⁹². Although no direct support was provided by the Chechens, alleged Hamas infiltration in Russia was publicized by an Israeli pamphlet in 2004 by Israel's Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ITIC)¹⁹³.

In conclusion, the first period of the Putin's presidency was marked by the predominance of intelligence agents in the state structure, who had the role not only of controlling the society, but also of operating in order to dominate the military aggressions and clashes with the insurgent Chechens. This allowed an increased level of cooperation with Israel, which was facing a similar threat within its territory with the terrorist attacks of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. With regards to the bilateral relations between Israel and Russia and their respective conflicts, the Russian newspaper *Segodnya* reported that: "*Sharon is impressed with Vladimir Putin and has spoken approvingly of Moscow's Chechnya policy, saying that it is what the Israelis should have done in Lebanon*"¹⁹⁴. Putin also reassessed

¹⁸⁷ M. N. Katz, *Putin's Pro-Israel Policy*, Middle East Quarterly 12, 2005.

¹⁸⁸ Vremya Moskovskoe Novosti, January 24th, 2001.

¹⁸⁹ G. Asmolov, *Israel's intelligence community will assist Russia's*, Kommersant September 7, 2004.

¹⁹⁰ *Saving Lives-Israel's Security Fence*, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, retrieved [here](#) on July 30th, 2020.

¹⁹¹ The Jerusalem Post, November 8th, 2005.

¹⁹² A. McGregor, *Distant Relations: Hamas and the Mujahideen of Chechnya*, Jamestown Foundation, Publication: North Caucasus Weekly Volume: 7 Issue: 8, [link](#).

¹⁹³ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁴ Segodnya, February 8th, 2001.

Russia's position *vis à vis* the Palestinians, stating that “*there is absolutely no logic*”¹⁹⁵ to the Palestinians' actions against Israel at that time. Putin was slowly but surely taking the distance from the Palestinians, as part of Russia's unconditioned fight against terrorism as “*the most urgent task facing the world community today*”¹⁹⁶. As a matter of fact, the Speaker of the Russian *Verkhovnyy Sud*, the Parliament's Upper House, refused to visit the Palestinian Delegation in his visit to Israel in 2002 noting that “*the terrorist acts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Israel have the same roots, mainly financial ones*”¹⁹⁷. In a publication for *Segodnya*, Russia's position in the first years of the 21st century towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was made clear:

*“Russia is on very delicate ground. On the one hand, our people account for one-quarter of Israel's population, and the violence in the Middle East is being incited by the same people who are inciting it in the North Caucasus ... On the other hand, Moscow would offend Russia's millions of Muslims and the numerous "friends of the Palestinians" among the political elite if it took an openly pro-Israeli position”*¹⁹⁸.

The second phase of the so-called Putin Era spanned from 2005 until 2009/2010 and saw the alternation of Vladimir Vladimirovich (until 2008) with Dmitriy A. Medvedev to the Presidential post. As Pellicciari (2018) notes, the FSB domination opened the way for a new élite to take the lead in Russian institutions. After focusing on the establishment and upkeep of domestic security, the priority for Putin's second term moved to the formation of a stable, satisfied and therefore conservative middle-class¹⁹⁹. A re-structuring of the Russian society was ideated, with the aim of bolstering the political leadership and ensuring its stability. Entrusted of this role were the jurists: they were given the duty of introducing “*(some) rights and (many) rules to encourage the redistribution of income in favor of the middle class*”²⁰⁰. The organizational structure of Russia was to be strengthened and regulation was implemented in a variety of fields. As a result, in the five-year period, net private wealth increased, after it had skyrocketed in the 1990's due to the virtually inexistent financial regulations. Differently from the previous decade, however, was the fact that housing and other non-oligarch-owned assets were the ones increasing the nation's wealth²⁰¹.

¹⁹⁵ *Noviye Izvestia*, April 18th, 2001.

¹⁹⁶ *Izvestia*, January 23rd, 2002

¹⁹⁷ *Vremya novostei*, March 13th, 2002

¹⁹⁸ V. Sychova, *Who Are You for, the Israelis or the Palestinians?*, *Sevodnya*, October 14th, 2000.

¹⁹⁹ I. Pellicciari (2018), p. 44.

²⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

²⁰¹ F. Novkomet, T. Piketty, G. Zucman, *From Soviets to oligarchs: Inequality and property in Russia, 1905-2016*, *VoxEU*, CEPR, November 9th, 2017.

Moreover, as [Figure 1](#) showed, the approval rate of the President started growing steadily since 2005, increasing by around 20% in this timeframe. The change in leadership did not, however, result in a change of perception of the Russian political élite abroad: The West did not cease to see the Kremlin as a “*dictatorship of spies*”²⁰².

In its Middle Eastern position, while not directly altering its attitude towards Israel, Putin’s second term as President marked a decisive opening towards Hamas. The Islamic Resistance Movement (this is the full name of the party) obtained the majority of seats in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative elections²⁰³, and as a result obtained an invitation to visit officially Moscow in March, in order to confront with the Kremlin on a set of issues. The invitation alone caused outrage in Israel, whose Transportation Minister Sheerit defined “*a knife in the back*”²⁰⁴ for obvious reasons: Hamas was recognized as a terrorist organization by Israel²⁰⁵ as well as the United States and the European Union. However, despite the alleged links with the North Caucasian extremist groups, the Russian Federation did not include Hamas in its Federal list, and opened for a bilateral dialogue. Despite Israel’s initially heated reaction, Russia made its intentions clearer upon the delegation’s arrival in Moscow “*with a pointed warning that the organization had to recognize Israel and dismantle its militias or face isolation*”²⁰⁶. On this note, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey V. Lavrov made his point clear: “*I don't think Hamas would have any serious future if Hamas doesn't change*”²⁰⁷, he said in a news briefing before the arrival of the delegation.

The Kremlin had three major interests for establishing a bilateral relationship with a party that was (and still is) considered a terrorist organization by a great deal of countries. Firstly, it proved a bargaining tool with the United States of America: Russian President Putin described Hamas’ victory as a *heavy blow* for the US diplomacy in the Middle East²⁰⁸, and wished to take advantage of the situation to build a connection with the internationally *quasi* isolated group. Secondly, as it is apparent, the relationship would help increase Russia’s influence in the Middle East and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular. Lastly, the role of mediator for the Kremlin would become increasingly more obvious and fit, as it was entertaining positive bilateral relations with all sides of the conflict – both Israel and the PLO, and now Hamas, too. As a response, the Hamas Secretary

²⁰² I. Pellicciari (2018), p. 44.

²⁰³ Jan. 25, 2006, *Occupied Palestinian Territories*, Election Guide, retrieved [here](#) on July 31st, 2020.

²⁰⁴ S. L. Myers, G. Myre, *Hamas Delegation Visits Moscow for a Crash Course in Diplomacy*, The New York Times, March 4th, 2006.

²⁰⁵ List of Declared Prohibited and Terror Organizations Ensuing to Defense Regulations (Emergency), 1945, and the Anti-Terror Financing Law, 5765-2005, Israeli Ministry of Justice.

²⁰⁶ S. L. Myers, G. Myre, *Hamas Delegation Visits Moscow for a Crash Course in Diplomacy*, The New York Times, March 4th, 2006.

²⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁰⁸ *Putin lays out Russian position on Hamas*, European Jewish Press, February 1st, 2006.

General declared that “*The Russian government does not set any conditions for us. Our interactions are increasing and this is praiseworthy*”²⁰⁹ – showing appreciation for Russian partnership while displaying its independent stance internationally.

Although the visit of the Hamas leaders did not please (to say the least) the Israeli counterpart, it did not manage to spoil the bilateral relations between Moscow and Tel Aviv. As a matter of fact, trade had been increasing steadily, as well as cultural and political interchange.

The third phase of the Putin Era saw a change in perspective with regards to the Kremlin’s priorities. Once the foundations for a secure and stable country were laid, respectively by the Intelligence and jurists’ élites, Russia was now ready to fully focus on its international posture. Starting ideally with the end of Medvedev’s presidency, the 2012-2020 period saw the rise of career diplomats as the “*Real political and constitutional heart of the Federation’s policymaking*”²¹⁰. The role of this élite has been specifically that of mediating, negotiating and bringing forward the Foreign Policy concept of the Kremlin through their work on the field, in the embassies and consulates. As Pellicciari notes, Russian ambassadors have the tendency to remain in their post for several years: examples of this are one of the most notable MID diplomats, V. A. Chizhov, who has been representing Moscow to the European Union since 2005; Sergey Razov, in Italy since 2013 and previously in China for eight years; as well as the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, who has held the post of Permanent Representative of Russia to the United Nations for ten years before returning to Moscow. While unusual in other state *apparati*, Russia’s long-serving diplomats serve the function of almost directly exercising the Kremlin’s interests in their host country, and therefore gather enormous knowledge and experience in the specific field they deal with.

While the rise in importance of the career diplomats cannot be denied, it must be noted how the other “*previous*” élites did not in fact leave the scene: synchronization and cooperation continued, although the most functional group for the Russian priority remained the one linked with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

One central factor influencing the bilateral relations between the State of Israel and the Russian Federation is most certainly the Netanyahu premiership. Re-elected in 2009 (after his 1996 *début* as leader of the 14th Israeli government) and in office as of today, it is argued²¹¹ that he has created a personal relationship with Vladimir Putin, and this has highly influenced the two states’ links over the years.

²⁰⁹ E. Koolae, H. Azizi, *Expansion of Russia – Hamas Relations: Sources and Implications*, Journal of Power, Politics & Governance December 2015, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 41-59.

²¹⁰ I. Pellicciari, 2018, p.45.

²¹¹ J. Krasna, 2018, p.12.

The Era of Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu: beyond a personal relationship.

While the third phase of the *Putin Era* started in 2012, change in Israeli-Russian relations started remarkably already three years before that, in 2009. That year not only saw Benjamin Netanyahu winning back the seat of Prime Minister of Israel, but it also led to the formation of a new government whose Foreign Minister's post was held by Avigdor Lieberman. Born in Moldova and, therefore, a formerly Soviet citizen, Lieberman founded and became head of the Israel Beiteinu party in Israel²¹², gathering the majority of the Russian-speaking electorate of the Jewish state. In the 2009 general elections, his party gained 15 seats in the Israeli Knesset, and earned him the appointment to Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netanyahu government. Given his personal history and his electoral constituency, Lieberman paved the way to a new rapprochement of Tel Aviv with Moscow. If not its champion, Netanyahu's foreign minister was at least the main promoter of this process, at the same time engaging the Prime Minister for the foundation of a later personal relationship with Putin²¹³.

Bibi's premiership started only one year after the Russo-Georgian war, which led Moscow to acknowledge the need for a military modernization plan of its armed forces²¹⁴. As a result, given the now-solid relationship with Israel – one of the most developed military *apparati* in the world – technological exchange in the field of warfare has started increasing nonstop until today. In this context, Avigdor Lieberman was trying to build a strong relationship with Russia in order to make it an alternative to the traditional alliance between the Jewish State and Washington²¹⁵. While this was clearly only the view of a minority of Russian-speaking voters in the country, since the political leadership was well-aware of the economic and political limitations of Russia, it helped increase Russo-Israeli interdependence.

The later Netanyahu-Putin relations fit almost perfectly in Israeli society thanks to two concurrent factors: firstly, the Russian electorate in Israel is generally oriented to the right²¹⁶, and secondly, the most prominent Russian-speaking politician in the Knesset set high on his agenda the strengthening of bilateral relations with Moscow.

Furthermore, the personal relationship between the two leaders has proved historically strong, so as to lead many journalists to call it a real “chemistry”²¹⁷. Surely, Putin ended the infamous legacy of

²¹² Avigdor Lieberman, HaAretz, retrieved [here](#) on August, 1st, 2020.

²¹³ A. Barkhudaryants, *La Russie au Proche-Orient (2009 - 2015): acteurs, enjeux et strategies*, PhD. dissertation for the Université Paris VIII, IFG, January 23rd, 2018.

²¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

²¹⁵ Y. Alpher, *The Ukraine/Crimea crisis: ramifications for the Middle East*, OpenDemocracy, May 8th, 2014.

²¹⁶ J. Krasna, 2018, p.12.

²¹⁷ H. Keinon, Netanyahu, *Putin and their so-called 'chemistry'*, The Jerusalem Post, November 21st, 2013.

anti-Semitism (overt or covert) that was widespread among Soviet officials, and welcomed the growing tendency in the Israeli Knesset and ministries (not only those controlled by Israel Beiteinu) to enhance significantly the political, cultural and economic exchange. Inter-parliamentary relations were improved, with Lieberman's aim to build connections that were "*nearly the same level as relations between the Knesset and the US Congress*"²¹⁸, with the formation of an inter-parliamentary committee on strategic security²¹⁹. Russian and Israeli foreign policies are in fact highly compatible – if not, as often, in practice, they surely are in theory. Namely, their strategic cultures are strongly interest-based *realpolitik*s, pragmatic and void of ideal strongholds or values to dictate their decisions. Dmitriy Trenin noted how "*for the military and security services, Israel has become a model of efficiency, determination, national solidarity, social cohesion, and a willingness to persevere and move forward against all odds [...] Russian and Israeli politicians and generals share a no-nonsense, hard-nosed Realpolitik-based view of the world*"²²⁰.

When in 2011 the so-called *Arab Spring* set the majority of the Middle East and North Africa in turmoil, Israel proved concerned about the stability of the only two peace agreements it had managed to sign with the Arab states: the ones with Egypt and with Jordan. Nevertheless, the main national security challenges for Israel in 2012, the year Vladimir Putin replaced D. A. Medvedev as President of the Russian Federation, were not directly linked to the revolutions. Jerusalem's main priority²²¹ was first of all that concerning Iran's nuclear program; secondly, it needed to ensure the preservation of the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan – both affected at different extents by the revolutions; thirdly, Israel was concerned that the conflict in Syria which evolved dramatically over the years would not spillover into its northeastern border, putting the Israeli population in direct danger; in the fourth place, Jerusalem needed to resolve – or at the very least manage – the conflict with the Palestinians, especially with regards to Gaza; lastly, the Jewish State's international stature was to be preserved while tackling these issues. The results of the unstable year were mixed: while Israel did not directly attack the Iranian nuclear bases, the international community intensified the sanction regime, especially in the energetic field. The peace agreements remained untouched, even after the election of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated President M. Morsi in Egypt. As for the conflict spillover from Syria, the situation will be touched with particular focus in the next chapter, the Israeli

²¹⁸ V. Z. Khanin, *The Social Aspect of Israeli-Russian Relations: A View from Jerusalem*, in: *Russia and Israel in the Changing Middle East*, Institute for National Security Studies, 2013. P. 67

²¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²²⁰ D. Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Cambridge: Polity, 2018, pp.89-90

²²¹ A. Yadlin, *Israel's national security challenges*, in: *Russia and Israel in the Changing Middle East*, Institute for National Security Studies, 2013. P. 29.

concerns were not met with corresponding facts. In the case of the Palestinians, unfortunately, no progress towards peace whatsoever was achieved.

As for Russia, the Arab spring intensified its policy in the region, although, as Russia's Middle East expert and MGIMO professor I. Zvyagelskaya argues, the Middle East was “*not at the top of Russia's foreign policy priorities*”²²².

The Middle-eastern revolts, however, alongside with Putin's presidency and the beginning of a tight personal relationship between the two leaders, paved the way to a final understanding of common interests and breaking-points between Russia and Israel, in particular in their Middle Eastern policies. Based on their mutual understanding of being pragmatic states with interest-based strategies, it can be argued that Putin and Netanyahu (and their respective foreign ministers) found three main areas on which they *Agree to Disagree*. In other words, three scenarios on which the two partners find themselves as opponents because of their conflicting policies. The reason why they *agree* to disagree, however, is twofold: firstly, Israel and Russia have a mutual understanding of each other's foreign policies as being interest-based and highly pragmatic, therefore they respect the independence of the other party's choices; secondly, an awareness has been achieved with regards to the fact that both countries can benefit at some extent from such discrepancies.

These conflicting areas on which Russia and Israel *agree to disagree* are, notably, the Palestinian issue, the Iranian nuclear and armament program and, lastly, the Syrian conflict and its resolution.

Agree to Disagree: Palestine, Iran and Syria

As anticipated, the question of Palestine proved to be a thorny one in the relationship between the Russian Federation and the State of Israel. Besides the Soviet support for the Palestinian cause in spite of the Israeli's between 1967 and 1991, even the most pro-Israeli policymakers in Moscow have historically advocated the right to exist of a Palestinian state in mutual recognition with the Jewish state. It was Gorbachev who in 1986 insisted for the PLO to achieve the so-called *national unity*, including all parties in the peace process and urging the *rejectionists* like Habash to give in to the idea of a two-state solution²²³. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the full normalization and stabilization of Russian-Israeli relations, the Kremlin did not abandon its aspiration to the role of mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the contrary, being a member of the dubiously-effective Quartet, Moscow has never stopped being involved in the peace process. As such, given its predilection for multilateralism as opposed to hegemony, and its pride in being called an *honest*

²²² I. Zvyagelskaya, *Russia's Interests in the Middle East: A New Context*, in: *Russia and Israel in the Changing Middle East*, Institute for National Security Studies, 2013. P. 33.

²²³ See n. 90.

broker for the conflict, Russia has established contact with all internal factions of Palestine. As such, the relationship with Hamas has already been covered – open dialogue and attempted mediation are the Russian keywords in the relationship, although they have rarely proved to be effective. Once again, the Kremlin invited vigorously both Fatah and Hamas to open channels of mutual communication and recognition between each other, though both parts have consistently refused to acquiesce to Moscow in this. With regards to the Jewish state, Jerusalem felt initially betrayed by Moscow’s move to openly welcome Hamas – which Israel listed as a terrorist organization, and as such is known around the Western world. However, shortly after, a common understanding was reached that the Kremlin was not endorsing the Palestinian party, rather it wished to build a relationship with it in order to exert its influence on all parties of the conflict. At the same time, however, Russia has entertained amicable relations with Hezbollah – whose enmity to Israel is second only to the Republic of Iran’s – recognizing it a major political force in Lebanon. As a matter of fact, both Hamas and Hezbollah (which literally translates to *the party of God*) are Islamist groups, and gather appreciation and support of a great deal of Muslims in the Levant. Even more so, both are victors of democratic elections, and they therefore directly represent the will of the people of Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (particularly Gaza)²²⁴. Lastly, the Russian Federation hosts more than 20 million Muslims²²⁵. Especially after the Chechen wars, the balance with the Christian majority has proved unstable, urging Putin to show appreciation and consideration towards the Islamic world. By recognizing these movements, Putin aimed at displaying Russian unbiased position towards the religious minority’s international actors.

In conclusion, despite Israel’s denial of the rightfulness of both Hamas and Hezbollah, the Jewish State recognizes the motives behind Moscow’s dialogue with these terrorist organizations, and fully grasps the Russian *realpolitik* respecting its implications.

Another major issue in Russian-Israeli relations lays in the ties that Moscow holds with the Islamic Republic of Iran. As far as Russia is concerned, Iran represents a strategic partner the Kremlin cannot afford to lose, let alone antagonize. At a first glance, the relationship between Moscow and Tehran may appear mainly based on the exchange of energy, military equipment and nuclear technology: a trade that is far too profitable to be influenced by geopolitics. It is indeed true that the levels of economic exchange between the two countries are remarkable and perhaps necessary for both – ultimately given the sanctions’ regime to which both are exposed to by the West since 2014 – however, this amount of trade is mostly a byproduct of the Russian interests in maintaining positive

²²⁴ *Russia maintaining contacts with Hamas, Hezbollah*, Interfax, December 7th, 2006.

²²⁵ E. Trough Hofmann, *Islam in Russia: History, Politics and Culture*, The Wilson Center, Kennan Institute, retrieved [here](#).

ties with a potentially highly disruptive neighbor. Indeed, first and foremost, Iran holds a strategic geopolitical position with regards to the Russian Federation: by directly bordering the Russian sphere of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Tehran's expanding military power may represent a major instability driver in the region in case of deteriorating relations with Moscow. Additionally, the Iranian establishment actively opposes and contains all forms of Sunni extremism in the Russian southern borders, which have historically caused high levels of tension with the Kremlin²²⁶. Besides a more internal analysis of the motives behind the Russian pro-Iranian stance lays a regional as well as global understanding of Tehran's position with regards to Moscow.

Already since Primakov's era, the Russian Federation sought an active partnership with the Islamic Republic in order to counter the US role in the Middle East²²⁷. The overt confrontation with the United States has always worked along Tehran's aspirations to achieve the role of regional great power, which was respected and supported by Moscow numerous times. While being acknowledged by the West as one of the world's biggest threats, according to Russian officials the concern over Iran's nuclear might is exaggerated²²⁸, while Foreign Minister S. Lavrov openly claimed that Iran does not indeed pose a threat to Europe or the United States²²⁹. Moreover, in line with the bipolar international confrontation, Iran upholds a markedly anti-Sunni agenda and is the forefront of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict: an international struggle that has little to do with religion, and much more with the Western support for the Gulf monarchies in order to contain Iranian expansion regionally. Once again, the Russian relationship with the Sunni states is subjugated by an existing and flourishing US dominance, while Iran's alliance could represent the Kremlin's opportunity to access the Middle East as a privileged and predominant actor²³⁰. As a matter of fact, Iran is Moscow's main opportunity to gain a foothold in the Middle Eastern arena, and the more influence the former acquires in the region, the more relevance the latter obtains, even globally.

Following the Western imposition of sanctions, beyond the enumerated factors, two major and fundamental motives behind the Russian strategic relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran can be identified, in a more general spectrum. The first one relates to the Iranian opposition with the West. Given the enormous energy resources of the Persian state, Russia holds dear the European and American hostility towards Tehran, as it allows Moscow to be a major energy supplier of the Old

²²⁶ S. Blank, *The foundations of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East*, The Jamestown Foundation, October 5th, 2015, p. 5.

²²⁷ Ibidem.

²²⁸ *Russia Says It Wants "Equal" Involvement in Missile Shield*, Global Security Newswire, www.nti.org, October 25, 2010.

²²⁹ S. Blank, 2015, p.5.

²³⁰ Z. Magen, *Russia and the Challenges of a Changing Middle East*, in: *Russia and Israel in the Changing Middle East*, Institute for National Security Studies, 2013, p. 28.

Continent²³¹. In case of a rapprochement between the parties, indeed, Russia would be the one to pay the highest price, as it would lose its bargaining chip with the EU once Iranian oil and gas would overflow the European energy demand²³². Secondly, while remaining in the realm of energy supply, in case of an Iranian opening to the West, the Central Asian oil and gas production could be channeled through Iran in order to reach the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, impeding Russia to maintain its hegemonic role onto the Commonwealth of Independent States, who now have to go through to Russia for their energy export²³³. It can be argued that, in contrast with Turkey's aggressive spread of influence in the newly-born republics in Caucasus and Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran proved a promising and trustworthy ally by cooperating with Russia in the attempt to stop the civil war in Tajikistan²³⁴. This notwithstanding, the bilateral ties between the two countries have been far from linear, being historically an object of negotiation, and rightfully earning the title of a "watchful partnership"²³⁵. Not only is this due to the fact that the two countries represent two culturally distant paradigms, with different priorities and *modi operandi*, but additionally, Moscow has always attempted at maintaining a balanced standing with Iran, in order not to endanger its position with other countries. The Kremlin has continuously adjusted its policy with Tehran in order to maintain the stability the latter could provide (or, rather, avoid disrupting), while at the same time safeguarding its existing relations with some of Iran's enemies, such as Israel.

In conclusion, Russian-Iranian relations are a highly sensitive issue for the Kremlin, as economic cooperation (in terms of military, nuclear and energetic supply) are a necessary tool to stabilize a potentially destabilizing enemy. Moreover, given Tehran's Middle Eastern influence, Russia's proximity could allow it to enter the region as the patron of a US-opposed coalition, allowing Iran to play the role of the regional leader, while Russia retains that of the Great Power.

On the other hand, Israeli-Iranian relations are far from being idyllic. If the Islamic Revolution brought Moscow and Tehran closer, the 1979 events caused in turn a major breakup in the relationship with Jerusalem. While the rhetoric of the revolution was markedly anti-Semitic, only three weeks after obtaining power, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini severed the diplomatic relations with Israel²³⁶. Escalation in tension followed, as the new rulers in Tehran were no longer supporting the United

²³¹ S. Blank, *The foundations of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East*, The Jamestown Foundation, October 5th, 2015, p. 6.

²³² S. Blank, *The foundations of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East*, The Jamestown Foundation, October 5th, 2015, p. 6.

²³³ Ibidem.

²³⁴ N. Kozhanov, *Understanding the revitalizing of Russian-Iranian relations*, Carnegie Moscow Center, May 2015, p. 8.

²³⁵ V. Sazhin, *Iranskiy Uzel [The Iranian Knot]*, *Metally Evrazii [Eurasian Metals]* №5, 2003, pp. 20–23.

²³⁶ D. B. Green, *From Friends to Foes: How Israel and Iran Turned Into Arch-Enemies*, HaAretz, May 8th, 2018. Retrieved [here](#) on August 1st, 2020.

States and its international stature – rather they were identifying it as the *Great Satan*, whose local proxy was Israel, the so-called *Little Satan*. Iran has starkly denied Israel’s right to exist, as it claims that the land of Palestine does not belong to the Jews at any extent. As proof, the former President of the IRI Mahmoud Ahmadinejad repeatedly and openly called for the annihilation of Israel²³⁷ denouncing the “*Zionist clan*” of “*ruling the world*”²³⁸. The tension, however, was not confined to the rhetorical level. As opposed to the Russian and Israeli pragmatic approach to International Relations, the Iranian foreign policy is a mutually enforcing symbiosis of ideology and strategy. Israel represents both the illegitimate occupier of the Palestinian (and, therefore, Muslim) soil as well as a major obstacle to the Iranian regional expansion. This is not only due to the position of the Jewish State and its influence in the region – with a highly developed military apparatus and a history of multiple victories against its neighbors in war – but also because of its alliance with the hegemonic power that allegedly oppressed and controlled Iran until the Revolution: The United States. It is important to notice how the rise to power of the Ayatollah started with the Persian students protests against the American influence in the internal affairs of Persia, whose ruler, the Shah, was perceived as a mere puppet of the West²³⁹. Iran and Israel are engaged in an unofficial, albeit manifest, war by proxy. The Islamic Republic is allegedly funding Hezbollah, Israel’s major threat in the northern border with Syria and Lebanon, in an attempt to undermine the Jewish State’s stability²⁴⁰ without openly challenging it militarily. Tehran’s contribution to Hezbollah is far-reaching, as it provides large sums of money, as well as weaponry, rockets, and intelligence support²⁴¹. Moreover, it is alleged²⁴² that the Iranian aim is to restructure the political outlook of both Lebanon and Syria, Israel’s dangerous neighbors, in order to advance its prominent position as regional leader of the Middle East, and the Jewish State has no possible role in the Persian expansion, if not that of a pawn to be eliminated.

In this overt confrontation environment with Jerusalem, as opposed to a “*watchful partnership*” with Moscow, the triangle Russia-Israel-Iran seems unexplainable. However, the Kremlin does not perceive the positive relations with both Middle Eastern powers as antithetical – on the contrary, “*its regional strategy is premised on concurrently fostering beneficial ties with the two strongest powers*

²³⁷ A. Zeiger, *Ahmadinejad’s new call for Israel’s annihilation is his most anti-Semitic assault to date, says ADL*, The Times of Israel, August 2nd, 2012, retrieved [here](#) on August 1st, 2020.

²³⁸ Ibidem.

²³⁹ While the root causes of the Islamic Revolution are to date object of debate, the aversion against the Western, and in particular American, meddling in the Iranian affairs is collectively acknowledged as a prime mover.

²⁴⁰ S. Wilson, *Lebanese Wary of a Rising Hezbollah*, The Washington Post, December 20th, 2004.

²⁴¹ M. Levitt, *Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God*, in: *Terrorism Financing and State Responses: a Comparative Perspective*, edited by Jeanne Giraldo and Harold Trinkunas., March, 2007.

²⁴² Ibidem.

*in the region*²⁴³. On the other hand, Israel hopes to benefit from the mutual partnership as a channel of communication with Iran, and investing in Moscow the role of mediator, albeit indirect, between the archenemies²⁴⁴.

Ultimately, the latest, most tense and intricate question that sets Moscow and Jerusalem on two different sides of the negotiation table is the Syrian conflict. Because of the deep roots of the issue, the multi-faceted causes leading to the Russian intervention in 2015, the variety of powers and interests at stake in this Middle Eastern arena as well as the complexity of the Israeli foreign policy in its (direct) neighborhood, the following chapter will be entirely dedicated to this issue. Questions regarding the genuineness of Russian-Israeli cooperation on the field as well as the points of contact and rupture between the two will be investigated.

In order to fully grasp the Russian strategy in Syria, its posture towards the various international actors and its relationship with Israel in such a delicate context, Israel's Foreign Policy Strategy will be investigated, with the lens of IDC Herzliya professor and former member of Knesset Ronen Hoffman's "Israel's Foreign Policy under Benjamin Netanyahu", as well as "Guidelines for Israel's National Security Strategy", by G. Eisenkot and G. Siboni. The same type of analyses, furthermore, will be given with regards to the Foreign Policy concept of the Russian Federation. Navigating through the documents of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with insights provided by Dmitri Trenin's monography "What is Russia up to in the Middle East" as well as historical and contextual background, this paragraph will lay the foundation for a clearer understanding of the third chapter.

The Israeli Foreign Policy Strategy: a matter of National Security

Differing from Russian open, well-planned and meticulously balanced foreign policy strategy, Israel's (geo-)political situation has historically impeded it to develop an independent and full-fledged agenda for its Foreign Ministry. The Middle Eastern state has had to face evolving challenges and perpetual threats in its direct neighborhood, requiring – first and foremost – a national security strategy rather than a distinct and well-developed diplomatic body.

As a matter of fact, Israel's security doctrine was born in the 1950's, upon the Jewish State's foundation, and was based on the assumption that the country was a small and relatively poor actor living in fear of an Arab invasion²⁴⁵. The existential threat to which Israel felt, and rightfully so,

²⁴³ J. Krasna, 2018.

²⁴⁴ On this regard, see N. Kozhanov, *Russian difficult balancing act between Iran and Israel*, AlJazeera, February 1st, 2020.

²⁴⁵ R. Hoffman, *Israel's Foreign Policy under Benjamin Netanyahu*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 2019.

exposed by its immediate neighbors encouraged its polity to develop a highly-militarized system in which the armed forces would occupy the central stage of the decision-making process. The whole Israeli society had to be re-invented – or rather, shaped in accordance with the situation it found itself into: from a majority of Holocaust survivors, with around less than 10% of the population living in socialist *quasi*-autarchic *Kibbutzim*²⁴⁶, the Jewish State needed to forge a “people’s army” ready to defend its territory. Mandatory national service was imposed on all Israeli citizens except for the Arab minority, requiring a minimum conscription’s period of two years for women and three years for men²⁴⁷. By doing so, the society as a whole became invested in the military build-up of the country, making all individuals personally involved in the state’s struggle against its enemies. The armed forces’ high-ranking officials, who built their careers inside the barracks and had a strictly military-security vision of the state, were the ones taking the roles of the leading decision makers. The result was a strong Defense establishment that held the most power and influence in the whole state system. The intrinsic narrative inside the Jewish State has not significantly altered since 1950, as several wars and evolving threats have continued to menace the stability of the only democracy in the Middle East. Consequently, the Israeli foreign policy has historically been dominated by the security corps instead of an active and well-trained Ministry of Foreign Affairs²⁴⁸. If, on the one hand, attempts to modernize the state structure and integrate the military and diplomatic outputs have been made, those have indeed been met with skepticism and mistrust inside the Knesset and the leading ministries²⁴⁹. Since 2009, the Israeli government has been led by Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu, and his approach to the states’ foreign policy is remarkable in its contrast with the Russian counterpart. While, in Moscow, Vladimir V. Putin enjoys a considerable level of political stability with regards to his own Presidential post, and is as of today expected to continue to rule the country for years to come, Netanyahu does not retain the same degree of certainty for his own position. After surviving six elections in eleven years²⁵⁰, being filed for corruption and indicted for breach of trust, bribery and fraud²⁵¹, and lacking solid coalitions, Netanyahu’s main priority is “*securing uninterrupted time in office*”²⁵².

²⁴⁶ H. Near, *The Kibbutz Movement in Historical Perspective*, Lecture at ECPR Workshop, Uppsala, April 2004

²⁴⁷ *Israel’s Defence Service Law 5746-1986*.

²⁴⁸ R. Hoffman, 2019.

²⁴⁹ An example is former MK Hoffman’s proposal before the 19th Knesset called “2014 Foreign Ministry and Public Diplomacy Act”, whose aim was to “strengthen the position the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) by setting its formal role and authority as the central governmental organ entrusted with the design and implementation of Israel’s integrated foreign policy and public diplomacy”. The proposal has been opposed by the PM Netanyahu and his Likud party. R. Hoffman, 2019, p. 5.

²⁵⁰ 2009, 2013, 2015, 2019, 2019, 2020.

²⁵¹ R. Wootliff, *AG announces Netanyahu to stand trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust*, November 21st, 2019, Times of Israel.

²⁵² R. Hoffman, 2019.

It is equally important to briefly analyze the role of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the State of Israel. It is not unusual, as it happened seven times, that the head of the MFA coincides with the serving Prime Minister. Indeed, Netanyahu held both posts three times, and was once foreign minister while being a member of the Knesset. The Israeli political system, moreover, allows an independent foreign policy to be promoted by the Prime Minister, shadowing the role of experts and advisers from the Ministry altogether²⁵³. On the basis of what has been analyzed – given Netanyahu’s struggle for the maintaining of power and the extent to which a Prime Minister can freely direct the state’s foreign policy – since the beginning of his office in 2009, *Bibi* has based Israel’s diplomatic relations on an overt attempt to increase his own stability and bolster electoral support. By doing so, the foreign affairs establishment has been increasingly weakened, losing both authority and power²⁵⁴. Young diplomats have been reported resigning their posts as a result of demoralization²⁵⁵, as the Ministry is not recognized its intrinsic added-value on important issues. On the contrary, the Defense Ministry is the leading authority, as Netanyahu has no long-term policy for important questions such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict²⁵⁶ and has a reactive rather than proactive international policy²⁵⁷.

On the basis of what has been outlined as the difference between the Israeli Foreign Policy and its National Security Strategy, it is now important to dive into the characteristics of the latter. Three main concepts can be identified as the vital security interests of the Jewish State: the first principle is to upkeep Israeli sovereignty over its territory; secondly, to safeguard the country’s critical assets and, lastly, to ensure the safety of Israeli citizens²⁵⁸. At this end, the Israeli military doctrine follows a simple three-step procedure when dealing with internal and external threats: warning, deterrence and, at last, decisive military victory²⁵⁹. However sophisticated and qualitatively superior the Israeli military apparatus is, with regards to its neighbors and not only, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) does not engage in an armed offensive before exhausting the previous steps. As a matter of fact, “*lengthy periods of calm*”²⁶⁰ represent one more vital interest for Jerusalem. The state, although aware of being in a condition of constant/imminent warfare, does prioritize the need to direct its resources internally

²⁵³ R. Hoffman, 2019.

²⁵⁴ H. Keinon, *Is Netanyahu Out To Destroy Israel’s Foreign Ministry?*, The Jerusalem Post, September 16th, 2016, retrieved [here](#).

²⁵⁵ E. Itamar, *Next foreign minister will have his work cut out*, Ynetnews, November 27th, 2018, retrieved [here](#).

²⁵⁶ R. Hoffman, 2019.

²⁵⁷ Ibidem.

²⁵⁸ G. Eisenkot, G. Siboni, *Guidelines for Israel’s National Security Strategy*, Policy Focus 160, Washington Institute, October 2019.

²⁵⁹ Ibidem.

²⁶⁰ Ibidem.

and for the development of the non-military spheres of the society, as well. Direct military confrontation is, therefore, not to be sought after, rather it shall be avoided with other, alternative methods. Among Israel's national interests, indeed, is the achievement of peace with its neighbors, *“to normalize relations with them and establish alliances with moderate nations [...] in order to reduce regional hostility”*²⁶¹. Given the highly instable and hostile geopolitical arena surrounding Jerusalem, it is not in the interest of the Israeli government to engage in military confrontation for the sake of values that are not to be directly included among the aforementioned.

As for Israel's geostrategic environment, a balanced coexistence in the Middle East occupies the central role in its security doctrine. According to the NSS Guidelines, there are four major struggles on the political field for Israel²⁶², all strictly pertaining to the Greater Middle East. The first challenge is most certainly the Iranian threat and its proxies. Tehran is, as a matter of fact, believed to be highly involved in the critical situation in Syria, as the Ayatollah supports the Alawite family of Bashar al-Assad, and this allows it to have a foothold only one border away from Israel. The Jewish State's main interest is, indeed, to keep the conflict from spilling over beyond the Golan Heights – the current Israeli-Syrian border. The second regional threat Israel faces is represented by the so-called *“Sunni camp”*, consisting mainly of the Arab Monarchies of the Gulf (with the exception of Qatar and Oman). Currently, Jerusalem enjoys a degree of stability with said countries, although it has not formally normalized ties with any of them²⁶³, which could, however, be disrupted swiftly given their official stance of supporting the Palestinian cause in open spite with the Israeli's. Trends of normalization have, however, been observed, and this appears to have become the least threatening of the neighboring areas, thanks to the common anti-Iranian positions. Moreover, the third threat is represented by non-state actors such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which uphold a Global Jihadist agenda with the explicit aim of destroying the state of Israel and its institutions. Lastly, the Muslim Brotherhood is perceived as a menace as it supports, alongside with Iran as it is alleged²⁶⁴, the terrorist organization Hamas in its struggle and its ongoing conflict in Gaza. The NSS, moreover, divides Israel's external menaces in conventional, non-conventional, sub-conventional and cyberspace/information threats – where the enemy of the Jewish state is represented, respectively, by

²⁶¹ G. Eisenkot, G. Siboni, 2019, p. 8.

²⁶² G. Eisenkot, G. Siboni, 2019, pp. 14-15.

²⁶³ With the exception of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain: see M. El Dahan, J. Heller, S. Holland, *Israel, UAE to normalize relations in shift in Mideast politics; West Bank annexations on hold*, Reuters, August 13th, 2020; O. Nahmias, T. Lazaroff, *Bahrain agrees to normalize relations with Israel, Trump announces*, The Jerusalem Post, September 12th, 2020.

²⁶⁴ Interview by B. Gwertzman with K. Sadjapour, *Iran Supports Hamas, but Hamas Is No Iranian 'Puppet'*, Council on Foreign Relations, January 8th 2009; R. A. Jalal, *Iran offers unconditional support to Hamas, Islamic Jihad*, Al-Monitor, July 13th, 2020.

traditional warfare (Sunni states), nuclear capabilities (Iran), terrorism (Hamas and Hezbollah) and all of the above in the case of informatics warfare.

To conclude the analysis of Israel's National Security Strategy it is important to outline Military Security Principles that lay the foundation of Jerusalem's posture against foreign (albeit regional) conflicts, such as Syria's. The cornerstone of the NSS is the following: "*The State of Israel will act overall based on a defensive strategy designed to ensure the existence of the state, and thwart and postpone threats to create extended periods of quiet, concurrent with proactive military and political efforts.*"²⁶⁵. As it is reiteratively made clear, it is in the Jewish State's interest to prevent war and delay confrontation with its adversaries, as military clashes are believed to be the last resort in dire situations. Additionally, Israel aims at maintaining conflicts outside of its own territory, preferring to deploy the military *apparatus* abroad rather than above its skies, in order not to endanger its national infrastructure and society. For the same reason, the duration of the conflict must be minimal and at the same time decisive.

Having covered the regional challenges for the state of Israel – the wars beyond its borders, the proxy confrontation with Iran and terrorism, mainly – as well as its military doctrine, it is clear that the extent to which Jerusalem will withhold its foreign intervention and balance its cooperation with foreign entities in the region remains in the hands of the current Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. As the Middle East slightly turned into a territory of super power confrontation between Russia and the USA (as well as European powers)²⁶⁶, political decisions have to be made regarding which side does Israel want to take, if any, and to what extent is it willing to be involved.

As this specific issue will be discussed at length in the following chapter, together with the implications of the Syrian conflict in the bilateral relations with Moscow, it is now important to investigate and analyze the Kremlin's foreign policy strategy.

The Russian Foreign Policy Strategy

The Russian Federation has a distinct, precise and publicly consultable foreign policy strategy which extensively covers all of its geopolitical interests. Being issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an official publication when need be, they are the most important documents for Russia's strategy abroad. They describe the priorities, the direction of action, the vision of the world and the approach to the "*trending*" issues that Russia confronts. In this part, a general analysis of said doctrine will be given, in comparison with the previous direction of the Russian MID, as exposed in the official

²⁶⁵ G. Eisenkot, G. Siboni, 2019, p. 25.

²⁶⁶ W. Rodkiewicz, *Russia's Middle Eastern Policy, Regional Ambitions, Global Objectives*, OSW Center for Eastern Studies, № 71, Warsaw, December 2017.

documents since 1993; following a more comparative overview, a focus on the Middle East will be provided and, finally, a line will be drawn with the Israeli National Security Strategy in order to identify the differences and commonalities between the two.

The format of the Russian foreign policy concepts includes four structural elements: firstly, the rationale for the concepts in the national strategic planning; secondly, the reflection of the state in the international environment; thirdly, the presentation of the regional and *issue-area* priorities of the state and, lastly, the determination of methods and means of implementing said priorities.

The first such document, called “The Basic Provisions on the Foreign Policy concept of the Russian Federation” was published in 1993, shortly after the birth of the Federation, when pro-American Kozyrev held the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs. The issue represented a poorly systematized set of different-level topics, as it presented 15 areas (both geographical and political), without a clear differentiation between regional priorities and functional areas of international interaction²⁶⁷. While the first geostrategic priority of Russia remained consistently its cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States (in all Foreign Policy Concepts), the rest of the world’s areas have altered their relevance for Russia over the years. At the same time, in 1993 the main *issue-area* priority for Russia was represented by arms control and international security, a remnant of the Cold War’s military build-up²⁶⁸. This priority was replaced by the formation of a “*new*” (2000, 2008, 2013) and later “*equitable and sustainable*” (2016) world order, as Russia was becoming increasingly aware of its position with regards to the US growing hegemony. It was however unclear which areas of the concept were to be regarded as priorities over the others, given the loose structure of the document. As a result, since the 2000’s Foreign Policy concept, a net distinction was made between regional dimensions and functional areas, where the latter would tend to precede the former²⁶⁹.

As a matter of fact, starting from Putin’s presidency, the MID’s doctrine became increasingly clearer, more detailed and well-structured. The 2013 issue states in its first paragraph the following: “*The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation [...] is a systemic description of basic principles, priorities, goals and objectives of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation*”²⁷⁰. The principle guiding the Foreign Policy is the protection of citizens’, society’s and, since 2008, also the

²⁶⁷ I. A. Istomin, *Sravnitel’nyy analiz prioritetov Rossiyskoy vneshney politiki i naychno-obrazovatel’nogo soobschestva spetsialistov po mezhdunarodnym otnosheniyam*, Vestnik Rudn. International Relations, 2018, 18 (1), Moscow, pp. 162—185.

²⁶⁸ Basic Provisions on the Foreign Policy concept of the Russian Federation approved by the order of the President of the Russian Federation B. N. Yeltsin of April, 23rd 1993.

²⁶⁹ I. A. Istomin, 2018.

²⁷⁰ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on February 12th, 2016.

state's interests²⁷¹. This shed a light on the new centralization of government's power after Putin, and hints how the interests of the Kremlin are, if not more, at least equally important as those of its inhabitants²⁷². Following the guiding principle, it is important to analyze the main goals and the objectives of the Russian foreign policy since the beginning of the 21st century and their evolution in the various FPCs. The reason why it is important to assess the development of the foreign policy concepts over time lies in the fact that the elements that remain focal in the doctrine are those which reflect the Russian strategic culture, its *weltanschauung* and the basic national standpoints²⁷³. As for the changing positions, instead, they are the reaction of the Russian polity to the evolving international environment. The basic goals the MID focuses on pursuing in 2016 are the following: firstly, *“ensuring the security of the country, protecting and strengthening its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and securing its high standing in the international community as one of the influential and competitive poles of the modern world”*²⁷⁴. As for the previous concepts, this objective has not been significantly altered, as it represents its traditional concept of security. It does interestingly include the world-class stature of the country, which is part of what Moscow insists on seeing as a multipolar international system. It is therefore perceived as a fundamental trait of the foreign policy that Russia maintains its global stature. The second major objective relates to the Russian environment: its threats and opportunities. The MID calls for an *“active promoting of international peace and universal security and stability”*, for a fair world-order with common initiatives under the framework of the international organizations. As Russia holds a permanent seat in the United Nations' Security Council with the power of veto, and in line with its struggle to defy the American unilateralist approach to the International Relations, Moscow supports and promotes the activity of the truly global UN. The following goals pertain: the economic development, as linked to the external conditions that the country creates for itself; the good relationship with the bordering states, whose majority is represented by former Soviet Republics; the importance of cooperation in the resolution of global issues and others. All of these have remained generally stable in the five concepts, as they represent the core direction of the Russian Federation.

Relevant for the Kremlin's stature towards both Israel and Syria is the description of the fifth basic goal, which states that the country should focus on: *“developing mutually beneficial and equal bilateral and multilateral partnership relations with foreign states [...] on the basis of respect for*

²⁷¹ F. J. Ruiz González, *The Foreign Policy Concept of The Russian Federation: A Comparative Study*, Framework Document 06/2014, Instituto Espanol de Estudios Estratégicos, April 2014.

²⁷² Ibidem.

²⁷³ Ibidem.

²⁷⁴ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on February 12th, 2016.

independence and sovereignty, pragmatism, transparency, multi-vector approach, predictability and non-confrontational protection of national interests; promoting broad international cooperation [...] and facilitating the formation of flexible non-bloc network alliances with Russia's active involvement"²⁷⁵. Moscow, thus, seeks pragmatic partnerships, as opposed to ideological alliances, that would eventually form non-bloc networks. This statement is of utmost importance as it underlines the complete closure of the Russian Federation with the ideological Soviet Union and its world division. This specific point explains how the Kremlin can entertain positive and fruitful partnerships with diverse and opposing actors contemporarily, as is the case of Israel and Iran, or Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Israel and Palestine etc. . . . Moscow does not intend to take part in factious conflicts between world coalitions or regional actors, rather it means to establish mutually-beneficial partnerships where each side is capable of acting in accordance to its own pragmatic interest. Moreover, the stress on the respect for independence and sovereignty as well as the promotion of multilateral cooperation help us better understand the Russian position towards Syria. Whereas the specifics of the conflict will be analyzed later, the foundation of the Kremlin's approach lays in the respect of these very principles. As such, Putin showcases the aversion for any kind of foreign-led forcible political transition in Damascus, where the stepping down of the President could only be justified by the popular consent. In the second part of the Foreign Policy concept, a focus is given on the stature of Russia with regards to the "Modern world". In 2013, attention was given for the first time to the diminishing role of the West in both political and economic world dominance. A shift to the East, met by a failing attempt of the Occident to maintain its position of power, is gradually causing instability in the international theatre. It must be noted how, between 2007 and 2014, Russia showed itself less and less willing to submit to the Western influence, and rather act following its own direction in an ever-changing system. Indeed, in 2007, Russian President V. V. Putin held a speech at the 43rd Munich Security Conference, openly criticizing the US and NATO for their hegemonic behavior, bypassing multilateralism while disrupting the Middle East and carrying on the arms race²⁷⁶. By that year, 10 former Soviet allies had joined NATO, and the Organization was planning to enlarge itself unto the point of reaching the direct borders of Russia with an – albeit unofficial – dangerous offer to Georgia and Ukraine in 2008²⁷⁷. The fear of a EU expansion towards the East, with the (unlikely) feared inclusion of strategic Ukraine among its member states, was alone able to disrupt the Russian foreign

²⁷⁵ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on February 12th, 2016, e).

²⁷⁶ *Vystupleniye i Diskussiya na Myunhenskoj Konferentsii po Voprosam Politiki Bezopasnosti*, February 10th, 2007, kremlin.ru.

²⁷⁷ S. Erlanger, S. Lee Mayers, *NATO Allies Oppose Bush on Georgia and Ukraine*, The New York Times, April 3rd, 2008.

policy, and caused the clashes between the pro-Russian and pro-European movements in Maidan square, Kiev, and the ongoing conflict between these factions in the Eastern part of the country since 2013-2014²⁷⁸. Russia did not intend to remain neutral on the Ukrainian issue and, while politically supporting the pro-Russian factions, it proceeded with the “*re-incorporation*”, as Russia defines it, or “*annexation*”, as the West defines it, of the Russian-majority Crimean Peninsula²⁷⁹. The Western response was that of selective sanctions against Russia, in order to economically alienate the country and push it to choose between the advantages of free trade with Europe and the United States or the protection of a national interest. While defining Russian actions as a just or an over- reaction would require a partial judgement, it can be said with certainty that the use of military power has lost its primary role in modern Russian foreign policy²⁸⁰. The Russian armed forces involvement has become the last resort of Moscow’s external doctrine, as it can be observed from the consistency of the “*Strengthening International Security*” priority, which states that: “*Russia consistently advocates reducing the role of the use of force in international relations while enhancing strategic and regional stability*”²⁸¹ in all foreign policy concepts. In this respect, Pellicciari (2018) notes that the Kremlin’s response to the crises of the 2010’s has mainly been “*measured and focused on political negotiations*”²⁸², favoring active diplomacy to military action. When looking at Moscow’s approach to the Syrian conflict, indeed, the Kremlin has repeatedly stated that the only international forum to be entitled to allow the use of force is the United Nations’ Security Council: no state-led coalitions should be able to wage war without the UNSC’s consent.

Moving on to the regional priorities of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, these have come to evolve significantly since the 1993 doctrine was first issued. While the most important region has consistently been represented by the Commonwealth of Independent States, whose relevance is similar to that of the internal issues of the Federation, the other areas have changed their relevance for the MID over the years. If in 1993, after the CIS, the United States represented the major priority for Russia for the enumerated reasons, in 2000 and 2008 its place was replaced by Europe, only to be united together under one macro-area of Euro-Atlantic region in 2013 and 2016. 2013 also saw the emergence of the Arctic and Antarctica as the third most-important regions for the Russian foreign strategy, followed by the Asia-Pacific area. Starting from 2000, this area precedes by importance the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which occupies therefore the *fifth position* in Moscow’s list

²⁷⁸ R. Kumar, *Russia’s Foreign Policy: an Overview of 25 years of Transition*, International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 53(3–4), 2018, pp. 210–226.

²⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁸⁰ Pellicciari, 2018, p. 40.

²⁸¹ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on February 12th, 2013.

²⁸² Pellicciari, 2018, p.40.

of regional priorities. Only in its 2008 Foreign Policy Concept does Russia explicitly identify its partners in the region, stating that: “*Russia intends to further develop its relations with Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Libya, Pakistan and other leading regional States in bilateral and multilateral formats.*”²⁸³. As for all of the other FPCs, Moscow tends not to overtly state its individual partners in the region. The reason behind this lays in the fact that Russia does not want permanent allies in the Middle East, as it prefers navigating between conflicting powers and maneuvering their alliances in the Kremlin’s best interest. Moscow’s alignments are “situational”²⁸⁴, based on the *realpolitik* of the state, and are not supposed to outlast the specific conditions that brought about their creation. As it has been observed with Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Iran and others, the same policy was implemented by the USSR. This led, indeed, to the repeated severing and restoration of relations with said states over history, depending on the stakes at hold for Moscow in a timely partnership/enmity. Even more so, Russia does not want to repeat the historic mistake of taking sides in regional conflicts and becoming therefore tied to possibly negative results thereof.

In 2013, the paragraph regarding the Middle Eastern policy of the Russian Federation was giving priority to the “*stabilization of the situation in the Middle East and North Africa and [the promotion of] peace and concord among the peoples of all the Middle East and North Africa countries on the basis of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity of states and non-interference in their internal affairs.*”²⁸⁵; while in 2016, an addition regarding “*collective efforts aimed at neutralizing threats that emanate from international terrorist groups*”²⁸⁶ was made, marking Moscow’s active involvement against the growing threat of jihadism in the region. They later go on to underline the importance of multilateral resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Russia’s leading role in the process as a permanent member of the UN Security Council as well as member of the Middle East Quartet.

While until 2013, the concerning issues for Russia in the region only covered the Iranian nuclear program, weapons of mass destruction and the establishment of a “*peace-loving, sovereign, neutral state*”²⁸⁷ in Afghanistan, the 2016 version added a new section regarding Syria. On this theme, Russia called for a political settlement based on the international resolutions of the UNSC and the UN-backed Action Group for Syria’s Geneva communiqué. It is reiterated how the Kremlin stands for a

²⁸³ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on January 12th, 2008.

²⁸⁴ D. Trenin, *Russia in the Middle East: Moscow’s Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers*, Carnegie Moscow Center, April 5th, 2016.

²⁸⁵ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on February 12th, 2013.

²⁸⁶ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on November 30th, 2016.

²⁸⁷ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on February 12th, 2013.

Syrian state whose sovereignty is fully safeguarded (“*the unity, independence and territorial integrity*”²⁸⁸), and equal rights in a democratic and secular state are ensured.

In conclusion, the Russian Foreign Policy Strategy in the Middle East today focuses on the following issues, in order of importance:

- The fight against international terrorism – which is believed to be originated in great part in the external interferences in the region. These have brought along the imposition of “*ideological values and prescriptions*”²⁸⁹, which have exacerbated extremist responses that promoted violence feeding off of distorted religious interpretations. Russia needs to contain the extremist ideology outside its sphere of influence.
- The fight against the Islamic State – as vector of jihadism.
- The containment and control of nuclear weapons and other Weapons of Mass Destruction.
- The stability of the region – to be achieved through collective and multilateral effort. Russia needs to be acknowledged as a relevant player in the settlement of the regional issues.
- The Syrian conflict – its resolution and the success of the democratic transition post-conflict.
- Iran and its compliance with the international nuclear regulation.
- The expansion of bilateral ties with the region’s players – also through the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum and the Russian seat of international observer at the Gulf Cooperation Council.
- The settlement of the Afghan issue.

As some of these issues will be investigated in the following chapter, where a specific analysis on the Syrian conflict will be outlined, let us now turn to a comparative outlook of the Russian Foreign Policy Strategy and the Israeli National Security Strategy.

Firstly, it is important to underline who are the agents of each country’s doctrine. In the Israeli case, as it was anticipated, it is primarily the Prime Minister who makes the striking decision in foreign policy, as he can hold the post of Foreign Minister and can overrule the Ministry in case of conflict with his own political agenda. In the case of the Russian Federation, the last section of the FPC states that it is the President who sets the guidelines and directs the state’s foreign policy and represents the state in the international arena: as such, nowadays, Putin and Netanyahu share the same burden of being the responsible figures for their states’ international successes and defeats.

²⁸⁸ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on November 30th, 2016.

²⁸⁹ Ibidem.

Politically speaking, indeed, Prime Minister Netanyahu is aware of the risks that a proactive foreign policy could cause to his electorate support. As a result, he has consistently tried to steer the decision-making process exclusively towards security issues and immediate, conservative policies. In the Russian case, on the contrary, the influence of foreign policy on the electorate is greater, and generally positive. In fact, the Kremlin's involvement in issues of international stature is perceived as a means of legitimization of the government *vis-à-vis* the Russian élite as well as the population²⁹⁰. Hence, while in Israel it is in the interest of the Prime Minister not to engage in disrupting foreign policy actions, in Russia a proactive international doctrine bolsters the political stability of the leader.

As for their basic principles, the Russian Federation and Israel share the core value of the protection of sovereignty, their critical assets and their citizens – as it is the foundation of all modern states. However, while Moscow stresses the achievement and maintenance of its standing position in the international community, Israel only values foreign support as a means of support and survival. The Jewish State does not mention its global position in its official documents, as it maintains, albeit at a lesser extent than in the 1950's, the awareness of its moderate dimension in the world order. If the Kremlin voices its aspiration to be a guarantor for world peace and order in the international system, Israel focuses its foreign policy completely on a regional basis. The meeting point of Jerusalem and Moscow is to be identified not in their international stature, their conflicting partner-networks or their military *apparati*. The core juncture between Israel and Russia lays in their unrestrained pragmatism. If, on the one hand, they present forging commonalities in the social sphere, enjoying a florid economic trade and a common resolute fight against terrorism, they are also on opposite terms in many issues, such as Iran or the United States. However, it is not the specific issues on the table that allow the Israeli-Russian dialogue to be constructive, rather the inherent *weltanschauung*, the rationale of both states has proved to be highly compatible – and fruitful for both of them.

Chapter III - The Syrian conflict: a window to the Middle East

The following chapter will focus on the Syrian conflict and the way it modified the existing relationship between Israel and the Russian Federation. Firstly, an overview of the conflict will be provided, with a geopolitical background and a brief analysis of the domestic political situation of Syria and an assessment of the impact of the *Arab Spring* in the country. To follow, the internal and international factions will be considered, leading the way to the international attempts to reconcile

²⁹⁰ W. Rodkiewicz, *Russia's Middle Eastern Policy, Regional Ambitions, Global Objectives*, OSW Center for Eastern Studies, N° 71, Warsaw, December 2017, p. 9.

the opposing parts of the Civil War. The issue of terrorism and its impact in the conflict will be analyzed, as it represents one of the most influential factors shaping the position of Russia and is relevant for Israel, too, in the Syrian scenario. Once said information will be given, and a deeper understanding of the situation provided, the Russian interests in the conflict will be navigated through, followed by the ones of the State of Israel. A light will be shed on the 2015 military intervention of the Russian military in the Syrian conflict, the game changer in both the unraveling of the civil war and the bilateral relations between said powers. Lastly, conclusions on the impact of the Syrian conflict on these State's ties will be drawn and an overall assessment of the relationship given.

In 2011, Syria was not spared by the waves of protests that sparked in the Middle East and North Africa. A quest for democracy for some, a fight against corruption and religious underrepresentation for others, the Arab uprising started in Tunisia and eventually spread all over the region, with varied results. Whereas the Moroccan establishment remained mainly unaffected by the protests, Libya saw the violent assassination of its leader and a consequent void of power and civil war, Yemen became a war-torn country with one of the gravest humanitarian crises in recent history, and Egypt and Tunisia did undergo political changes, albeit with different outcomes. In Syria, the protests against President Bashar al-Assad's undemocratic rule were heavily repressed and quickly escalated in a comprehensive war between the government and the rebellious factions. The demands of the population were essentially the toppling of the corrupt, authoritarian and brutal regime of Assad and his family²⁹¹, which had been curbing the freedoms of its population for four decades. While the government decided to act swiftly by deploying its military might, in July 2011 defectors of the armed forces formed the Free Syrian Army to counter the state's advancement. The political discontent could be identified as a major motive for the outburst of violence in the country, however, it is also important to shed a light on who Bashar al-Assad is, who he represents and how is his figure perceived within the country.

The Al-Assad Family

In 1970 Syria underwent the tenth coup in seventeen years²⁹² which led Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, to power. Assad was a member of the Ba'ath, the socialist and Pan-Arabist "Renaissance" party, and, most importantly, he was not a Sunni Muslim as the majority of Syrians. In fact, he belonged to the clan of the Alawites – a Shi'a minority mainly present in Syria, Turkey and Lebanon, which generally had a contentious relationship with Sunni Muslims. As such, given the personalist

²⁹¹ *Mid-East unrest: Syrian protests in Damascus and Aleppo*, BBC News, March 15th, 2011.

²⁹² N. Morrison, *What Bashar al-Assad Learned From His Father*, Harvard Politics, December 28th, 2019.

cult that he created around himself and his entourage, Assad created a mainly-Alawite élite in Syria, letting the Sunni majority population feel underrepresented, while at the same time protecting the rights of some of the state's many minorities²⁹³. Moreover, as for the opposition, the regime was intransigent and responded grandly to political threats. A clear demonstration of the regime's brutality came in 1982 when, in order to crush an armed rebellion of members of the dissident Muslim Brotherhood, the President sent troops to bomb the city of Hama, where the clashes were taking place, with fighter jets and tanks to annihilate the opposers, causing up to 40,000 casualties and destroying two thirds of the city²⁹⁴. The leader caused a war-like situation inside his own country, with great human and economic cost, with the only objective of repressing around 500 armed rioters. Repression under the Assad family was, hence, widespread and brutal, and as the 2011 events broke out, Hafez's son Bashar did not have doubts on how to curb the protests attempting at his own Presidential post. Hafez al-Assad's Syria had a fruitful relationship with the Soviet Union: the Syrian President was a strict realist and pragmatic leader, and believed Moscow to be Damascus' strategic partner. As a result, in 1971, he allowed the Red Army to have access to the port of Tartous, where the Kremlin deployed its Navy and had its only access (as of today, too) to the Mediterranean²⁹⁵. In exchange, Syria imported enormous amounts of Russian weaponry through lines of credit due to its limited financial resources²⁹⁶ and signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1980 with the USSR²⁹⁷. Not only were weapons shipped to Syria from the Soviet Union, but also intelligence coordination, joint listening posts in the Golan Heights for both powers to spy on the Israeli activities beyond the border were in place²⁹⁸, making Syria one of the central allies of the USSR in the Middle East and North Africa. However, also given the importance for Moscow of the Tartous port, Syria was aware of the advantage it had with the Soviets, and often exploited this situation. To use the words of the Russian ambassador in Syria (1968-1977) Nuritdin Mukhitdinov: "*Syria accept[ed] from the Soviet Union aid, loans, student exchange, military programs – when you think of it, it accept[ed] everything from us. [Long pause] Except advice*"²⁹⁹. This went to show how Al-Assad recognized the importance

²⁹³ M. Rafizadeh, *For Syria's Minorities, Assad is Security*, AlJazeera, September 16th, 2011. While Christians and Shi'a Muslims felt less marginalized than before under Al-Assad's rule, Kurds faced even harsher repression during both Hafez and, particularly, Bashar's rule. On this topic, see n. 293.

²⁹⁴ B. Atassi, *Breaking the Silence over the Hama atrocities*, AlJazeera, February 2nd, 2012.

²⁹⁵ D. Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To in the Middle East*, Polity Press, 2018.

²⁹⁶ A. Lund, *From Cold War to Civil War: 75Years of Russian-Syrian Relations*, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019.

²⁹⁷ Soviet-Syrian treaty of friendship and co-operation 8 October 1980, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 23:1, 43-44, 1981.

²⁹⁸ A. Lund, *From Cold War to Civil War: 75Years of Russian-Syrian Relations*, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019.

²⁹⁹ As related by former US Ambassador to Syria Richard Murphy, speaking at "[The New Narrative: Who Authors the Future?](#)", Beirut Institute Summit 2018, at 15.00.

of the Soviet Union as a strategic ally, while maintaining an independent (strictly pan-Arab) and pragmatic foreign policy. The relationship between the two countries proved to be complicated, however it laid on solid foundations: a common anti-imperialist drive, which brought them firmer together after the 1967 Arab defeat and in the 1973 struggle against Israel, a solid trade and military exchange, access to the Mediterranean for Moscow and the support of a Great Power for Damascus. As the Soviet Union re-established its relationship with Israel and the Russian Federation was born, Syria lost its ideologically-driven bargaining chip with the Kremlin. Israel was indeed Syria's most bitter enemy, and Assad worked relentlessly to achieve military parity with it, while Jerusalem, aware of this, wanted not only to defeat Damascus, but to curb its defensive capability entirely³⁰⁰. In 2000, Hafez Al-Assad's son Bashar succeeded him in leading the country. After a constitutional revision was made by the Parliament to lower the minimum age required for Syrian citizens to become President (from 40 to 34, Bashar's age), an election took place via a referendum, which unsurprisingly approved the Parliament's proposal to nominate the late President's son for the post. The votes in favor were 99.7% of the total, with a 94.6% turnout³⁰¹. Bashar al-Assad promised to rejuvenate the Syrian economy by implementing state reforms, slightly opening up the market, and shifting the state's foreign policy more to the West, although not radically³⁰². If the first years of Assad's presidency were marked by numerous state visits to European and Sunni pro-Western countries, the Syrian President never gave up on his father's geopolitical strongholds: the alliance with Iran and the bitter enmity with Israel³⁰³. In fact, in 2004 the first round of sanctions against Syria were imposed as a result of the "*Government of Syria's policies in supporting terrorism, continuing its occupation of Lebanon, pursuing weapons of mass destruction and missile programs, and undermining U.S. and international efforts to stabilize Iraq*"³⁰⁴. Assad withdrew its troops from Lebanon in 2005 as a result of foreign pressure and understood that his regime was on the verge of collapse³⁰⁵: therefore, the Alawite President decided to intensify its cooperation with Iran and Hezbollah, sending increasingly clearer messages to the West of his unwillingness to reach out to them. Coincidentally, this Syrian phase coincided with the end of the first Putin's presidency and the Russian turn away from the United States. Thus, Russia-Middle East scholar Kreutz summarizes: "*Syria's international isolation was an*

³⁰⁰ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 387.

³⁰¹ D. Nohlen, F. Grotz, C. Hartmann, *Elections in Asia: A data handbook*, Volume I, 2001, p. 228.

³⁰² A. Lund, *From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations*, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019. The reason for the only partial modernization and Westernization of Bashar Al-Assad's Syria is to identify both in his own reticence against a complete shift to the West, as well as the establishment that supported him, being almost entirely inherited directly from his conservative, pan-Arab father.

³⁰³ *Ibidem*.

³⁰⁴ *Syria sanctions program*, OFAC, August 2nd, 2013. On the Basis of OFAC's Executive Order 13338.

³⁰⁵ V. Perthes, *Syria: It's all over, but it could be messy*, *New York Times*, October 5th, 2005.

*important factor allowing a new Moscow-Damascus rapprochement between 2004 and 2008, the highpoint of Western pressure on Syria [...] probably even more important was the renewal of Moscow's proactive foreign policy which was conceived as a defense after the American war in Iraq in 2003 and the 2004 NATO enlargement*³⁰⁶. When in 2005 B. al-Assad visited Moscow and met with President Putin, a new era in Russian-Syrian relations started. Although part of the Russian élite was contrary to the meeting, as it was perceived counterproductive in the growing relationship with Israel³⁰⁷, Putin was lamenting U.S. activity and believed the partnership with Syria to be strategic to resume the historic influence Moscow once had in the Middle East. Arms trade resumed, although restricted by the Russian reluctance to spoil the region's balance of power³⁰⁸.

As anticipated, Syria's major allies are Iran and its proxy organization Hezbollah. Since the 1979 revolution the autocratic regime of the Shah saw in Syria its foothold to the Eastern Mediterranean, and found in Assad senior first, and junior later, a wishful partner with a compatible regional approach. As a matter of fact, Damascus was Iran's bridge to convey weapons and funding through to reach Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza: Tehran's proxy (terrorist³⁰⁹) organizations in the region. This particular international partnership set the country in direct confrontation with Israel: it is noteworthy to mention how, in 2006, when Israel attacked Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Jewish State faced fierce opposition and military preparedness on the other side of the border. Whereas the conflict resulted in an Israeli victory, Jerusalem blamed the effective resistance made by Hezbollah on the Russian weapons that had been sold to Syria and later acquired by the terrorist organization³¹⁰.

On the domestic front, despite implementing major modernizing reforms for the Syrian economy and upholding a secular agenda, Bashar al-Assad's years of presidency did not encompass higher degrees of freedom of expression, and human rights violations such as torture, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and minority repressions (especially against the Kurds) were frequent³¹¹. As a result, when the *wind of change* from North Africa arrived, a great deal of the Syrian population took the streets, wrote graffiti, made poetry and expressed in many ways their discontent for the Assad regime. The Alawite family responded militarily, and as the conflict escalated with the entry into scene of the

³⁰⁶ A. Kreutz, *Syria: Russia's Best Asset in the Middle East*, *Russie Nei Visions*, N° 55, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, November 2010.

³⁰⁷ V. N. Tetekin, *Pochemu Siriya ob'ekt davleniya so storony Zapada?*, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, December 19th, 2006.

³⁰⁸ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 388.

³⁰⁹ According to the United States and the European Union, although Russia does not recognize neither Hezbollah nor Hamas as terrorist organizations.

³¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹¹ *A wasted decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al-Asad's First Ten Years in Power*, Human Rights Watch, Report, July 16th, 2010.

Free Syrian Army and the transformation into a full-scale civil war, the conflict started getting its international resonance and both direct and indirect interventions.

By 2012, the Syrian conflict had become much more than a civil war – it lacked the basic structure of two fronts confronting each other (the regime and the rebels). Instead, foreign and hybrid non-state forces intervened in favor of both parties, and sometimes against one another.

An extremely delicate issue in the evolution of the conflict is to be identified in Assad's unorthodox strategy vis-à-vis the terrorist groups that operated in Syria. It is alleged by several sources³¹² that shortly after the conflict escalated, the Syrian President released exponents of various jihadist groups with the aim of letting them join the lines of the rebels, so as to discredit the latter in the international arena by tinging the rebellion with extremism. Foreign fighters from all over the world joined the struggle, although their objective was not the overthrow of the Syrian President per se, but rather to create a void of power to be filled by an Islamic caliphate. This was the case with exponents of Al-Qaeda, which was joined in 2013 by the one-year-old Jabhat al-Nusra – a jihadist front established with the precise purpose of creating an Islamic State in Syria.

Outlook of the Syrian Conflict

What started as mass protests and civil disobedience in Syria between January and March 2011 evolved into a Civil War, first, and an international conflict by proxy, later. The following part will analyze the origins of the discontent and the evolution of the war by taking into account the major events and issues with regards to the Russian and Israeli interests and involvement in the country. As it will be demonstrated, a number of internal and foreign actors have been involved in the conflict, and its resonance goes well beyond the borders of the Syrian Arab Republic.

It has been discussed how the Al-Assad family did not govern the country in a purely democratic fashion: repressions were frequent and human rights violations systematic. Nevertheless, the reasons that led to the population's revolts are not to be identified in the structure of the regime alone. Several theories exist as to explain what the main causes of the discontent were, and most of these hold only partial truths. It cannot be denied that, before 2011, corruption was rampant in Syria, the power was centered around the ruling Alawite élite, and the social balance was difficult to maintain due to the instable region with massive flows of migrants from the bordering countries (Palestinians and Iraqis, mainly). While not as ethno-religiously fragmented as Lebanon, Syria did present a significant heterogeneous society: the majority of its population being Muslim (86%), of which 82% are Sunni,

³¹² R. Sherlock, *Syria's Assad accused of boosting al-Qaeda with secret oil deals*, Telegraph, January 20th, 2014.

whereas Christian make up to 10% of Syrians and 3% of the inhabitants are Druze³¹³. The stateless Kurdish people represent 10-12% of the population³¹⁴, with internal religious differences being equally present. It has been argued that ethno-sectarian divisions did not historically affect Syria under Bashar Al-Assad³¹⁵, as religion did not play an extremely influential factor in the society. It is noteworthy to add that, in an attempt to modernize the country under several aspects, in 2009 the charter of the ruling Baath party was amended³¹⁶. The state was attempting to tighten its links with the international economic players and give in to the young population's needs, and therefore reformed the internal market regulations, introduced new forms of democratic process, ensured pluralism in elections, diminished the Party's influence in the state's governance, abolished food subsidies etc...³¹⁷. However, the regime had come to be anachronistic in a Syrian society where the youth – with high levels of education and low employment expectations – represented more than 50% of the population³¹⁸, lacked the old-fashioned blind faith in the Baathist ideology and was increasingly exposed to foreign living standards. Moreover, despite the party's reforms, security agencies were still in force and the state apparatus remained well and living – directly influencing the everyday lives of Syrians. As a result, the March 15th mass demonstrations in Dara'a, at the Jordanian border, were mainly comprised of youths demanding more reforms, increased democratic freedoms, an end to the regime's repressive methods, which included internet censorship, travel bans and arbitrary arrests³¹⁹. The state's injustices, including the huge wealth gaps of the population with the *nomenklatura* and the state-friendly businessmen were lined up with the historic resentments against the President and were fomented by the events in the fellow Arab nations.

While the enumerated factors represented objective criticalities and needs of the Syrians, the events that followed the March 15th have widely been subject of speculation, information war and international meddling. Indeed, Assad's immediate response to the protests has been military and oppressive, leading to the arrest and torture of minors³²⁰, however, several attempts to satisfy the citizens' needs have been brought about. On March 29th, 2011, the entire cabinet – whose Prime Minister had been serving since 2003 – resigned as a concession to the protesters³²¹; governors were

³¹³ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 442.

³¹⁴ Ibidem.

³¹⁵ C. Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016, p. 48.

³¹⁶ *Al-Hayat*, 17 January 2015.

³¹⁷ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 443.

³¹⁸ H. Plecher, *The Shrinking Population of Syria*, Statista, by sources of the World Bank, July 14th, 2020.

³¹⁹ E. Flock, *Syria revolution: A revolt brews against Bashar al- Assad's regime*, The Washington Post, March 11th, 2011.

³²⁰ J. Doran, *The Boy Who Started the Syrian War*, Al Jazeera, February 10th, 2017.

³²¹ *Syrian cabinet resigns amid unrest, says state TV*, BBC News, March 29th, 2011.

replaced³²² and around 200'000 Kurds obtained Syrian citizenship³²³. Despite the government's attempts, foreign governments such as the Monarchies of the Gulf, Turkey and the Western world, all sided with the rebels flaring up the violence. Russian Middle-East expert Aleksey Vasiliev, when analyzing the driving factors behind the beginning as well as the evolution of the Syrian conflict, quotes the words of the Representative of the Patriarch of Moscow to the Patriarch of Antioch, the Archimandrite Aleksander (Elisov): "*The stagnation of political life in Syria had created a lot of negativity in society: corruption, rudeness of officials, lack of rights when dealing with the state apparatus, and so on, which could not but arouse the discontent of the middle class and low-income citizens. I believe that this had created a favorable ground for unrest. However, the wick had been lit from the outside. The military riots acquired special intensity after the end of the active phase of the Libyan campaign.*"³²⁴. Vasiliev, with the words of the Orthodox *missus*, points out how the proper conflict was ignited from without, and goes on to speculate on how the Western media as well as the Arab (Al-Jazeera, controlled by Qatar, and Al-Arabiya, Saudi-owned and based in the UAE, in particular) news outlets were waging an information war against the socialist Baath ideology, as well as, naturally, against Bashar al-Assad³²⁵.

The Syrian conflict is not, as anticipated, a bipolar confrontation of ruling governments *versus* rebellious citizens. It is formed by scattered groups forming loose alliances internally, each with one or more foreign patrons and funders, fighting a powerful government with foreign backers and opponents. It is therefore necessary to identify the internal and the external players in the conflict, while lining out the key events of the conflict since its outburst in 2011.

The Impact of the Arab Spring on the Regional and International Balance of Power.

As of 2011, the Syrian geopolitical alliances were taking a new shape, with a wider basin of partners and traditional enemies ready to begin alliances with Bashar al-Assad's Syria. Right before the commencement of the unstoppable cycle of violence and destruction that the civil war brought about, the Alawite President had been tightening regional links in an attempt to jumpstart the economy, and

³²² V Siriy otmenen rezhim chrezvychainogo polozheniya, Novaya Politika, April 20th, 2011.

³²³ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 444.

³²⁴ Interviyu predstavatelya Patriarkha Moskovskogo pri Patriarkhe Antiokhiyskom arkhimandrita Aleksandra (Elisova) portalu "Interfaks-Religiya" – www.patriarchia.ru, February 29th, 2012. From A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 445.

³²⁵ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 445; Z. Abdulnabi, *Based on the peace journalism model: Analysis of Al-Jazeera's coverage of Bahrain's uprising and Syria's chemical attack*, Global Media and Communication 11(3), December 2015, pp. 271-302.

provide the long-isolated country with supporters and sponsors. In this light, on February 6th, 2011, the foundation stone of the “Friendship Dam” was laid jointly by Syrian Prime Minister Otari and his counterpart from Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and visa requirements for mutual travel were lifted³²⁶. A florid cooperation between the two former rivals was eventually taking shape. Alas, it did not last long as the conflict in Syria erupted only few weeks later. As with Turkey, Assad aimed at forging alliances with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which had come to appreciate the President’s inclination towards them. As the conflict first erupted, all said countries invited Syria to implement the requested reforms, in order to scale down the clashes and ensure the President’s permanence in power. As it will be discussed later, these hopes were short-lived. Only Russia and Iran remained loyal to their allegiance with Assad, and have supported the regime during the whole duration of the conflict, albeit with occasional remarks being made. This notwithstanding, the events of the Arab Spring shook the grounds under which all the regional players found themselves and the specific countries’ experiences, in particular those of Libya, Bahrein and Egypt, set precedents and misled many into thinking that one state’s fate would be all states’ fate.

As anticipated, the initial reaction to the Syrian protests was a Saudi, Qatari and Turkish support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad, while calling for the implementation of reforms and reconciliation with the opposition. The original pro-regime narrative encompassed two major, alternatively supported, points: firstly, the opposition Assad was fighting was mainly made of criminals, armed gangs, jihadists and foreign-supported groups; secondly, the President was seen as pursuing his reform policies, thus giving in to the reasonable demands made by the population.³²⁷ This notwithstanding, as the *Arab Spring* disrupted the region, initially, Syria was overlooked by most international actors, as other countries’ situations were resonating more in the global arena³²⁸. Firstly, Egypt represented the most pressing issue for the West, as it was an important military trade partner and the key Arab ally for the United States. Obama, albeit adverse to American foreign intervention, was convinced by his advisors to urge for Mubarak’s resignation, which was obtained shortly after³²⁹. This set a dangerous precedent, mainly for the other Arab nations’ comprehension, that the USA was capable *and* willing of steering the MENA politics in its own interest. On a different note, the uprisings in Bahrain and their possible spillover were the most worrying issue for the Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Indeed, the island monarchy

³²⁶ S. Cengiz, *Turkey’s shifting relationship with Syria: From friendship dam to peace corridor*, Arab News, August 9th, 2019.

³²⁷ C. Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016, p. 66.

³²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

³²⁹ V. Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation*, Scribe, London, 2013, p. 166.

saw its subjects revolting against the ruling *Sunni* élite, unrepresentative of a 60% *Shi'a* country³³⁰. Indeed, Saudi Arabia felt directly exposed to a similar fate as it, too, has a large and unrepresented *Shi'a* population (10-12%)³³¹ living mainly in the areas facing Bahrain. Together with the UAE, a total of 2000 troops were jointly sent to Manama in support of the ruling Sunni monarchy on March 14th under the aegis of the Gulf Cooperation Council^{332, 333}. The protests and clashes saw a complete lack of coverage by the Qatari-owned and directed Al-Jazeera³³⁴.

The case of Libya, lastly, is of utmost importance to understand the expectations of both the rebel forces within Syria, as well as the foreign actors actively opposing the Assad's regime. From Tripoli, Muammar Qaddafi responded militarily to the Libyan protesters prompting the rebels to form the National Transitional Council: the Benghazi-based rebel government. The civil war broke out, and foreign countries intervened politically at first by calling for Qaddafi's resignation and ceasefires. As those calls had not been heard, the Security Council, with no votes against and five abstentions, amongst which figured Russia and China, passed the resolution 1973: military intervention in Libya was authorized and a cease-fire called for³³⁵. In the Libyan civil war, Qatar tested its influence as regional power and began its activism: it was Doha who lobbied for the Arab League's support of a no-fly zone in Libya and the Gulf monarchy was the first Arab State to recognize the NTC as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people³³⁶; it sent six combat aircrafts to Libya and established ties with the local jihadists.³³⁷

The impact of how the crises evolved in Egypt, Bahrain and Libya resonated in the whole region, as they were taken as examples of how the Syrian situation could be handled. Qatar saw its meddling with the Libyan crisis as a success, even more so after Qaddafi's assassination, and believed it could replicate the experience in Syria. In all three cases, moreover, foreign intervention had boosted the Arab population's esteem of the regional (mainly Gulf) actors, boosting their soft power efficiency;

³³⁰ The Bahraini government does not provide official figures regarding the divide between Sunnis and *Shi'a*, however several NGOs report the sects to make up to, respectively, 40% and 60% of the citizen population. See *Bahrain 2018 International Religious Freedom Report*, Office of International Religious Freedom, US Department of State, 2018.

³³¹ *Saudi Arabia 2018 International Religious Freedom Report*, Office of International Religious Freedom, US Department of State, 2018

³³² E. Bronner, M. Slackman, *Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest*, The New York Times, March 14th, 2011.

³³³ The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is an intergovernmental regional organization which includes 6 member states: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE and Oman – all the Gulf's Arab States except for Iraq.

³³⁴ Z. Abdulnabi, *Based on the peace journalism model: Analysis of Al-Jazeera's coverage of Bahrain's uprising and Syria's chemical attack*, *Global Media and Communication* 11(3), December 2015, pp. 271-302.

³³⁵ United Nations Security Council, S/RES/1973 (2011).

³³⁶ C. Philips, 2016, p. 64.

³³⁷ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 455.

the international presence appeared to have resolved the contentions in a short amount of time and resulted in the capitulation of the country's leaders both in Egypt and in Libya.

In the meantime, overlooked Syria saw violence flaring up, with the regime deploying tanks and aircrafts to crush the rebels: Assad, too, was observing the evolution of the Arab Spring in the region and acted ruthlessly in order to impede similar scenarios from happening at home. Ramadan 2011 (starting on August 1st) was the game-changer for the Syrian conflict in the international arena. This was the moment when the regime's brutality started being really exposed, thanks to the sharing of footage shot by the locals' cellphones³³⁸. Assad brutally repressed the rebels, once again, in the infamous city of Hama where his father caused the death of 40,000 civilians 29 years earlier. Tanks were deployed, snipers picked off by-goers, causing around one hundred casualties between the eve of Ramadan and its first day³³⁹. This tragic and dreadful occasion led to the eventual condemnation of the Assad regime by former supporters like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as well as the European Union and the United States. On August 6th, the GCC criticized "*mounting violence and the excessive use of force which resulted in killing and wounding large numbers*"³⁴⁰; the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton released a statement on August 18th noting "*the complete loss of Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people and the necessity for him to step aside*"³⁴¹; The US President Barack Obama for the first time declared the need for Assad to resign as "*The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way*"³⁴² and imposed a new round of sanctions on Syria³⁴³.

The Initial – and Decisive – International Alignments

Whereas on April 3rd the Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani of Qatar sent a letter to Al-Assad supporting Syria "*amid attempts at destabilization*"³⁴⁴, on July 18th the Qatari Ambassador was withdrawn from the embassy in Damascus, which was consequently shut down³⁴⁵. In August, Qatar's representative to the United Nations harshly criticized the regime's violence and four months later

³³⁸ *Hama: Holy Month in Killings*, AlArabiya, August 2nd, 2011, retrieved on YouTube [here](#).

³³⁹ Editorial, *Syria's Ramadan Massacre*, the Washington Post, August 1st, 2011.

³⁴⁰ *GCC urges end to Syrian 'bloodshed,' calls for reforms*, Al Arabiya, August 6th, 2011.

³⁴¹ Declaration by the High Representative, Catherine Ashton, on behalf of the European Union on EU action following the escalation of violent repression in Syria, 13488/1/11 REV 1, Brussels, 18 August 2011.

³⁴² M. Philips, *President Obama: "The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way."*, Obama White House Archive, August 18th, 2011.

³⁴³ Executive Order 13582 of August 17, 2011: Blocking Property of the Government of Syria and Prohibiting Certain Transactions with Respect to Syria.

³⁴⁴ *Qatari emir voices Qatar's support for Syria*, Now Lebanon, April 3rd, 2011. Retrieved [here](#) on August 16th, 2020.

³⁴⁵ *Qatari ambassador closes embassy, leaves Damascus*, France 24, July 18th, 2011.

the Emir was the first foreign leader to propose sending Arab troops to Syria to “stop the killing”³⁴⁶. The Gulf monarchy was turning its back against its former ally Al-Assad, starting a new strategy of opposition, and later funding of the rebel forces on the ground in Syria. The reason behind the Qatari policy shift is twofold. Firstly, Doha believed it had learnt from Libya that an intervention policy could positively impact the political development of a country while boosting the monarchy’s international stature; secondly, given its increasingly overt support for the Muslim Brotherhood – mixed with a reportedly scarce and biased Qatari intelligence on the situation in Syria³⁴⁷ that led Doha to think that the regime would soon collapse – the Emir hoped to eventually replace the élite in Damascus with the members of the outlawed MB, making Syria a strong ally at the mercy of Qatar³⁴⁸. It is important, however, to clarify that the foreign intervention in Libya did not bring about peace, stability and least of all a peaceful political transition. In the long run, the situation was frozen into an ongoing conflict, but on the short-run – which is the timeframe Qatar based its deductions on – it appeared to be a successful case of foreign-directed transition. For this, too, Doha’s strategy was laying on misperceptions given, among others, by short-sightedness.

On this note, Al-Thani was on the same page with Erdoğan – also a vivid supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, in Turkey, the ruling AKP party wanted to shape the nation’s foreign policy around the core concept of making Ankara “*Not [...] a bridge between East and West but [...] a central country that should project influence, and [the AKP] saw the Islamic World and the Middle East as a key route to this*”³⁴⁹. After repeated attempts at coming to terms with Assad, all of which had been turned down quite abruptly by Damascus, Turkey understood it was time to change its position and work for its own interests. In Syria, much was at stake for Erdoğan: first and foremost, the two countries share an almost 1000-km-long border, making the Syrian conflict a security threat for Turkey; secondly, waves of refugees have started naturally flowing from Syria into Turkey mounting up to more than 3,5 millions as of August 2020³⁵⁰. Moreover, Ankara feared that the weakening of Syria could lead to the establishment of several bases for the PKK – the Kurdistan’s Workers’ Party. Deemed as a terrorist organization by Turkey and really representing the needs and aspiration to independence, or at least autonomy, of the Kurdish minority in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, Ankara had been fighting against the PKK for three decades, and in September 2012 accused

³⁴⁶ K. Y. Oweis, *Qatar emir suggests sending Arab troops to Syria*, Reuters, January 14th, 2012.

³⁴⁷ C. Phillips, *Eyes Bigger than Stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Syria*, Middle East Policy Council, Volume XXIV, Number One, Spring, 2017.

³⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁴⁹ C. Phillips, 2018, p. 71.

³⁵⁰ Registered Syrian refugees – source: Government of Turkey, UNHCR, last update, August 14th, 2020. Retrieved [here](#).

Damascus and Tehran of backing the Kurdish “terrorist group”³⁵¹. Erdoğan could not allow the Kurds to gain territory in neighboring Syria. On the economic side, moreover, Erdoğan needed a stable neighbor to favor its southbound land-trade – in the previously cited Turkish concept of becoming a regional influence. Lastly, on a purely political and soft-power note, Ankara could not be seen siding with a leader that was widely perceived as a bloody tyrant among the Middle Eastern population – whose support Erdoğan wanted for himself³⁵². As a result of the enumerated needs and interests, rebel groups were formed in the territory of the Turkish Republic and the Hatay (Antioch) province of Turkey, previously belonging to Syria, became a “convenient base”³⁵³ for the opposition. Lastly, as in the case of Qatar, Turkey hoped for a post-Assad Syria, which was expected to become reality in a short period of time, to be not only pro-Turkey, but really Ankara-led. As the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu stated in 2012: “*A new Middle East is emerging and we will continue to lead this. Turkey will pioneer this order of peace*”³⁵⁴ – explicitly marking the regional aspirations of the country.

As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, as anticipated, its main preoccupation was the spillover of the Bahraini and Syrian-like uprisings into its territory. In addition, however, the Gulf monarchy was also distressed about the growing influence that Iran was to obtain with a destabilized Syria. In fact, Riyadh initially supported Assad, mirroring the stand it had taken in Bahrain in order to contain the protests, but as Ramadan 2011 came and the threat of the Arab Spring had become less real, the need to counter Iran in the region became overriding. As such, Riyadh was on board with the Qatari and Turkish strategies of supporting the rebels in order to have Assad step down. The final goal became that of replacing the Syrian President with a friendly and weak leader – although it would become increasingly evident that Riyadh and Doha did not share the same views on Iran, and Ankara grew to prioritize the repression of the Kurds over the destabilization of the regime. While Saudi Arabia mainly supplied weapons and equipment to rebel groups, Qatar and Turkey supported Islamist forces and the Muslim Brotherhood and, to use the words of foreign minister Khalid bin Mohammad Al-Attiya, Doha was “*very much against excluding anyone (from the struggle against the Assad regime) at this stage, or bracketing them as Al-Qaeda*”³⁵⁵ – openly exposing its lack of differentiation between jihadist and non-extremist groups. This led to a further demarcation of the differences between the Saudis and the Qataris, wherein the former would support forces like the Free Syrian Army and the

³⁵¹ D. McElroy, *Syria and Iran 'backing Kurdish terrorist group', says Turkey*, The Telegraph, September 3rd, 2012.

³⁵² C: Phillips, 2018, p. 71.

³⁵³ E. Lundgren Jörum, *Syria's "Lost Province": The Hatay Question Returns*, Carnegie Middle East Center, January 28th, 2014.

³⁵⁴ *Davutoğlu: Turkey Leads Winds of Change in New Mideast*, Duniya, Nisan 27th, 2012.

³⁵⁵ B. P. Usher, *Joe Biden Apologised over IS Remarks, but Was He Right?*, October 7th 2014, retrieved [here](#).

latter would focus on terrorist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra³⁵⁶. Moreover, the struggle for regional leadership saw the two monarchies clashing once more, leading to the Saudis, together with the UAE and Bahrain, to sever diplomatic relations with Qatar in March 2014³⁵⁷. The vague common cause of countering the regime in Damascus was implemented with several, often opposing, policies of the three Sunni-majority countries. Even more so, all were further motivated by the August 18th, 2011 coordinated condemnation of the Assad regime and the demand for it to stand down by the Western powers of USA, UK, France, Canada and Germany.

With regards to the highly divisive Islamic Republic of Iran, during the Arab Spring it had consistently supported the Arab streets in an attempt to form Tehran-friendly regimes and favoring the toppling of its regional enemies. When it came to Syria, however, the situation was markedly different. Since the Islamic Revolution and the rise to power of the Alawite (therefore vaguely Shi'a³⁵⁸) Al-Assad family in Syria, Tehran and Damascus cultivated positive and fruitful relations in several fields. Remarkably, the Damascene regime represented a strategic ally in the majority-Sunni Levant, as it channeled weapons and funding for Hezbollah and Hamas and represented the Ayatollah's foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean, only one border away from Israel. Without Syria, Iran's policy in the Levant would crumble. As such, the Iranian leadership could not afford to lose such a fundamental ally, and decided to modify its strategy and shift from supporting the Arab streets in the MENA to funding the regime's struggle against the population in Syria. As a matter of fact, the Syrian civil war only brought the two countries closer together, as the major disrupting issue in their relationship related to Assad's wish to develop closer ties with the Arab Sunni states: a hope strongly crushed by the unraveling of the conflict. Iran also saw the war in Syria as a means of confrontation with its sworn enemies the United States and Israel, as the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei openly declared: "*In Syria, the hand of America and Israel is evident [...] Wherever a movement is Islamic, populist and anti-American, we support it*"³⁵⁹. And support they did, with large quantities of weapons and training, sophisticated technology to track the rebels' online activities and even Iranian revolutionary guards from the Quds force, whose third-in-command was training the regime's forces directly³⁶⁰. The core of Tehran's policy in Syria was provided by its deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian: "*We do not see President Bashar Assad staying in power*

³⁵⁶ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 457.

³⁵⁷ C. Phillips, 2016, p. 75.

³⁵⁸ It would be incorrect to depict the Alawite as a purely Shi'a sect of Islam: their religion encompasses the revering of Ali, like the Shi'ites, however they include beliefs of Christianity and have their own distinguishing traits, making them a separate ethno-religious group. However, their allegiance is debated. On this issue, confront the works of Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Hassan Tusi and Matti Moosa.

³⁵⁹ G. Abdo, *How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria*, Foreign Affairs, August 25th, 2011.

³⁶⁰ Ibidem.

indefinitely but neither do we want “extremist forces” to replace him”³⁶¹, demonstrating Iran’s concern over an eventually disruptive post-Assad leadership, which in the worst case would be US-driven, and in the best case would simply not allow Iran the same freedoms it had earned with Assad. As for the United States, its approach was based on two major misleading factors: firstly, the American intelligence in Syria was extremely scarce. Historically, Syria represented a hostile pro-Soviet country, mainly impenetrable to American security services and remained low in the Washington’s priority list: this is visible by the fact that, in 2009, the State Department’s Syria desk was made of only one person³⁶². Thus, the United States had misleading knowledge of the country, and the development of the internal affairs were expected to follow the same path as in Egypt or Libya. One of the main differences, however, besides the intrinsic distinct features of the countries, laid in the fact that the US had no leverage inside the Assad’s regime. If having Mubarak step down only required Washington to pull the right levers, Damascus was uncharted territory. As a result, Washington hoped that by implementing the same steps that it initially took in the other countries, it would reach the same result – namely, the stepping down of the President. As such, Obama made a statement on August 18th, 2011, which was later endorsed and owned by Merkel, Sarkozy and Cameron, using an anti-regime rhetoric in the hope that this would exert significant pressure on Assad. On April 29th, moreover, Obama’s Executive Order 13572 initiated a sanction regime against Syrian representatives, and the list of those included therein kept on growing over time and was followed by similar, also escalating, EU initiatives – like the arms embargo on May 9th³⁶³. Essentially, the Obama administration in the White House followed more or less blindly the strategy it had undertaken in the other *Arab Spring-affected* countries, regardless of the Syrian uniqueness and the different share of consensus that Assad enjoyed amongst his citizens. While difficult to assess because of the obvious complications of collecting poll surveys at the beginning of the conflict, a poll by YouGov Siraj for the Doha Debates published in early 2012³⁶⁴ reported that 55% of the Syrian population supported the Assad regime – implying that the silent majority had been overruled by a violent and armed minority. This poll was criticized for being unfair, as it had been taken online, in a moment where internet access was limited, and the statistic sample consisted of only 97 people³⁶⁵.

³⁶¹ *Iran Does Not Seek Indefinite Power for Assad, Senior Diplomat Says*, The Daily Star (Lebanon), April 4th, 2014.

³⁶² Interview with US officials, Washington, August 2014; interview with Robert Ford, Washington, 15/6/15 in C. Phillips, 2016, p. 76.

³⁶³ Official Journal of the European Union, *Council Decision 2011/273/CFSP of 9 May 2011 Concerning Restrictive Measures Against Syria*.

³⁶⁴ <https://dohadebates.com/news/item/index.asp?n=14312>

³⁶⁵ For the debate on the accuracy of the poll and different interpretations of it, see: J. Steele, *Most Syrians Back President Assad, but You’d Never Know from Western Media*, The Guardian, January 17th, 2012; B. Whitaker, *Syria and the ‘Assad Poll’*, Al-Bab.com, January 18th, 2012.

The only reliable source the US, the UK and France had, were their diplomatic representatives in Syria. Their role would have been crucial, were they to be given the right attention and credibility. As a matter of fact, when reporting to London, Ambassador Collis reported that Bashar al-Assad could enjoy the support of roughly 30-40% of the population³⁶⁶. Moreover, his departure was not going to happen soon, unless three major requirements were met: firstly, the unrest needed to spread extensively to the key cities of Damascus, Aleppo and the Kurdish region; secondly, the cohesion of the Syrian army and Intelligence services was to collapse; lastly, the inner core of the regime would crumble. Unless all of these events occurred, which did not manifest as of 2020, the regime would be able to hold on to power³⁶⁷. Ambassador Collis even went on to report that the sanctions' regime would not be leading to a swift collapse of the Syrian economy and its regime. The French Ambassador Chevallier agreed with Collis, however Sarkozy's diplomatic aide Nicolas Galey reportedly said: "*Your information does not interest us, [...] Bashar Al-Assad must fall and he will fall*"³⁶⁸. This abrupt reaction from Paris not only was an arrogant presumption based on the Libyan perceived "success", but it also showcased a more general Western attitude that ceded being geo-strategical, and started becoming increasingly political. This leads us to the second misleading factor in the US Foreign Policy: its domestic politics. Indeed, Obama was going to run for his second term in 2012 and, like the other Western leaders, he was facing mounting internal pressure – both by the population and by members of Congress – for taking an active and critique stand against the murderous dictator of Syria, as the media had presented Al-Assad in North America and Europe. Ultimately, the most cost-effective strategy for Obama to play was that of a mounting rhetorical pressure, which was not to be followed by what would become a swampy, costly and lengthy military struggle. As a matter of fact, after the declarations condemning Al-Assad and demonstrating the resolute American opposition to his regime, the United States National Security Committee advised POTUS that those statements were enough for disrupting the Syrian balance and having the President step down³⁶⁹. The White House had thus deployed its soft and *smart power*³⁷⁰, responding to the internal demands, exposing itself against a regime that it had already forecasted to be doomed to collapse, thus favoring all the existing forces to accelerate their actions in this direction. And the rest of the Western world followed blindly. However, as stated, these were mere miscalculations, as they only flared up the conflict on both sides: if Iran and Russia increased their support for Assad in fear

³⁶⁶ UK Diptel from Damscus to FCO, *Syria: the Peace Quickens*, July 19th, 2011.

³⁶⁷ Ibidem.

³⁶⁸ C. Phillips, p. 79.

³⁶⁹ K. Bugra Kanat, *A Tale of Four Augusts: Obama's Syria Policy*, SETA, Washington, DC, 2015, p. 81.

³⁷⁰ J. S. Nye Jr, *Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power*, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 4, July/August 2009, pp. 160-163.

of an American military intervention, the rebels sparked with joy expecting the “almighty”³⁷¹ USA to step in for their cause. Contextually, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia also believed that the US armed forces would intervene in the foreseeable future, and set their strategies accordingly. The Libyan campaign reminded all, both allies and enemies of the United States, that Washington could and, apparently, would achieve its objectives, no matter what³⁷².

In conclusion, miscalculations and limited knowledge dominated the international actors in their involvement in the conflict, only making matters worse for the civilians on the ground and flaring up the violence in the territory of Syria.

We will now turn to look at what role did terrorism play in the conflict, as this represents a core issue for a complete understanding of both Russian and Israeli approach to the Syrian civil war, which will be subsequently discussed.

The Internal Factions and the Role of Terrorism

The Syrian opposition has been fragmented since the very beginning of the protests, and as violence mounted, so did the numbers of armed groups fighting the Al-Assad’s regime. As Christopher Phillips reports: “*Underestimating the Assad regime’s durability was a costly error by its international opponents, but as damaging was the overestimation of Syria’s opposition and its ability to form a united and effective force*”³⁷³.

Indeed, in July 2011, the Free Syrian Army was established: a rebel group initially consisting of army defectors, which published a video, which had been shot in the Turkish region of Hatay with Erdoğan’s *placet*, calling on the Syrian soldiers to join the opposition and bring the regime down³⁷⁴. However, the group lacked unity, as it represented more of a declaration of intents than a well-structured, war-prepared body. Many Syrian civilians and military officers published videos on YouTube declaring their allegiance to the FSA, forming militias, or *katibas*, spontaneously and mainly with local range and aspirations: their numbers have risen to over a thousand in 2012³⁷⁵ - proving their inefficient fragmentation. Since the FSA had no clear leadership nor structure, the numerous armed groups lacked guidance, strategy, and differed greatly in terms of ideology.

³⁷¹ C. Phillips argues that in the Middle Eastern perception of the United States, it could “achieve whatever it sets its mind to”, and this perception was strengthened by the campaign in Libya. C. Phillips, 2016, p.82.

³⁷² C. Phillips, 2016, p. 82.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³⁷⁴ C. Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016, p. 126.

³⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

Two core issues, among many others, set the members of the FSA dangerously apart: firstly, the degree of acceptance, if any, of foreign interference and support in the anti-regime cause³⁷⁶ and, secondly, the role of Islam and Jihadism within the armed struggle. These two themes played a central role in the unfolding of the conflict, as they represented the crux of the conflict, leading to a further division of the opposition and the formation of intra-rebel clashes which ultimately undermined the efficiency of the anti-regime struggle. Given its weakness, the FSA never did lead, but rather followed the developments of the conflict, making it a barely relevant actor in the conflict³⁷⁷. The Free Syrian Army, and the opposition as a whole, lacked a clear strategy other than the vague objective of taking Bashar Al-Assad down no matter what. In spring 2012, two major shifts shook the rebel forces boosting their efficiency: firstly, an increase in weaponry bolstered their military equipment³⁷⁸. As a result of capturing several border areas with Turkey, foreign supplies could arrive sooner and more robustly to these forces, allowing them in addition to seize several regime bases where arms were stored. A virtuous cycle was instilled, allowing the rebels to grow militarily. Secondly, the intelligence assistance of Turkey, Qatar and the West prompted the opposition with a new strategy – to capture rural areas in order to increase their – purely formal – territorial extension. This notwithstanding, the forces’ incoordination could not be overcome by foreign “donations”, and resulted in miserable failure. An example of this is the attempt to seize Aleppo from the regime’s control. In a city where most of the middle class supported the President and despised the periphery-based rebel militias, various opposition forces wanted to take control of the town in order to create a corridor from Aleppo to the Turkish border³⁷⁹. The attempt took place on July 19th, 2011 by the Liwa Al-Tawheed. This *katiba* had been formed on July 18th, 2011, and was therefore barely one-day old, with the specific aim of taking Aleppo. The Liwa attacked without previous coordination with other groups, which later joined the struggle and ended up clashing with one another³⁸⁰, making the operation a clumsy failure and showcasing one of the main weaknesses of the opposition: unity. In an attempt to form a body similar to the Libyan National Transition Council, which allowed the opposition to be united in one front and receive backing by the UN and NATO, on August 23rd, 2011, the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed in Istanbul, under the auspices of France and Qatar, by a small group of Syrian emigrants³⁸¹. The group presented a strong Muslim Brotherhood influence

³⁷⁶ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 446.

³⁷⁷ C. Phillips, 2016, p. 126.

³⁷⁸ S. N. Abboud, *Syria*, Polity, New York, 2015.

³⁷⁹ C. Phillips, 2016, p. 128.

³⁸⁰ E. Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* Routledge, London, 2013, p. 91.

³⁸¹ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 446.

and was generously funded by Turkey³⁸², although its real impact on the conflict and influence on the territory was minimal. The SNC was far from being anything similar to the NTC, as the latter was supported by existing military achievements and benefitted by Qaddafi's lack of international support. The Syrian National Council lacked credibility, even more so as the protesters forwarded different and opposing demands which it was unwilling or unable to provide. Several other groups joined, other distanced themselves, but no common ground between them was to be found as different experiences called for different outcomes of the conflict.

In February 2012, the "Group Friends of Syria" was formed as an international forum to oppose Assad – it was formed by 114 foreign countries, among which clearly figured Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the USA, France and others. The group recognized the SNC as the "*legitimate representative*"³⁸³ of the Syrian people and opposition, but soon came to recognize the latter's weakness in the Syrian arena. Other groups like the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Force were created, with the aim of bringing about peace and humanitarian assistance but refusing to have a dialogue with the regime. Saudi Arabia became the main sponsor of the NCSROF, but it once more proved to be an inefficient group with no power to honor its proposals. Despite all this, in March 2013 the Arab League officially (as it was an only *de facto* reality before then) allowed its member states to arm the opposition forces, and invited the SNC to take the seat of Syria³⁸⁴, as Assad had been banned from the organization in November 2011.

In the midst of this chaotic fragmentation, with group affiliations being formed and broken overnight, several individual rebels would leave the more secular and moderate forces in order to join the Islamist groups. This would not only prove problematic for the enhancement of the jihadist militias *per se*, but also showcased the porousness of the opposition, making it dangerous for foreign actors to finance and train Syrians, as they might join completely different groups using the same weaponry and training for terroristic aims. As it will be analyzed with the due thoroughness in the rest of this chapter, this represented one of the main and sounder reasons why the Kremlin would not abandon Assad's side in his fight not to give in to the opposition. It was extremely hard, if not impossible, to draw a demarcation line between purely secular and exclusively jihadist groups involved in the conflict, as the former may join or use the means of the latter. Israel, too, albeit notably against an anti-Zionist government while remaining officially neutral on the conflict, expressed concern regarding the flourishing of radical Islamist forces in the Syrian territory.

³⁸² C. Phillips, 2016, p. 72.

³⁸³ 'Friends' of Syria Recognize SNC, Aljazeera, April 1st, 2012.

³⁸⁴ A. Samir, Y. Saleh, Arab League Clears Member States to Arm Syria Rebels, Reuters, March 6th, 2013.

In Summer 2012 the rebels were making their way into the regime-held territories. Violence and pure cruelty were rising – a morbid case of cannibalism was reported when a rebel commander ate the heart of a killed regime soldier in front of shooting cameras inciting other rebels to do the same³⁸⁵. In the northeast, the Kurdish forces were gaining back control of their region at the expenses of the government, but their territory was also an objective for the Islamist forces, with which fighting started. At the same time, the Syrian-based YPD (Democratic Union Party) was cooperating closely with the Turkish PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), attracting the enmity of Ankara towards itself. In this chaotic situation, the Syrian Kurds (YPD) were fighting the jihadists and received US support for that, but at the same time the YPD was working with the PKK, Erdoğan's bitter rival, causing Ankara to support the jihadist militias to curb the Kurds³⁸⁶. In short, while the Turks and the Americans were publicly supporting the rebels, they found themselves arming two opposing factions, with Ankara straightforwardly directing the jihadists. The Kurds, on the other hand, were fighting the regime forces as well as the anti-regime Islamist groups. It appears thus evident that the more the conflict unraveled, the less distinction could be made by international actors between pro- and anti-Assad forces. As a matter of fact, the Free Syrian Army included within itself several Islamist cells, and even its spokesmen have referred to jihadist groups such as Jabhat Al-Nusra as a force to be deemed necessary and integral in the fight against Bashar Al-Assad's regime³⁸⁷ (although many Western forces have supported the FSA with the explicit aim of countering the Islamists). The aim of the 'Front of Support for the People of the Levant' is officially to “*establish a Sunni Islamic State in Syria*”³⁸⁸. As such, it actively fights against the heterodox Shi'a and secular regime with the means of terrorism. The Front has been recruiting the fighters released from prison in June 2011 by Al-Assad, and has later been joined by violent extremist individuals from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Russia as well as émigrés from the UK, France, etc... Internationally, Jabhat Al-Nusra was recognized by Al-Qaeda's leader Al-Zawahiri as its only representative in Syria, and is listed as a terroristic organization by the global community, including the governments of the Russian Federation, the United States and the United Nations³⁸⁹.

As it should have become clear by now, rarely would one force be united under a comprehensive and unitary alignment: as was the case for the regime's opposition – scattered and often fighting within

³⁸⁵ P. Wood, *Face-to-face with Abu Sakkar, Syria's 'heart-eating cannibal'*, BBC News, July 5th, 2013.

³⁸⁶ E. Uslu, *Jihadist Highway to Jihadist Haven: Turkey's Jihadi Policies and Western Security*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39:9, 2016, p. 785; A. Zaman, *Salih Müslim: Çetelere mermi veriliyor*, *Taraf*, September 2013.

³⁸⁷ M. Adraoui, *The case of Jabhat Al-Nusra in the Syrian conflict 2011 -2016: Towards a strategy of nationalization?*, *Mediterranean Politics*, 24:2, 2019, pp. 260-267

³⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁸⁹ O. Egorov, D. Narmania, R. Mamedov, *Anti-government extremist organizations in Syria*, RIAC, 2016, [link](#).

itself – so were the terrorist groups. Jabhat al-Nusra was certainly not the only jihadist force in Syria to fight against Assad. Besides the Al-Qaeda branch in Syria, other extremist militias sprung in the territory, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Jaysh al-Fatah and others. However, the single group that infamously stood out for its fanaticism, power and expansion was the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. The group formed in 2006 in Iraq with the name “Islamic State of Iraq”, although it retained no territorial control. By 2011 the organization was growing weaker, but as the US troops withdrew from Iraq and the *Arab Spring* and the revolts in Syria started, its influence started growing: this is when the ISIS (which added the area of *al-Sham*, meaning Levant or Syria) was born³⁹⁰. Its leader was the Iraqi preacher Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a Sunni Salafi Muslim who led the ideological warfare of the group, focusing on one core objective: establishing a world caliphate. Among the inherent goals were the destruction of the State of Israel as well as Hamas, and the destabilization of Central Asia – regionally and internationally dangerous aspirations that attracted the world’s attention. Already in the first months of 2014 ISIS and al-Nusra clashed several times, as the two had become enemies with conflicting ideologies, regardless of their jihadist aspirations. The globalist ambition of IS was in conflict with the local reality of the Front. As such, the latter swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda while the former decided to go its own way in 2014, forming a new front within the regime opposition³⁹¹.

The Islamic State started its territorial expansion from Iraq, where it would seize large territories and loot them of their resources. Among the captured areas by the IS was Iraq’s second greatest city, Mosul, where one of the most important branches of the Iraqi National Bank was looted. This conquest alone provided the terrorists with cash resources amounting between \$0,5 and \$1 billion dollars³⁹². Baghdad was too weak to defend itself, and while the United States used the emergency situation as a leverage with the central government to have it get rid of the Shi’a Prime Minister al-Maliki, Russia armed Iraq and made sure that the capital be protected³⁹³.

With Iraq’s second city being captured, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself Caliph of the newly-founded Islamic Caliphate on June 29th, 2014³⁹⁴. From this moment on, ISIS expansion seemed unstoppable: from the Iraqi border, it entered into Eastern Syria capturing the Kurdish-majority North-East and the city of Raqqah, the Caliphate’s new capital, on to Palmyra, Aleppo, the Idlib Province and parts of Damascus. At its peak, ISIS retained control over 40-90,000 square kilometers,

³⁹⁰ Ibidem.

³⁹¹ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 451.

³⁹² E. Khvostik, “*Islamskoe gosudarstvo*” narashchivaet vyruchku, Kommersant, November 28th, 2014, p. 8.

³⁹³ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 452.

³⁹⁴ *Isis rebels declare 'Islamic state' in Iraq and Syria*, BBC News, June 30th 2014.

a population of 8 million³⁹⁵ and, as Russian Defense Minister S. K. Shoygu reported in 2015, 70% of the Syrian territory (although most of it was uninhabited desert) and 60,000 fighters³⁹⁶.

We will now navigate through the main international reconciliatory attempts, observing the Russian role in them, and the global divisions regarding the resolution of the conflict. We have hereby given a general introduction to the issue of terrorism in general and Jabhat al-Nusra in particular, and these topics will be further investigated after the following paragraph in order to better grasp the Russian and Israeli policies in Syria, and the risks and opportunities that this conflict brings about.

International Reconciliation Attempts

The Arab League

Through the end of 2011 and the first months of 2012, violence in the Syrian conflict was mounting and the conflict started gaining international resonance. The Arab League, after an initial period of complete silence, started becoming vocal about a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the summer of 2011, and sent its Secretary General Nabil Al-Aaraby to Damascus for negotiations with Assad. In September, the head of the AL declared that “*A deal has been agreed*”³⁹⁷: not only would the Syrian President implement reforms to foster the political and civil rights of the citizens, but he would also withdraw the tanks and the military forces from the streets and call for elections. Unfortunately, Al-Aaraby understood that the regime’s promises were rarely met with the corresponding deeds. Indeed, later in November, Assad accepted a new deal proposed by the League of Arab States: this time not only would his tanks be withdrawn from the cities, but the Alawite President promised he would also end the violence altogether, release political prisoners and open a dialogue with the opposition³⁹⁸. Only a few days had to pass before Al-Aaraby could once more observe the worthlessness of Assad’s promises: on November 16th Syria was expelled by the Arab League and an economic sanctions’ regime against it was started³⁹⁹.

A fundamental aspect to understand the League’s activism in the Syrian conflict lays, as it often is the case, in the interests of its president. As a matter of fact, the Arab League’s rotating presidency in 2010 was held by the State of Qatar. Although it should have passed to Iraq on February 2011, Doha lobbied its way to obtain a one-year extension of the presidency, with the goal of dealing with

³⁹⁵ S. Tarasov, *Blizhnii Vostok: diagnostika budushchego goda*, Regnum, December 27th, 2014.

³⁹⁶ *Shoigu: zona vliyaniya ‘Islamskogo gosudarstv’ rastet, zakhvacheno 70% territorii Sirii*, TASS, December 11th, 2015.

³⁹⁷ *Arab League says Syria reform deal agreed*, AlJazeera, September 10th, 2011.

³⁹⁸ C. Phillips, 2016, p. 89.

³⁹⁹ M. Küçükkeleş, *Arab League’s Syrian Policy*, SETA Policy brief N° 56, April 2012.

the Syrian crisis from a position of relevance⁴⁰⁰. Even more so, the previously active states of Libya, Syria and Egypt had been weakened by the *Arab spring*, and Doha could thus take a predominant role in the organization without major obstacles.

It is however important to briefly discuss the effectiveness of the League of Arab States and its strength, as they should not be overestimated. The AL differs greatly from other regional intergovernmental organizations like the European Union, as it lacks economic coordination, its 22 member states are unwilling to give in parts of their sovereignty, and thus make the League rarely effective and poor in common resources. In this light, the following can be better understood: in December 2012, a monitoring group was sent to Syria from the League of Arab States, but it was underfunded, unexperienced, and too small numerically to make a difference, or even be accounted as a serious counterpart from the Syrian regime⁴⁰¹. On January 22nd, the Qatari Prime Minister proposed a new peace plan, which encompassed Assad' resignation in favor of his Vice President and dialogue with the opposition. As the deal was rejected by the Syrian regime, the Arab League's mission to Syria was withdrawn. In conclusion, the Arab League's attempt to use political means for the resolution of the conflict can be summed up with a logic explanation: the leading countries Qatar and Saudi Arabia wanted to show to the rest of the League (as well as the international community) that the peaceful means had been used, and they proved ineffective. As such, only a military intervention, inspired by the Libyan experience, of course, could represent the end of the Syrian atrocities⁴⁰². On March 6th, 2013, on a Qatari proposal, the League of Arab States stressed the right of its members to arm the Syrian rebels⁴⁰³.

The Russian Federation

The Russian role in the international reconciliation attempts was particularly impacting thanks to its seat of permanent member of the United Nations' Security Council with veto power. Often backed by China, Russia vetoed several UNSC Resolutions against the Assad regime: on October 4th, 2011, the two countries used this power to turn down a draft resolution in the SC that, as the UN News report, "*had strongly condemned Syrian authorities for their violent crackdown against pro-democracy protesters this year and called for an immediate end to human rights abuses*"⁴⁰⁴. The statement made by the Russian Ambassador at the UN Vitaliy Churkin on this regard was that, while Russia did not support the Assad regime, it believed that said resolution would not bring the parties

⁴⁰⁰ C. Phillips, 2016, p. 90.

⁴⁰¹ *Ex-Arab League monitor labels Syria mission 'a farce'*, BBC News, January 11th, 2012.

⁴⁰² H. Hassan, *Syria, the view from the Gulf States*, ECFR, June 2013.

⁴⁰³ A. Samir, Y. Saleh, *Arab League Clears Member States to Arm Syria Rebels*, Reuters, March 6th, 2013

⁴⁰⁴ *Russia and China veto draft Security Council resolution on Syria*, UN News, October 4th, 2011.

closer to peace. In his words: “*such an approach could trigger a full-fledged conflict in Syria and destabilization in the region as a whole. The collapse of Syria as a result of a civil war would have a very destructive impact on the situation in the entire Middle East.*”, and he continues, “*Our proposals for wording on the non-acceptability of foreign military intervention were not taken into account, and, based on the well-known events in North Africa, that can only put us on our guard. Equally alarming is the weak wording in connection with the opposition and the lack of an appeal to them to distance themselves from extremists.*”⁴⁰⁵. Ambassador Churkin’s words are of utmost clarity and reflect perfectly the Russian stand, which has remained coherent since the beginning of the conflict. The Kremlin has held that a foreign intervention, and even more so, a foreign approach leading to the destabilization and thus collapse of the Syrian regime, could only have a disastrous effect, both on the population of Syria and on the region as a whole. It will be showed and proved later as well how a similar scenario, with the growing and strengthening of extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS for Russia (and Hamas and Hezbollah for Israel), could have a global impact on the stability of Eurasia and the rest of the world as a whole. The Russian ambassador goes on to note how the resolution his team had drafted, together with the fellow delegates of Brazil, India, China and South Africa (the BRICS countries) and was later discarded in the forum, called for the respect for the “*national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as well as the principle of non-intervention, including military, in its affairs; the principle of the unity of the Syrian people; refraining from confrontation; and inviting all to an even-handed and comprehensive dialogue aimed at achieving civil peace and national agreement by reforming the socioeconomic and political life of the country*”⁴⁰⁶. These were, and are to date, the core principles behind the Russian position in the Syrian conflict.

In a renewed attempt to curb the Western and Sunni plans to destabilize Syria, on February 4th 2012, Churkin’s delegation used again their veto power to block the Security Council’s resolution demanding Syria to accept the January 22nd’s Arab League plan. Whereas this did not encompass a military intervention or a direct threat *stricto sensu* towards Assad, it still requested him to step down in favor of his Vice President Shara’a and lead a political transition⁴⁰⁷. The Kremlin later also opposed the UNSC proposals of deploying non-violent sanctions against Assad *ex art. 41* (July 19th, 2011)⁴⁰⁸ and the referral of the regime before the International Criminal Court (May 22nd, 2014)⁴⁰⁹. After the

⁴⁰⁵ Security Council Sixty-sixth year 6627th meeting Tuesday, 4 October 2011, 6 p.m. New York, p.4

⁴⁰⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁰⁷ *Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Syria as Russian Federation, China Veto Text Supporting Arab League’s Proposed Peace Plan*, United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, February 4th, 2012.

⁴⁰⁸ S/2012/538

⁴⁰⁹ S/2014/348

Russian military intervention in Syria, ten more UN Security Council resolutions have been vetoed by Russia, which also had China's support on four of them.

However, the Kremlin did not present itself as a stubborn and obstinate international player, as it did support the first Arab League's peace plan presented to Assad in November 2011. It is indeed true that the regime did sign the agreement, and Moscow is thought to have pressured Damascus in this direction⁴¹⁰. It was, though, Damascus who did not follow through with the obligations it had signed for. In order to show its renewed commitment to resolve the conflict in a nationally and regionally sustainable way, Moscow also supported the Kofi Annan's March 2012 peace plan. This was a political diplomatic settlement set out by the former Secretary General of the United Nations, which had been nominated Special Envoy for the UN and Arab League in Syria. The agreement called on the Syrian authorities to: start a dialogue with the Envoy in order to work for an "inclusive Syrian-led political process"⁴¹¹ for peace; commit to stop violence by all parties under a UN-supervised ceasefire; ensure humanitarian assistance; release political prisoners; ensure freedom for journalists and respect the right of the people to peacefully demonstrate⁴¹². A truce was called on April 12th, 2012; Parliamentary elections were held in the government-held areas – with a voter turnout of 51%, the Baath party obtained the majority of new MPs (168), followed by independents (77) and the Popular Front for Change and Liberation won 5 seats⁴¹³. A partial withdrawal of the regime's military forces also took place, but the truce, alas, did not last long. While the regime finally respected the ceasefire, Christopher Phillips reports that the international forces did not stand by the opposition on this and at times "*actively supported the task of disrupting ceasefire*"⁴¹⁴; on the same note, the Russian diplomat and MGIMO professor M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva stated that "*Russian diplomats called upon Asad's opponents to comply with the provisions of Annan's plan [...] However, the oppositionists replied that other external players tell them completely the opposite things. Namely – "do not lay down your weapons", "abroad will help you"*"⁴¹⁵. This can be seen as the epitome of how entangled the internal and international forces had become, and how the former had stopped acting on their own and really believed that the latter's involvement would eventually help them wipe out the regime. Peace did not last. On August 2nd, Kofi Annan resigned and published an article on the Financial Times called "My Departing Advice on How to Save Syria". This illuminating piece

⁴¹⁰ D. W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, Yale University Press, London, 2013, p. 188.

⁴¹¹ K. Annan, *Annan's Peace Plan for Syria*, Council on Foreign Relations, March 2012.

⁴¹² *Ibidem*.

⁴¹³ *Syria election results show support for reforms, says Assad*, BBC News, May 16th, 2012; *Syrian Arab Republic*, Electionguide.org, May 7th, 2012. [Link](#).

⁴¹⁴ C. Phillips, 2016, p. 229.

⁴¹⁵ M. Khodynskaia-Golenishcheva, *Na pravilnoy storone istorii*, Siriyskiy krizis v kontekste stanovleniya mnogopoliarnogo miroustroystva, M., OLMA Media Grupp, 2015, p. 248.

explains the reasons for Annan’s resignation – the frustration for the stalemate reached by the conflict – which rooted in the international interest-seekers and the blind reluctance to take “*bilateral and collective effort by all countries with influence over the actors on the ground in Syria, to press upon the parties that a political solution is essential*”. He went on giving specific advice: “*For Russia, China and Iran this means they must take concerted efforts to persuade Syria’s leadership to change course and embrace a political transition, realizing the current government has lost all legitimacy*” and, he continues, “*For the US, UK, France, Turkey Saudi Arabia and Qatar this means pressing the opposition to embrace a fully inclusive political process – that will include communities and institutions currently associated with the government. This also means recognizing that the future of Syria rises and falls on more than the fate of just one man*”⁴¹⁶.

Before resigning, however, Annan had established an international forum called the “Action Group for Syria”, gathering the permanent members of the UNSC, the UN secretary general and the high representatives of the EU, the Arab League and several Arab countries. A few days after its foundation, the group met in Switzerland to draft a final communiqué, the so-called “Geneva I” to identify the necessary steps to implement the UNSC resolution 2042 and 2043 (deployment of UN observers and implementing of the peace plan). The Geneva communiqué was supported by all 5 SC permanent members, which jointly agreed on a Syrian-led transition and “*The establishment of a transitional governing body that can establish a neutral environment in which the transition can take place [...]. It could include members of the present Government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent*”⁴¹⁷. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insisted in and was successful on excluding the stepping down of Assad from the communiqué⁴¹⁸. Notwithstanding the common effort made by the international actors, together with the Syrian supporter, the Kremlin, Assad stated that he would not accept any outside solution on how to tackle the conflict.

Russia: What is at Stake in Syria?

We have seen that Russia took the side of the regime since the early stage of the conflict, as the Kremlin understood that it had to avoid a foreign-led transition in Syria. Instability in the country and a possible reshuffling of the ruling force could disrupt the region and have even more resonating

⁴¹⁶ K. Annan, *My departing advice on how to save Syria*, Kofi Annan Foundation, August 5th, 2012.

⁴¹⁷ *Identical letters dated 5 July 2012 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council*, A/66/865–S/2012/522, 9, a).

⁴¹⁸ *UN envoy calls for transitional government in Syria*, BBC News, June 30th, 2012.

consequences. But what were really the interests of Moscow in the country, how were these shaped and how were they turned into policy?

In order to fully grasp the Syrian strategy of the Kremlin it is fundamental to outline its relevant foreign policy priorities both globally and regionally. These have been enumerated in previous paragraphs and will only be briefly summed up. Globally, the Russian Federation aimed at obtaining and enforcing its Great Power status, as well as underlining the centrality of the United Nations' Security Council as the most relevant multilateral forum regulated by international law. In Russia's opinion, this should be the only body to be entitled to allow the use of force internationally. Regionally, the presence of the Kremlin in the Syrian conflict could serve its goal of global relevance – representing the bearer of order in a war-torn area. Even more so, supporting Bashar al-Assad would impede the West to act unilaterally and start a foreign-led transition. This would encompass great costs for the region's stability and the Syrian people's independence, as a void of power could easily be filled by local extremist militias or biased leaders that might cut Moscow out in desperately pro-American moves. Russia had already seen how Libya and Afghanistan had fallen victim of the Western dominance in their political transition, and the result in both cases was a spiraling of violence, unrest, instability, refugee flows, extremist ideology's growth and so on. On the 2012 Sochi meeting of the Valdai Club, discussing the situation in the Middle East, the Russian academician Vasiliev successfully outlined the three main priorities of the Federation in Syria at that time. *"1. First of all, it is necessary to stop the bloodshed. 2. The Syrians themselves should solve the Syrian conflict by political means, without resorting to violence. 3. Foreign interference in Syrian affairs should not be allowed"*⁴¹⁹. This vision was endorsed by Deputy Foreign Minister M. Bogdanov, and remained the cornerstone of the Russian policy throughout the duration of the conflict. Later on, Russia added the preservation of Syria's sovereignty and its minorities' rights among said principles, but the concept remained unvaried. This notwithstanding, what could surprise a foreign observer is the following paradox: The West and the Sunni states called for a foreign intervention in Syria, while Russia opposed it in the UNSC. However, in the past, the United States did carry out military interventions (in Iraq and Serbia) disregarding the UN's permission. In fact, Washington led a world-wide coalition in these wars. Hence, the UNSC does not retain complete control over foreign (especially US) armies if they are determined in their actions. As for Russia, the advocate of the Security Council's primacy, it is the (only) one who deployed its air force in Syria in 2015. There is a twofold explanation to this riddle: firstly, the United States (Obama) was averse to any kind of foreign military expedition, as it was costly, risky, surely swampy and difficult to manage. However, it was politically inconvenient not to showcase Washington's role as world-saver by not threatening

⁴¹⁹ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 463

Syria of intervening. Thus, the UNSC proposed the use of force but, as Russia turned it down, Obama was relieved of the duty to intervene in Syria. While he had demonstrated his resolution against the “bloody tyrant”, Russia could be identified as the ally of a ruthless regime. In the second place, it is true that Russia intervened in Syria without the Security Council’s consent. However, the Kremlin acted in complete accordance with international law: it was Syria who officially requested Russian intervention in the conflict⁴²⁰. After all, while the Russian Federation represents the only foreign country to be officially and directly involved, other non-state actors such as Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards’ Corps are also fighting the terroristic forces in Syria.

Indeed, the growth of terrorism in Syria represented one of the most pressing issues for the Kremlin. The rise of the Al-Qaeda branch Jabhat al-Nusra and the growth of the Caliphate, together with the plethora of other jihadist groups, represented a multi-faceted threat for Russia. The most notable of all, the Islamic State, also represented a major menace in the global context. With its steady expansion, ISIS had started a state-like economy mainly based on oil revenues from seized wells, hostage ransoms and robberies. As A. Vasiliev reported: “*Despite the chimerical plans and medieval rhetoric, it was a temporary but real structure*”⁴²¹. As such, the Caliphate was expanding territorially in Syria, seizing power and resources, and fought both the regime, the other terrorist groups and the Kurdish forces indiscriminately. It was gathering fighters not just locally, but thanks to its extensive and effective propaganda structure it was able to reach out to Muslim émigrés in all parts of the world. Countless stories have been told of Europeans, North Americans, North Africans and others who radicalized online and left the comfort of their lives behind to join the Islamic State and lost their lives in Syria. However, even more worryingly, the global outreach of the group was not limited to its recruitment for fighters for the Syrian cause. Since 2014, all continents, with the exception of South America, witnessed ISIS-led or -inspired terrorist attacks. Russia experienced a Church shooting carried out by a 22-year-old Dagestani in the town of Kizlyar, and the bombing of a Russian airplane en route from Sharm el-Sheikh to Saint Petersburg, where no passenger or crew member survived. As for Israel, while the country did not experience direct attacks by ISIS, the Jewish community worldwide was repeatedly targeted, either by members of the Caliphate or by individuals who had been inspired by it. However, Russia did not fear, if not partly, for its safety from terrorist attacks *per se*. More widely, Putin’s greatest concern was the spread of a jihadist ideology that could contaminate the 20-million-strong Sunni Muslim population of Russia. This part of the Federation’s citizens resides mainly in the southern regions of the federation, the Northern Caucasus and South

⁴²⁰ *Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad: Exclusive Interview | NBC Nightly News*, YouTube, from minute 3:30, [link](#) ; *Siria, raid della Russia contro l'Isis. Damasco: "è stato Assad a chiedere intervento"*, Rai News, September 30th, 2015.

⁴²¹ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 454.

Russia, and additionally, all of the CIS countries (the immediate Russian sphere of influence) have a majority Sunni Muslim population and neighbor directly the Middle East. The regional spillover effect of ISIS, added to its global outreach thanks to the propaganda machine, made Russia extremely wary of the jihadist group's evolution.

In his years of presidency, Vladimir V. Putin had already experienced, tackled and overcome the threat of terrorism inside Russia. The cited Chechen Wars saw the Federation trying to contain not only a conflict in a geographically limited area, but also the expansion of a jihadist ideology within the region. The federation was not only attacked militarily in Chechnya, but several parts of the country suffered from terrible terroristic attacks. The most infamous, both for resonance and inhumanity, was the Beslan school siege, where the Chechen Islamic group – separatist and jihadist in ideology – took 1,099 people as hostages, including 777 children, and caused the deaths of 333 people, half of which were aged 1 to 17⁴²². The official website of the city of Beslan reports that: *“In 1418 days and nights of the Great Patriotic War (World War Two, D. D’A.), 357 adult men from the village of Tulatovo, now called Beslan, died. Now - within minutes - almost the same amount. Moreover, most of them are kids”*⁴²³. Hence, when in Syria similar *mujahideen* forces were seizing power, a renewed secular state vs. Sunni Islamism fight was apparent. The Kremlin could not let these groups achieve their objectives and risk a new wave of terrorism in Russia, and in the rest of the world, as it was. Syria can be therefore described as a reminiscence of Chechnya for Putin in this regard. If we take this analogy as valid, Vladimir Vladimirovich words on the situation in North Caucasus will help better grasp his vision with regards to insurgent extremist forces: *“The essence of the ... situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya ... is the continuation of the collapse of the USSR.... If we did not quickly do something to stop it, Russia as a state in its current form would cease to exist.”*⁴²⁴. In fact, Putin did not want Syria to become a new Afghanistan, where the void of power left by the exiting foreign forces gave space to breeding jihadist forces and created enormous waves of refugees; nor a new Libya, where the Western intervention caused the failure of the state and the spread of terrorism, and the country became a major exporter of fighters and uncontrolled weapons⁴²⁵; nor a new Chechnya, where radicalization could be fostered. However, former USNSC advisor F. Hill argues that Syria is not Chechnya for four main reasons: firstly, Assad does not retain the same military resources and territorial control like Putin did with the Chechens – therefore, the conflict deteriorates the central state day by day. Secondly, given the extreme fragmentation of the

⁴²² *V pamyat' o pogibshih... My pomnim – O sobytyah*, City of Beslan, retrieved [here](#).

⁴²³ *Ibidem*.

⁴²⁴ In: F. Hill, *The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad Mistaking Syria for Chechnya*, Foreign Affairs, March 25th, 2013.

⁴²⁵ *Ibidem*.

opposition and the terrorist groups, targeted killings against the heads of the opposing forces would prove an inefficient strategy. Thirdly, Syria detains Weapons of Mass Destruction creating a proliferation threat: “*Chechnya is in a bad neighborhood, but Syria is in a terrible neighborhood*”⁴²⁶: the spillover effect in Syria would resonate across continents. Lastly, the scale of humanitarian costs and destruction is not comparable between the two conflicts.

Did Russia have a choice? The three scenarios.

As a result, Russia had no alternative than to support the Assad regime in an attempt to avoid a vast-scale geopolitical disaster. Three main scenarios were before Putin in 2015, and all of them seemed to naturally call for a Russian intervention in order to maintain order. The first scenario was that of an abandoned Syria – one that remained in the hands of Assad and lacked international backing, both for the regime and for the opposition. The second scenario pictured Syria in the hands of the West and, the third one, envisioned a Qatari/Turkish domination over the country. In the first case, a democratic transition would prove impossible, as the secular opposition is too scattered, the jihadist forces are the ones that could gather the most power but they, too, would fight one another till destruction before agreeing on a new leadership. Thus, Syria would become an even more fertile soil for radicalization and a haven for extremist forces around the world. Given the fragility of its neighbors, the Islamist wave could easily extend to Iraq and Lebanon, gain more power, and later dangerously move to Central Asia and be in the Russian front yard, inciting its Muslim population to join the struggle against secularism – in this case, Moscow. A world-class jihadist agenda would thus become a realistic objective for these forces, and global terrorism would scale up to critical points. The Russian sphere of influence would be directly threatened, its domestic stability undermined, and potentially 12% of the Federation’s population could turn up against their country. Moreover, such an either weak or jihadist Syria would be a great destabilizing factor in the Middle East and North Africa region, upsetting the existing fragile balance and adding fuel to the Sunni-Shi’a confrontation. Russia would certainly lose an important partner in the region, whose regime has allowed it to base its navy in the port of Tartūs, the Kremlin’s only access to the Mediterranean and foothold in the Middle East, and a strategic ally in the arms supply.

In the second scenario, where Syria is exclusively dealt with by the West, meaning a US-led coalition with France and Great Britain following its steps, the problems are multiple. Firstly, both President Obama and President Trump have rejected the interventionist policies of the previous American administrations, and would not get actively involved in a conflict so entangled and so far away from

⁴²⁶ Ibidem.

their border. The existing involvement of the Western coalition is limited – not by the Russian veto alone, it has been shown – to a political support and semi-official funding to specific rebel groups. It has been proved, however, that the rebel forces, for instance the FSA, are not homogeneous, and oftentimes the resources that were shipped to Syria to fight Assad were used by ISIS or other groups to fight the Kurds or other rebels⁴²⁷. On this regard, US President Donald Trump admitted that, while Washington is willing to support the secular and “moderate” anti-regime forces: “*We have no idea who those people are*”⁴²⁸, underlining the high-level impossibility to identify Syrian forces who are not somehow linked to terrorist groups. The case of a full-scale military intervention, thus, is highly unlikely, and would mean a breach of the Syrian people’s sovereignty and independence. Foreign funding, however, is equally fueling *jihadism*. Since inter-forces dialogue have proved impossible and ineffective thus far, the crumbling of the Assad regime would be inevitable and the consequences would be those enumerated in the first scenario. A perfect example of this was provided by the 2013 regime’s chemical attacks on the oasis of Ghuta – a rebel-controlled area in the outskirts of Damascus. As the public opinion could not accept a similar war crime to happen without the US taking the right measures, Obama was urged to intervene in the conflict. However, Russia and Iran believed the attacks to have been carried out by the rebels themselves instead of Assad, and Moscow negotiated with Washington that, instead, they would rid Syria of the chemical weapons, avoiding military interventions⁴²⁹. Obama had declared in 2012 that the use of poisonous substances was the “red line” that would have forced the US to intervene in the conflict. However, being reluctant to wage war in the Middle East, the White House resident accepted the Kremlin’s deal, showcasing two important points: firstly, the US had certainly abandoned the interventionist policy and would not be expected to take direct part in the conflict; secondly, Moscow was now able to (and successful in) negotiating and striking deal with the United States: Russia was, once again, to be considered a Great Power – it dealt with the USA as equals⁴³⁰.

As for a Turkish/Qatari-led conflict resolution, this would encompass a difficult rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood. If this was to happen, a stable government would be first necessary, and this would prove hard to find within the opposition, for the aforementioned reasons, and hypocrite if made with Assad. In the highly unlikely case this was to succeed, Syria would stir away from its traditional Shi’a allies, as well as the Sunni monarchies of the Gulf. It would destabilize the region with a new setting and a renewed (and instable) balance of power. Iran would lose its strategic partner, the core

⁴²⁷ D. E. Sanger, *Donald Trump Likely to End Aid for Rebels Fighting Syrian Government*, The New York Times November 11th, 2016.

⁴²⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴²⁹ D. Trenin, *What is Russia Up To in the Middle East?*, Polity, Cambridge, 2018, p. 51.

⁴³⁰ D. Trenin, 2018, p. 51

of its corridor to the Mediterranean and to Israel, Russia would likely lose its rights over Tartūs and its privileged position with Syria and, once again, the Syrian people's independence and sovereignty would be disregarded.

What is common to the last two scenarios is that a foreign-backed regime change would be justified and once more normalized, risking to unsettle the international geopolitical balance, and possibly even inspire further rebellions with the hope of an external intervention. As Putin stated at the Valdai meeting in December 2015: *“Unilateral diktats and forcing one's political framework [onto other states] produces exactly the opposite [of the intended result]: instead of conflict settlement, escalation; instead of sovereign, stable states, a growing expanse of chaos”*⁴³¹.

The following pages will look into the “fourth scenario”, the one that did turn into reality: the Russian intervention in Syria.

The 2015 Russian Military Intervention

It has been demonstrated how Vladimir Putin could not have simply stood aside and watched Syria unravel, as the consequences would have been dramatic. The Russian President rather believed that the threat of terrorism was becoming too dangerous and imminent, and acted according to the quote: *“when a fight is inevitable, you have to hit first”*⁴³², as he admitted himself. The Chief of Russian General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov on this note declared: *“ISIS would have continued to gather momentum and would have spread to adjacent countries. We would have had to confront that force on our own territory. They would be operating in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Volga region [of Russia]”*⁴³³. In addition, Gerasimov added that the timing of the operation was a central factor: *“If we had not intervened in Syria, what would have happened? [...] in 2015 just over 10 percent of the territory remained under government control. A month or two more, by the end of 2015, and Syria would have been completely under ISIS [rule]”*⁴³⁴. As a matter of fact, until 2015, Russian support to warring Syria was present but limited to the diplomatic sphere (in the international *fora*) and arms sales, mainly. This was due to the fact that, differently from the general view of the West and the Gulf monarchies, the Kremlin did expect Assad to remain in power and survive the opposition; however, as foreign backing bolstered the rebels' offensive and the terrorist groups grew exponentially, the situation in 2015 became too challenging for the regime to withstand much longer.

⁴³¹ President of Russia, Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, October 24th, 2014.

⁴³² N. Buckley, *Putin on Isis: 'when a fight is inevitable, you hit first'*, Financial Times, October 23rd, 2015.

⁴³³ V. Baranets, *Nachal'nik genshtaba vooruzhennykh sil Rosssii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov: 'My perelomili khrebet udarnym silam terrorizma*, Komsomol'skaya pravda, December 26th, 2017.

⁴³⁴ Ibidem.

The expansion of ISIS at the expenses of Assad represented the culprit of Russian concern: the terrorist forces were expanding, gaining territory and recruiting new fighters and, at the same time, the regime was on the verge of collapse. It was a twofold catastrophe that Russia could not simply observe with worry from afar. As for the terrorist threat, as it has already been discussed, it represented an enormous risk from Russia in terms of both regional and domestic security. ISIS's ideology was attracting many Russian-speaking Muslims: the Soufan Center reports that, as of 2017, approximately 3,500 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq came from Russia, although only 400 of them had returned home from the battlefield⁴³⁷. The Federation represented the single largest source of foreign fighters, and the Kremlin wanted to minimize the domestic risks that the eventual returnees would necessarily bring about. Even more so, the radicalized Russian-speakers from the CIS and the RF collectively mounted up to 7'000 individuals, and they could hardly be controlled at home, much less would it have been possible to do so in Central Asia. In this light of containing the jihadist expansion, President Putin declared that it was necessary to: "*Take the initiative and fight and destroy the terrorists in the territory they have already captured rather than waiting for them to arrive on our soil*"⁴³⁸ – as such, the Kremlin needed to prevent them from returning home altogether, which required their elimination in Syria⁴³⁹.

As for the collapse of the Assad regime, the Islamic State was ready to quickly replace it and seize the whole of Syria – it would have been the cornerstone of a lengthy and prominent escalation of the Caliphate. As the threat was becoming increasingly clear, on September 29th, the Syrian Presidency officially invited the Russian Federation to intervene militarily in its aid against the terrorist threat posed by ISIS and the other jihadist groups⁴⁴⁰. With Russia's acceptance the following day, the military expedition in the Syrian territory began, and it did so in complete respect of international law – which justifies this type of actions in the exclusive cases of UNSC's approval or, as in this case, a state's direct invitation. Discussions on this regard were held before the official invitation and, as a convergence of interests was identified, the Kremlin received the official approval of the Upper House to deploy the military in Syria.

However, Moscow was not willing to be entangled with a lengthy and bloody conflict. The Afghan war had left the Russian people scarred with the so-called Afghan syndrome, causing a high reluctance towards foreign military involvement. As such, action in the territory of the Arab Republic

⁴³⁷ R. Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, Soufan Group, New York, October 2017.

⁴³⁸ President of Russia, Meeting with Government Members, September 30th, 2015.

⁴³⁹ D. Trenin, 2018, p. 62.

⁴⁴⁰ *Siria, raid della Russia contro l'Isis. Damasco: "è stato Assad a chiedere intervento"*, Rai News, September 30th, 2015

was restricted and directed specifically to the achievement of Moscow's objective. Russia's intervention, Dmitri Trenin argues, could be defined as: expeditionary, air-dominated, coalition-based and limited⁴⁴¹. It has been expeditionary as Russia has fought in a foreign, non-bordering country. As such, all of the troops and weaponries have been deployed thousands of kilometers away from the sovereign territory of the Federation. Secondly, the strikes have been carried out mainly by the Russian air force and partly by the Navy. While the latter has mainly intervened by launching missiles from its ships docked in Tartūs or in the Caspian Sea⁴⁴², the former is strategically deployed in a way that aims at minimizing the Russian casualties. As a matter of fact, although the electorate grew increasingly supportive of Putin's move⁴⁴³, in line with his popular "*assertive foreign policy*"⁴⁴⁴, the Kremlin was not willing to sacrifice more troops for a war in a foreign land, as it had happened in Afghanistan. This caused Russia to engage many mercenaries, whose death tolls would not count on the official statistics and thus maintain its casualty-count near to zero⁴⁴⁵. Thirdly, given the predominantly air-strike strategy, the Russian intervention needed to be coalition-based, too, where its *raids* would be accompanied by ground operations carried out by the Syrian army. This caused a high degree of cooperation, both military and strategic, between Moscow and Damascus. Lastly, the Russian operation would only be limited. The conflict was to be kept from escalating, and the temporary nature of the intervention was to be respected, in order not to be swamped in a new Afghanistan.

A fundamental trait to appreciate fully the Russian military action in Syria is the understanding that Moscow only deployed its air force once it perceived that all other means had been exhausted, resulting to be fruitless. Namely, the Kremlin developed several diplomatic tracks, some of which even continued after the military intervention, however they all proved to be ineffective due to several factors, such as: the Syrian actors' unwillingness to compromise; Assad's disregard for the difficultly agreed-upon deals, which caused him to lose credibility in the diplomatic struggle; and the foreign backing of the rebels that incited them to proceed fighting instead of bending to the regime. The Geneva I communiqué, which surprisingly found all five members of the United Nations' Security Council consonant, ended up in failure due to Assad's defiance, and a new round of peace talks took place in the Swiss city again in 2014. It consisted of an "inter-Syrian negotiation"⁴⁴⁶, with representative delegations of both the regime and the opposition. Months before the beginning of the

⁴⁴¹ D. Trenin, 2018, p. 54.

⁴⁴² Ibidem, p. 65.

⁴⁴³ V. Razuvaev, *Chto oznachaet operatsiya v Sirii dlya rossiiskoy politiki*, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, November 3rd, 2015.

⁴⁴⁴ S. Charap, E. Treyger, E. Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, Rand, 2019.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁴⁶ A. Vasiliev, 2018, p. 470

conference, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and US Secretary of State Kerry structured as a task-sharing strategy: while Moscow would work with Damascus to have a delegation of the regime being present at the talks, Washington would have dealt with the opposition forces⁴⁴⁷. As it is now clear, the US had to face a highly fragmented front, with several opposing groups clashing with each other. However, as of 2014, the Islamist forces had not yet acquired the power and representativeness they obtained later and their absence strongly facilitated the delegation-building process. Nevertheless, to identify a unitary representative of the Syrian people proved a difficult task, and one that left many unsatisfied. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva argues that the US policy was based on two basic assumptions: firstly, the President Bashar al-Assad had lost legitimacy and all of the Syrian people wanted him to resign; secondly, the National Coalition was the only rightful representative of the Syrians⁴⁴⁸. These two ideas were not accurately reflecting the reality of the Syrian theatre and, as for the National Coalition, it demanded the resignation of Assad before any negotiation could take place. For this reason, the Coalition split before the conference. As a result, Geneva II did not gather all the rightful representatives of the Syrian factions with scattered and partial delegations, it was predominantly coordinated by the United States, Russia and the UN, and did not lead to any agreement of sorts. It represented yet another failure of multilateral diplomacy and the continuation of brutal violence and repression.

Ultimately, the support Russia had provided Syria with until 2015 had proved insufficient to curb the protesters and, most importantly, to impede the growth and spread of terrorist groups. It was deemed necessary to eliminate the threat at its source without causing, at the same time, significant Russian casualties. For that reason, the air force strategy proved the most effective and profitable.

Between Russia and Israel is Iran

As the Israeli National Security Strategy reported, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been representing the single most important threat to the Jewish State for decades. However, as it was analyzed earlier, Moscow has not refrained from cooperating with Teheran in various spheres: trade, technology, diplomacy and, since 2015, military coordination in Syria, as well. Whereas the overall relationship between the Russian Federation and Iran never constituted a pillar of either state's foreign policy, the common support for Damascus has changed their attitudes. The Kremlin was pursuing a purely interest-based diplomacy, where good but limited relations could permit it not to take sides in Iran's various conflicts (the Sunni-Shi'a fracture, the Iranian-Israeli struggle) and thus maintain equally

⁴⁴⁷ M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, 2015, p. 263

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

beneficial relations with all the region's actors. When Moscow and Teheran met in Syria, however, their common strategy hid strongly diverging long-term objectives. As it is now clear, (part of) Putin's strategy in Syria is to curb the opposition and allow Assad to remain in power – and this is perfectly in line with the Rouhani's efforts in the country. However, the overarching aim of the former is to get rid of terrorism and mediate for a peaceful and stabilizing political transition – with the formation of a friendly and non-disruptive post-Assad Syria. Whereas for Iran, its goal in the country is different and not compatible with Russia's. Teheran needs post-war Syria to be subjugated to it because of its regional role: the Arab Republic represented the corridor from Western Asia to the Mediterranean, thanks to which weapons and funding can reach Hezbollah and the Al-Quds forces in Lebanon; it is the ally on whose territory Iranian military bases are welcome to spy and prepare attacks against Israel, which is only one border away⁴⁴⁹; finally, the decades-strong alliance with the Assad family is a fundamental priority for Teheran to be preserved, as a new rule could easily halt the regional strategy of the former Persia. A different leadership, which is likely to be Sunni if not openly anti-Iran, would undermine Iran's regional ambitions, disrupting the Shi'ite Axis: Teheran, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut⁴⁵⁰. As such, if Putin wants a political transition for a legitimate representative of a stable post-war Syria, Rouhani looks at the preservation of the highly convenient *status quo ante bellum*, which would allow it to continue exerting its influence on the Levant. It would be a great miscalculation to account the two states as allies, given their opposing visions over Syria, however it is in the interest of both powers to maintain an active dialogue in the battlefield. Russia needs Iran's military on the ground in order to avoid the demise of Assad⁴⁵¹ in favor of the rebels (or worse, the terrorists). Moreover, the presence of another foreign force to support Assad in Syria allows Moscow to limit its involvement.

As a matter of fact, Iran is the single most conflicting issue between Israel and Russia: the Islamic Republic repeatedly vowed for the complete elimination of the Jewish State⁴⁵² while Moscow is actively cooperating with it in the Syrian conflict. How can this relationship be fruitful for Jerusalem, and who is the Kremlin really allied with: Iran or Israel? As it should have been clear by now, Russia and Israel share a *Realpolitik* that allows them not only to pursue apparently opposing policies, but also to understand how neither side's decisions are value-based. It is therefore fully in Israel's comprehension how Moscow can maintain both tracks operating, although this surely requires

⁴⁴⁹ M. Behraves, *Iran's Syria Policy post-IS: Staying for the Long Haul*, Middle East Eye, November 15th, 2017.

⁴⁵⁰ *Iran: Syria Part of Axis of Resistance*, CNN News, August 8th, 2012.

⁴⁵¹ C. Lovotti, *Redistribution of Power in the Middle East: Moscow's Return to Syria*, in: K. Mezran, A. Varvelli, *The MENA region: A great power competition*, Atlantic Council, October 8th, 2019, p. 75

⁴⁵² T. Staff, *Top Iranian general vows to 'annihilate' Israel*, The Times Of Israel, January 10th, 2019; *'Tumor' Israel Will Be 'Uprooted and Destroyed,' Iran Leader Khamenei Vows*, The Algemeiner, May 22nd, 2020.

continuous dialogue in order for the two not to clash. Secondly, it is renowned that the Kremlin has never been looking for allies in the Middle East: only limited partners. As such, neither Israel nor Iran represent vital allies for the Federation, but both present strategic opportunities for the Russian objective of projecting its Great Power status, regionally as well as globally.

The Iranian question is of paramount relevance for the Jewish State, and in fact represents the main Israeli concern in the Syrian conflict. The following paragraph will allow us to understand the balance (or lack thereof) in this unlikely trio, the interests and standpoint of Israel in the Syrian conflict and its meeting- and breaking-points with Russia.

The Israeli Interests in Syria

When the Syrian protests turned into a full-fledged civil war in 2012, the State of Israel carefully refrained from taking sides and adopted what was called the “*sitting-on-the-fence*” or “*wait and see*” approach⁴⁵³. If Assad was recognized as an unfriendly and openly anti-Israel leader, he was also known in Israel as the *devil we know*⁴⁵⁴: one that understood the Syrian military unpreparedness to threaten, let alone wage war against, the most militarily advanced state of the Middle East. The border between the Arab Republic and the Jewish state is marked by the Golan Heights. This territory, seized by Israel in 1967, was annexed (without any international recognition thereof besides Washington’s, on March 2019⁴⁵⁵) in 1981, and has been mostly calm and secure since 2006, when the two states started observing a “mutual deterrence”⁴⁵⁶. Hence, the Assad regime had reached a tacit agreement of stability of the bordering area. In addition, having held power so strongly for several decades, and with a secular ideology, it had impeded the rise of Islamic parties just across the Israeli border, ensuring a known situation of, if not peace, absence of conflict at least. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that Syria did not represent a threat for Israel. As said, Jerusalem knew its neighbor and what to expect from it, and it also was aware that it served as a corridor for the Islamic Republic of Iran to reach Lebanon. It was thanks to Syria’s Alawite and Iranian-friendly regime that Teheran was free to fund and carry weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon – the proxy organization which Israel has confronted several times, and remains high in the list of threats to Jerusalem. This encompassed a strategic problem: if Assad was the *evil Israel knows*, on the other hand it was supported by Iran

⁴⁵³ H. Malmvig, *Israel’s Conflicting Interests in the Syrian War*, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2016.

⁴⁵⁴ Y. Katz, *For All his Faults, Assad is the Devil We Know*, The Jerusalem Post, March 23rd, 2011.

⁴⁵⁵ S. Holland, J. Mason, *Trump recognizes Golan Heights as Israeli, boosting Netanyahu and angering Syria*, Reuters, March 25th, 2019.

⁴⁵⁶ J. Hilterman, *Russia Can Keep the Peace Between Israel and Iran*, The Atlantic, February 13th, 2018.

and Hezbollah, which were getting worryingly close to the Israeli territory. Conducting a policy of “strategic depth”⁴⁵⁷, Teheran aimed at advancing in Israel’s neighboring territories. According to US Army official Michael Eisenstadt: “*The [Iranian] goal is to encircle Israel with these proxies that could enmesh it in a series of open-ended, low-level conflicts that make life there unbearable*”⁴⁵⁸. This strategy explains, indeed, the countless raids that had been carried out by Gaza into the Israeli territory, whose effects were most of the times minimal, but their resonance could compare with the terroristic aims of inciting fear rather than defeating the opponent militarily.

Hence, the Iranian goal in Syria, with regards to Israel, is to strengthen its forces deployed in the territory, both Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, in order to destabilize the neighboring country and “*Set in motion a long-term process of [Israeli] decline*”⁴⁵⁹. The means to achieve this are twofold: firstly, the Islamic Republic uses the Syrian territory to provide Hezbollah with all the necessary military equipment and strategic training; secondly, it exploits its military presence to advance in the neighboring areas and establish in the South of Syria several military bases⁴⁶⁰.

This threatening situation naturally explains the first Israeli interest in the Syrian conflict: the containment of Iran and the prevention of weapons’ transfers from the former to Hezbollah. What are, though, the instruments for Israel to fulfill this interest? Jerusalem will not intervene directly in the conflict, causing an open confrontation with the Islamic Republic and its proxies, as this would encompass an extremely complicated, costly, lengthy and unnecessary war. What Israel is doing is to carry out targeted strikes in Syrian territory against Hezbollah and/or Iranian bases. As the south of Syria is won back by the regime, Israel’s enemies have the possibility to advance and settle near the border, and thus launch attacks which are, as in Gaza, characterized by low-intensity but high-frequency. This is indeed the objective of the Iranian forces; however, Israel has repeatedly halted (or responded to) several attacks⁴⁶¹, and is thwarting the attempts of the Shi’ite forces to establish bases in the Golan. A relevant factor, however, lays in the strategic consequences of Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian conflict. Israel believes that by being active outside its reference territory (Lebanon), Hezbollah is stretching its abilities and recruiting many young people, who would else not be directly affected by the war. This causes both a weakening of the political appreciation of the organization, which holds 10% of the parliamentary seats in Beirut and is now dragging free youth

⁴⁵⁷ H. Ajili, M. Rouhi, *Iran’s Military Strategy*, Survival, 61:6, 2019, pp. 139-152.

⁴⁵⁸ D. Kenner, *No Matter Who Wins the Syrian Civil War, Israel Loses*, The Atlantic, August 29th, 2018.

⁴⁵⁹ J. Hilterman, *Russia Can Keep the Peace Between Israel and Iran*, The Atlantic, February 13th, 2018.

⁴⁶⁰ L. Hanauer, *Israel’s Interests and Options in Syria*, Perspective, RAND, 2016

⁴⁶¹ *Letter to UN regarding attack in Golan Heights*, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 28th, 2015.

Retrieved [here](#).

to a foreign conflict, and a necessary decrease of intensity in its conflict with Israel⁴⁶². In 2018, after remarkable advancement of the Assad *coalition*, the IDF started expanding its strategy with larger air strikes. Whereas these used to be limited to containing the (pro-)Iranian forces in Syria, by that year Jerusalem started worrying about the Shi'ite significant territorial expansion on the territory and began acting so as to push them out militarily⁴⁶³.

The Russian military intervention in Syria did represent a game-changer in the conflict, and the Jewish State was certainly affected by it. While Moscow has been working on the ground with Teheran, Jerusalem was hoping it could have Russia mediate with Iran to clear Syria's south from the Shi'ite forces. This has certainly been a difficultly achievable goal, but it pertains to the second Israeli interest: to minimize the military impact of Russia. This stems from the fact that, since the 2015 military intervention, the Kremlin has been supporting the Assad regime in a way that allowed Iran to divert its attention onto other issues as well. Thus, according to Israeli strategists, Teheran is now able to focus more on the "*little Satan*", rather than conveying all its forces to fight the anti-Damascus forces. The cited issue pertaining Hezbollah, where it could lose its appeal onto the Lebanese people as well as its might to fight Israel due to the commitment against the rebels, could therefore lose its relevance and Putin might indeed be, albeit indirectly, helping the Shi'ite forces in their struggle against Israel. Moreover, Jerusalem has worried about the partner's presence in Syria as prior to that the IDF had complete freedom of movement inside the Arab Republic to target its enemies. After 2015, Israel started to worry that inadvertent clashes with the Russian forces may take place, complicating a precious relationship. It is precisely for this reason that, in Fall 2015, Russian President Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu held several high-level discussions – in coordination with the respective Ministers of Defense and Intelligence Services – in order to establish a de-conflicting mechanism⁴⁶⁴. These had the final goal of allowing Israel to strike against the Shi'ite targets without interfering with the Russian strategies. Moreover, an open and continuous channel of dialogue was created in order to prevent each side's military forces from clashing with one another. Lastly, Jerusalem wanted to be ensured that the Russian weapons would not fall in Hezbollah's hands. Netanyahu reassured Putin that the Israeli strikes would only aim at pro-Iranian targets, pledging to remain outside the internal fighting for power of the Assad regime. This upgraded the level of cooperation between Moscow and Jerusalem, which had now become strategic partners with a deep military interconnection.

⁴⁶² L. Hanauer, *Israel's Interests and Options in Syria*, Perspective, RAND, 2016.

⁴⁶³ G. Murciano, *Preventing a Spillover of the Iran Israel Conflict in Syria*, SWP Comment, July 27th, 2018.

⁴⁶⁴ M. Tsvetkova, *Israel, Russia to coordinate military action on Syria: Netanyahu*, Reuters, September 21st, 2015

Clashes between the many forces in Syria's crowded skies are however extremely difficult to avoid. Two major events, indeed, shook the bilateral relations of Russia and Israel because of inadvertent Israeli mistakes. The first occurred in February 2018 when, in response to an Israeli warplane being shot down by the Syrian air force and a pro-Iranian drone attack against Israel, the Jewish state's air force struck a Syrian base where Russian advisors were present⁴⁶⁵. This caused harsh Russian criticism against Israel until the two leaders met in Moscow in May. On this occasion, a new, informal, agreement was made: as long as Jerusalem would not object the Assad regime's advancement in southern Syria, Russia would allow it to strike against pro-Iranian targets in all of the Arab Republic's territory⁴⁶⁶. A second one took place in September 2018, when a Russian warplane was shot down in Syria because of Israel⁴⁶⁷. In this case, too, the relationship cooled only to return to the original levels of cooperation after a few months.

It can be observed how, as Russian-Israeli cooperation grew, the Kremlin's relations with Iran started showing their criticalities. Indeed, Moscow and Teheran have been in competition over the post-war outlook of Syria, where the former does not want to allow the latter to turn the Arab Republic in a puppet state. Also, because of the Israeli pressure, Putin could not allow to turn the country in a stronghold for the anti-Zionist forces. Paradoxically, the more support Russia provides to Assad, the more Iran profits in its struggle against the Jewish State – but at the same time, if Iran were to slowly withdraw its forces from Syria, Russia would have to deploy more troops to ensure the regime's stability. As such, the more the conflict unravels, the more it is complicated for all forces to balance each other. In 2015, Israel had to project different scenarios trying to assess the impact of the various actors' victory in the Syrian civil war. Four scenarios for the medium-term in the country can be identified: a decisive victory (1) or defeat (2) of the Assad regime; a partial defeat of Damascus (3) or, ultimately, and enduring stalemate (4). In the case of Assad's victory in Syria, Israel would return to having “the devil it knows” as a neighbor, but with the addition of Iranian and Hezbollah forces roaming freely and establishing bases in the territory. While the Russian intervention is “limited”⁴⁶⁸, hence not intended to outlast the conflict and its political settlement, the pro-Iranian forces have provided the regime with support with the clear intent of taking over with leading influence once stability would be ensured. Assad, an all-time ally of Iran, would likely be happy to allow this to happen. As a result, Israel would have Iran as a direct neighbor on two (or three, if we count Gaza,

⁴⁶⁵ L. Averbukh, M. Klein, *Russia-Israel Relationship Transformed by Syria Conflict: Political Interests Overshadow Social and Economic Ties*, Comment N° 37, SWP, September 2018.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶⁷ *Russia blames Israel after military plane shot down off Syria*, BBC News, September 18th, 2018.

⁴⁶⁸ “This is a limited war very closely tied with the diplomatic process”: D. Trenin, 2018, p. 54.

too) different fronts: Lebanon and now Syria. With the military and nuclear development of the Islamic Republic, this would be a war-promising scenario.

In case of a decisive Assad's defeat, extremist forces are the ones most likely to take power after him. On this note, besides the incredible destabilization of the whole region, international policy analyst L. Hanauer argues that, once seized power, *"such an entity could—even in defiance of its foreign patrons— actively seek a conflict with Israel as a means of establishing its legitimacy in the broader Arab or Muslim world."*⁴⁶⁹. A similar situation – as for the extremists – would occur in case of Assad's partial victory (third scenario), with the ulterior threat that an Alawite enclave with Iranian support could pose to Israel⁴⁷⁰. To use the words of an Israeli security chief: *"Either way, the result would be bad. A victory of a Russian-backed radical axis that consists of Iran–Syria–Hezbollah is not a positive prospect for Israel. But on the other hand, the concentration of all the global jihad madmen in Damascus and the Golan Heights is also a disconcerting development."*⁴⁷¹. The last, or "stalemate", scenario is the only one with a possible positive outcome for Israel. A weak, war-torn Syria would need Iran to focus its forces on the conflict; neither Assad nor the opposition or the extremists would have any motivation/interest/means to attack the Jewish state. This is certainly not a long-term perspective, as progress has been made in the direction of an Assad's strengthening in the country. However, even in the event of decisive foreign action in favor of the regime's opposition, a stalemate could not last long. Unfortunately, the Middle East is not new to decade-long wars without significant changes to the status quo (Israel knows better), however the Syrian one cannot be defined a frozen conflict, projected to last for many years to come. Provided it is still difficult to assess who, under which coalition and with which foreign backing will emerge victorious from this war, it is expected for a diplomatic action, together with the ongoing military involvement, to effectively stabilize the country in the medium term.

Nevertheless, Israel's strategy appears to be, alongside the fighting of pro-Iranian forces, to indirectly support a protraction of the conflict for the foreseeable future. On this note, a weak Assad regime is functional to Jerusalem's interests. This allows Israel to enter Syria and implement its anti-Iranian strategy with the only precaution of not interfering with Russian action.

Differently from Moscow, the Sunni terrorist groups in Syria represent secondary concern for Israel, being subordinate to the more urgent and threatening Shi'ite and pro-Iranian forces. Israeli Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yaakov Amidror argues that: *"The radical Sunni groups on the northern and southern borders pose no immediate threat [for Israel], and while they may deliver unpleasant surprises, they have*

⁴⁶⁹ L. Hanauer, *Israel's Interests and Options in Syria*, Perspective, RAND, 2016, p. 7.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibidem.

⁴⁷¹ B. Caspit, *Israeli Security Chiefs Modify Assessment on Syrian War*, Al-Monitor, February 11th, 2014.

more immediate enemies to fight.”⁴⁷². As such, these radical groupings do not represent a destabilizing factor for Israel, as their priorities are now to gain control of the Syrian territory and oppose the non-Sunni and non-Arab forces in the country. It has already been described how their eventual rise to power would disrupt the region’s delicate balance, but this is not believed to be plausible given the foreign direct intervention of both Russia and Iran against them. What Israel rather sees as a menace is their possible establishment over the Golan, which could ultimately cause a dangerous spillover of ideas as well as fighters in neighboring Jordan. After Russia and Saudi Arabia, the Hashemite kingdom represents the third country of origin of foreign fighters in Syria alongside ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and many other jihadist groupings⁴⁷³. Lastly, Hanauer observes how, in the event of a terrorist takeover of the Golan, Israel could freely fight it without risk of receiving foreign accusations of sorts. While all other factions have one or more international supporters, the terrorist groups are officially everyone’s enemy. As such, Jerusalem is confident it would successfully and relentlessly defeat these groups, even receiving praise for its actions.

How Were the Russian-Israeli Relations Affected by the Syrian Conflict?

In 2015, the Russian Federation and the State of Israel established a tactical cooperation to avoid confrontation in the Syrian conflict. However, their relationship has highly improved since the beginning of the conflict on spheres that do not necessarily only pertain to the military realm.

Such coordination brought about a frequent and direct confrontation of the two powers, which naturally entailed an increased mutual understanding and enhanced social, cultural and economic ties. In addition, Israel and Russia have been mutually supportive outside Syria, as in the case of the European and North American sanctions regime against Russia, which Israel did not participate in and rather used to foster commercial lines with Moscow. On this note, the Jewish State did risk to negatively affect its existing positive relations with the West (as well as Ukraine, which has a centenary history of welcoming Jews), however, this also reflected Jerusalem’s diversification policy. Indeed, in the second half of the 2010’s, Israel started a diplomatic strategy attempting at expanding its economic and strategic ties with the BRICS countries, and especially its core: Russia, India and China⁴⁷⁴. In this light, the Syrian conflict furthermore helped Jerusalem reinforcing this strategy to a much deeper level. With regards to the diplomatic support, in April 2017, the Russian Federation

⁴⁷² Y. Amidror, *Israeli Strategic Challenges and Opportunities in the New Year*, Begin–Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Perspectives Paper 307, September 16th 2015.

⁴⁷³ R. Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, Soufan Group, New York, October 2017

⁴⁷⁴ Y. Alfer, *Israel and the BRICS*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, Expert Analysis, September 2015, [link](#).

officially recognized West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, while declaring that East Jerusalem should constitute the capital of the future, independent Palestinian state⁴⁷⁵. While this move left many observers surprised as it came apparently unexpected to many⁴⁷⁶, it aimed at demonstrating Moscow's continued commitment to advance diplomatic solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On this issue, the Kremlin's position did certainly not change because of the Syrian conflict, as it was also confirmed by the latest Foreign Policy Concept of the RF, but Israel did become a privileged interlocutor for Russia given their frequent meetings. In confirmation of this, Hamas and Hezbollah were never included in the Russian list of recognized terroristic organizations, in line with the central strategy of holding a dialogue with all relevant parties in the region, although the Iranian proxy in Syria has repeatedly been attacked by Israel with Russia's *placet*. Once again, no official standing was declared by Moscow, so as to allow it to maintain its relations with both powers and balancing between the two, when possible. Lastly, Russian presence in Syria could help “*validate [Israeli] presence in the Golan Heights [and] weaken Iranian influence*”⁴⁷⁷. It is indeed true that, while both powers agreed to cooperate in the Syrian theatre, neither will compromise its core interests to favor their partner. What is fruitful in the relationship, however, is the by-product of the diplomatic ties that each of them enjoys. While Russia makes use of Israel's privileged relationship with the USA to bridge their conflictual relationship, it is even more the case for Jerusalem to use the Kremlin's exchange with Iran to obtain relevant information, send messages of military might and purport strategic intentions.

Moreover, both Israel and Russia have a history of terroristic cells in their territory which both powers have successfully tackled. While cooperation on this issue pre-existed the Syrian civil war, the Israeli security services have continued cooperating with Moscow's by exchanging technology, with yet undefined characteristics, which is likely to support the Kremlin's struggle against terrorism in the concerted interest of eliminating the jihadist threat in Syria.

Overall, diplomatic, economic, technological and social relations were strengthened significantly. Both powers had to perfect their stand in international *fora* in order not to unsettle the existing balance, and lines of indirect communication between them and their respective enemies (as in the case of Israeli-Iranian relations) or competitors (as with Russia and the USA) were established. The core standings on issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Russian-Iranian partnership remained unaltered, but the conflict gave each side leverage to negotiate on related minor issues.

⁴⁷⁵ *Rossiya priznala Zapadnyy Yerusolim Stolicey Izrailya*, Vedomosti, April 7th, 2017.

⁴⁷⁶ R. Ahren, *In curious first, Russia recognizes West Jerusalem as Israel's capital*, The Times of Israel, April 6th, 2017.

⁴⁷⁷ M. Wojarowicz, *Israeli-Russian Relations in the Context of the Syrian Civil War*, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Bulletin N° 48 (988), May 17th, 2017, [link](#).

Conclusions

The Russian-Israeli relationship does not follow a script. It is not predictable, rigid or based on eternal principles. The two countries remain deeply committed to their *Realpolitik*, never abandoning pragmatism and allowing values to play a mere role of contouring. Two highly interconnected powers, with a rich common history spanning from the Jewish *Shtetls* of the Russian Empire to the contribution in the fight against Nazi-fascism in the Second World War, from the Jewish Autonomous Oblast' to the thorny issue of Aliyah and the million of Russian speakers in Israel: Moscow and Jerusalem did not need external events to understand the entrenchment of their history. However, their geographical distance played different roles in the evolution of geopolitical balances. True to their pragmatic interests, the two have witnessed diplomatic prosperity as well as bitter opposition, only to find their commonalities again. Their path has not followed a straight line. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reshuffling of world powers, Moscow and Jerusalem have decided to focus on their meeting- rather than their breaking-points. This proved an extremely fruitful approach to bilateral relations, as since 2015 the two have become able to pursue their own, often conflicting, personal agendas without interfering with one another. This task proved certainly challenging, but highly rewarding for both powers.

Thanks to the increased and open dialogue with Israel, Russia has opened a new and solid track of Middle Eastern diplomacy. The Kremlin's influence in the region as a Great Power has been highly enhanced by its activities with Jerusalem – it is the only foreign actor that can rightfully claim to have positive relations with all the relevant players in such a highly fractured region. Russia has shown the world its relevance in the Middle East, filling the void left by an increasingly anti-interventionist United States in Syria. As such, ISPI Associate Research Fellow C. Lovatti wrote for the Atlantic Council that: “*Fostering a dialogue with Moscow should be made a priority of Western powers' Middle East policies – particularly the United States and European countries – in order to find a shared security approach for the region*”⁴⁷⁸, underlining the fundamental role Russia is playing today in the MENA.

Even more so, Russia's dialogue with Israel represents a bridge to Washington, Israel's primary ally. The position of Moscow in the Syrian conflict as a widely-respected mediator has given it the opportunity to negotiate with the USA several times on an equal basis. For the first time after the end of the Cold War and thanks to its Middle Eastern policy, the Kremlin was able to coordinate its agenda

⁴⁷⁸ C. Lovotti, *Redistribution of Power in the Middle East: Moscow's Return to Syria*, in: K. Mezran, A. Varvelli, *The MENA region: A great power competition*, Atlantic Council, October 8th, 2019, p. 78.

with the White House as a relevant player. Similarly, albeit with higher levels of thrust, Israel profits from its relationship with Russia as the intermediary between Jerusalem and Teheran. While no direct negotiations between the Islamic Republic and the Jewish State have taken place, or are expected to in the medium run, a common interlocutor has now been found, and it represents to date the only informal channel of communication between the bitter enemies.

Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu are said to have established a personalist relationship based on friendship and affinity. While this represents a merely relevant factor, as it would be difficult to assess how much of this is the mere result of strategic interests, the two countries are linked by similarly assertive figures with clear understandings of each other's priorities and needs. Be their relationship honestly human or not, the two leaders have interacted for 8 years⁴⁷⁹ and reached a more than reasonable mutual comprehension.

As for what the future of Russian-Israeli relations holds, this depends on several central factors, such as the Iranian expansion in the region or a strong revival of Washington's involvement in the Jewish State's affairs, as the Trump presidency is slowly but surely advancing. However, the Middle East is well known for its unpredictability, with countless underlying and dormant moving forces that make political predictions little more than divination. Israel's governments are infamous for their duration, and while Netanyahu represents an exception, his future looks taunted by legal issues and a quietly growing centrist opposition; as for V. Putin, the 2020 constitutional reform could, in theory, allow him to Preside the Kremlin for many years to come, however, this highly depends on several domestic factors. What can be positively affirmed, though, is that both Israel and Russia have a strong interest in maintaining the quality of their cooperation: Russia can continue projecting Great Power status and Israel can certainly benefit from a strategic and all-ranging ally like Moscow.

⁴⁷⁹ When Benjamin Netanyahu was last nominated Prime Minister in Israel, in 2009, Putin had just started serving for the same position under Medvedev's presidency, only to replace him in 2012 – eight years ago. However, Netanyahu served as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2002-2003, when Putin was President, and therefore started officially interacting with him 18 years ago.

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ABSTRACT

This work aims at shedding a light on the bilateral relations between Russia and the State of Israel in a historical framework spanning from 1948 and 2020, with greater attention being given to the Syrian conflict. The thesis is divided into three chapters, where the first serves as a mainly historical analysis of the Soviet Union's approach to the newly born Jewish State, its motives for the initial support and the severing of relations in 1953 and 1967. After having covered the 20th century, the second chapter moves on to look into the development of bilateral ties after the collapse of the USSR until nowadays. Whereas the first chapter generally outlines the tendencies of Moscow with regards to the Middle Eastern country, the second one accompanies the historical cut with a deeper analysis of the geopolitical factors shaping the relationship, analyzing in detail the respective official foreign policy doctrines and studying the figures of prominent decision-makers on both sides. As for the last chapter, the focus on the Syrian conflict dives deeply into the regional balance of power, accounting for the foreign interventions in the civil war as well as the related rifts represented by the Sunni-Shi'a confrontation, the Israel-Iran's enmity and the issues of Hezbollah and Hamas.

In 1948, the Soviet Union was the first country to fully recognize the newly-established State of Israel and its legitimate government. This represented a decision of paramount relevance to understand Moscow's strategy in the Middle East, in general, and with regards to the Jewish state, in particular. The United Kingdom, whose former Foreign Minister Lord Balfour expressed the support for "*The establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people*"⁴⁸⁰ 31 years earlier, refused to fully recognize the Jewish state due to the lack of fulfillment of "*basic criteria*" for statehood⁴⁸¹. As for the United States, which Israel identified as its major ally and patron, it only recognized the provisional government as the *de facto* authority.

In order to explore the motives behind the prompt and full Soviet recognition, this thesis provides an analysis of the role and strategy of Moscow in the Middle East and later explores the connections between Zionism and Communism. As for the former issue, four major areas can be determined for the understanding of Soviet interests in the Middle East: geographical, strategic/military, economic/energetic and political factors. Firstly, the USSR's territory extended as far as bordering Afghanistan, Turkey and Iran, making it a real stakeholder in the region's developments and its affairs. Moscow needed to protect its borders and avoid conflicts or instability to spillover inside its territory. To ensure this, bilateral diplomatic relations needed to be established with the relevant

⁴⁸⁰ Declaration of U.K.'s Foreign Minister Lord A. J. Balfour to Baron Rothschild, 02/11/1917

⁴⁸¹ P. M. Brown, *The Recognition of Israel*, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 42, No. 3, July 1948, pp. 620-627.

actors in the neighborhood. Secondly, the Middle East could provide Russia access to the Mediterranean Sea – a warm water port Russia had been aiming at since the times of the Empire, as a trade connector as well as a military base in a globally relevant area. On the economic note, the 1940's started exposing the region's rich oil reserves, and the Soviets were certainly interested in this, as their high levels of production had significantly decreased after Hitler's attempted invasion and destruction of the energy facilities in Southern Russia and the Caucasus. As for the political factor, the MENA region represented the *playground* of France and the United Kingdom, leaders of the colonialist and imperialist vision that Lenin (and the Soviets in general) starkly opposed. By supporting the formation of the State of Israel, while retaining a confused relationship with the Zionist ideology, the Kremlin wished to enter the Middle East as a Great Power, protecting its national interests both to avoid instability and to foster anti-colonial attitudes among the newly-born states. This explains why, in 1936-1939, Moscow supported the Arab independence movements and in 1948-1949 it armed the Jews in their fight against the Muslim Arabs in Palestine. Ideological affinity played a minor role if compared to the anti-colonialist and Great-Power-affirmation policies the USSR wanted to implement in the region. Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko's speech before the United Nations in 1947 certainly surprised many, even in the *intelligentsiya*, by stating that: "*The fact that no western European State has been able to ensure the defense of the elementary rights of the Jewish people, and to safeguard it against the violence of the fascist executioners, explains the aspirations of the Jews to establish their own State. It would be unjust not to take this into consideration and to deny the right of the Jewish people to realize this aspiration. It would be unjustifiable to deny this right to the Jewish people, particularly in view of all it has undergone during the Second World War.*"⁴⁸². Thus, besides endorsing the Jewish State's formation, the USSR was openly taking a position against the *West* with regards to its treatment of Jewry in Europe and the lack of support for their struggle to form a safe haven for them in Palestine.

After the *Great Patriotic War*, shy openings to cooperation were established between the two countries, although Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion had clearly stated that the newly born state was "*Western in its orientation*"⁴⁸³. Two major factors influenced the bilateral relationship in the 1948-1953 period: *Aliyah* and instances of anti-Semitism. By *Aliyah* we mean the emigration of Jewish individuals from their country of residence to Israel, which has been codified as a right in the 1950 by an Israeli Law called the Law of Return. On this basis, it was in the interest of Jerusalem to allow immigration and to negotiate with foreign countries to favor this process. Even more so, as

⁴⁸² Remarks by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to the UN Special Committee on Palestine, May 14th 1947.

⁴⁸³ The Jewish Agency's Digest, II, 18 (288), February 27, 1950, pp. 782-783.

anticipated, the Soviet Union hosted one of the largest Jewish communities in the world, and forms to date the first territory of origin in Israelis born outside of Israel. However, this freedom of movement promoted by the Jewish State was necessarily not met by Stalin's Soviet Union. A whole new category of neglected people in the country was born: the *Refusniks* or *Otkazniki*. These were all the Jewish Soviet citizens whose request to emigrate to Israel had been denied for some reason – with the official motivations being varied, the reality was that the USSR did not want to set a trend of exaltation of nationalities, enforcing an all-Soviet citizenship and loyalty. This certainly caused friction and increased negotiations between Jerusalem and Moscow in order to achieve better treatments for the Jews of the Socialist Union.

In 1953 an overt case of anti-Semitism was witnessed in the USSR: a group of physicians, including many Jews, were accused of having caused the death of several high officials as motivated by anti-Soviet motives – they were accused of being murderous spies. The so-called *Doctor's Plot* aimed at exposing an alleged “*Jewish-bourgeois nationalist group*”⁴⁸⁴, working against the state. This caused indignation in Israel and led to a bomb being placed under the Soviet consulate in Tel Aviv. As a result, Stalin decided to severe relations with the Jewish State, which were re-established after his death that same year.

Despite having once again an open diplomatic channel, the two countries reached new levels of tension in 1955 when the USSR struck an arms deal with Egypt. After being repeatedly rejected by the UK and the US in his requests for armament, President Naguib turned to Moscow, which was more than eager to support a former British colony in an anti-Western struggle. Observing the new relationship unravel, Israel grew concerned about a superpower arming its direct neighbor and enemy. This concern was well-founded, as in 1956 the new Egyptian President Nasser decided to nationalize the Suez Canal Company, owned primarily by French and British investors. Since its creation and until that moment, the two European powers retained almost complete control of the shipments from the Mediterranean into the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. With Nasser's move came Israel's invasion of the Sinai, followed by London's and Paris' involvement. Thanks to the Soviet support for Egypt, the invasion resulted in a withdrawal of the attacking troops and a de facto victory of the Arab Republic. After this conflict, where Israel (directly) and the USSR (by proxy) laid on the opposite sides of the battlefield, the hostility between the two countries started escalating. As such, in 1967 the Six-Day War broke out and Washington's alliance with Israel became evident. The Jewish State's devastating victory against Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon – where the first two were armed by Moscow – caused the Kremlin to severe relations with Israel once again. No official diplomatic relations took place between the two until their restoration in 1987.

⁴⁸⁴ Pravda, 13th January 1953, p.1.

With no diplomatic ties in force between the countries, the core issues of the relationship in the 70's and the 80's regarded the two core interests of Israel's foreign policy: the Palestinians and Aliyah. As for the latter, with the *détente* of US-Soviet confrontation, hundreds of thousands of Jews were allowed to leave the USSR, with the majority relocating to Israel, and many choosing the United States instead, or other Western European countries. As this era came to an end in 1980, an 80% drop of permits to emigrate followed, with the motivation of "inconsistency with State interests". This demonstrated the Soviet understanding of Israel as a major US ally, whose relationship for Moscow was to be subordinated to its relations with Washington.

As far as the Palestinians are concerned, the Kremlin always carried out a mediatory role, attempting to obtain a diplomatic resolution between the two parties as mediated by the USSR. Hence, the Kremlin embarked in a lengthy struggle with the Palestine Liberation Organization to have it recognize the State of Israel in order to be able to proceed with the political settlement. While working for the internal stabilization of the PLO, Moscow never took its side in spite of Israel, and was acknowledged by the Palestinians as "*Support[ers of] our goal but our friendship with them is limited to their interests.*"⁴⁸⁵.

In 1985 the USSR's leadership passed to M. Gorbachev, and his *perestroika* program started being implemented both in domestic and foreign policy. The decade was marked by the final years of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, from which the new governance wanted to withdraw in order to end the vast and inefficient investment. With the *Novoe Politicheskoe Myshlenie*, the new political thinking, global interdependence and multilateralism became the key words of Soviet *weltanschauung*. The universal superiority of socialism was being abandoned, in favor of a peace-oriented foreign policy. Thus, diplomatic attempts at the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were carried out, and in 1987 the relations with the Jewish State were restored, and the 24 year-strong rupture of diplomatic relations was declared a "*historic mistake*"⁴⁸⁶. Full contact was officially re-established in October 1991, the same month as the Madrid Peace conference.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Presidency of B. N. Yeltsin, a new opening to the West took place, in complete denial of the communist and anti-Western past. The year 1992 is known as the *Honeymoon* year between the Russian Federation and Israel – a mutual comprehension of the benefits of the relationship was created. For Israel, florid ties with the Russian Federation were necessary for several reasons. Firstly, the Kremlin represented an honest mediator, both for the settlement of the Palestinian question, as well as for its privileged role particularly with Syria – an

⁴⁸⁵ Al-'Alam (Morocco), December 20, 1982.

⁴⁸⁶ C. Haberman, Israel and Soviets Restore Full Relations, The New York Times, October 19th, 1991, Section 1 page 5.

Arab country that has not, to date, recognized the State of Israel, while being historically close to the USSR and the RF. Russia was perceived as a non-biased actor. Secondly, after 1979, with the Iranian Revolution, Teheran became Israel's open enemy in the region, and Moscow held a stable relationship with it. Hence, Israel could benefit of its ties with Russia to have a mediator or a mitigator in its conflict. The Jewish State needed to maintain a positive relationship with the Federation in order to limit, where possible, the latter's involvement in the Middle Eastern armament. In a regional strategic understanding, it was better for Israel to have Russia as a friend than as an enemy. Trade interests also played a role, for Russia's raw materials and Israel's agriculture sector needing large markets of export. Lastly, Israel needed good ties in order to allow the continuation of *Aliyah* from Russia. As for Russia, the internal political discourse was fragmented because of the presence of newly-born anti-Semitic parties holding seats in Parliament. More phases can be identified in the Russian attitude towards Israel in the last decade of the 20th century: the first phase was characterized by Foreign Minister Kozyrev's project to align Russian foreign policy with Washington, arguing the natural affinity of the two. In this framework, little attention was dedicated to the Middle East, except for the support for the US approach in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Once again, Russia wanted to play the role of the honest broker between the parties – one that held positive relations with all the involved actors in the region. In 1992-1995 the relationship steadily improved. Russia wanted to take on a balanced position in world politics: while maintaining global aspirations, it would neither try to follow the hegemon blindly nor try to replace it itself. However, the Russia Presidency was increasingly struggling in its relationship with the Parliament, which was growing increasingly anti-Yeltsin and nationalistic with marked anti-Israeli sentiments. Several peace conferences were held (Madrid and Madrid 2) to confront Israel and the PLO, and while the first was hosted in the USA, the second took place in Moscow upon the Kremlin's invitation.

Yeltsin created a personal bond of friendship with Yitzhak Rabin, and a frequent object of discussion between the two would be the Russian supply of military equipment to the Syrian army: The Israeli Prime Minister would try and mediate with Moscow in order to have it diminish its dangerous business volume with Israel's neighbor, ally of Iran and historical enemy.

In 1996, Yeltsin was approaching presidential elections, and his feeble foreign policy was not well seen by the newly elected Parliament. In order to maintain sufficient levels of political support, the Russia President nominated the Jewish Arabist Yevgeny Primakov as Foreign Minister. Despite his Israelite roots, he was perceived in Israel as a support of Arab nationalistic figures in opposition with the Jewish State. The foreign policy under Primakov followed two core axioms: restoring Russia's Great Power status and the challenging of the USA in its global and regional aspirations. A multi-polar world was to be established, as opposed to the Cold War bi-polarity and the subsequent

American hegemony over world affairs in the 1990's. In this new period of confrontation, the Middle East became the middle-ground between the two powers. The policy of the Kremlin towards the neighboring Middle East was “a critical component of a global multi-vector strategy to reassert Russia's parity with the US globally and regionally”⁴⁸⁷: it represented the stance to take against its historic rival. A period of tension followed, with the Jewish Agency in Moscow being denied accreditation, being therefore forced to close after decades of service, Israeli operations in Lebanon were strongly criticized by Yeltsin, a bomb was placed in Moscow's Choral Synagogue and other despicable events occurred. As Yeltsin was re-elected President in 1996, however, relations bloomed again and saw alternating moments of friendship and accusations, mainly by Russia.

As for the beginning of the 21st century, the lens used to interpret the Presidencies of V. Putin and D. Medvedev is the one provided by professor Igor Pellicciari, who theorized the “Theory of the Three Élites”. In this light, the two decades from 2000 to 2020 were divided into three phases, each dominated by a specific leading group in Russian establishment. The first period spans approximately from 2000 to 2005 (President Putin's first term as President of Russia), and is dominated by the intelligence (spies), whose role was to ensure national security by controlling and reporting to the Kremlin all sorts of developments in domestic affairs, Russian society and similar. In synthesis, Putin exploited the strongest and best-established group in the system to ensure the primary necessity of a functioning state – its internal stability. In parallel, A. Sharon was elected Prime Minister in Israel and the al-Aqsa Intifada had recently broken out in the country. Peace talks in Camp David were held, and failed, causing the outrage of Palestinians. In 2002, in line with the multilateral efforts to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Middle East Quartet was established, with Russia, the USA, the European Union and the United Nations as members. Its aim has been that of helping mediate peace negotiations, however it has proved ineffective and mainly US-led. As the Intifada unraveled, so did the Second Chechen War in Russia, with acts of terrorism and Sunni extremism rising in the southern regions of Chechnya and Dagestan. The two conflicts could be compared under many aspects, and led Israel to support Russia in its anti-terrorist struggle with intelligence sharing, training of counterterrorism special forces and others. At the same time, the Kremlin refrained from criticizing Jerusalem's activities against the Palestinians. On this occasion, the two countries first understood one of their commonalities: the (Sunni) terrorist threat of a minority of the nation acting against the central power.

The second phase spanned from 2005 until 2010 approximately and saw the alternation of Vladimir Vladimirovich (until 2008) with Dmitriy A. Medvedev to the Presidential post. After focusing on the establishment and upkeep of domestic security, the priority for Putin's second term moved to the

⁴⁸⁷ S. Blank, 2015, p.3

formation of a stable, satisfied and therefore conservative middle-class. Thus, the designated “élite” for this was identified with the jurists, whose aim was to reform the legislative system in order to restructure Russian society. On the Middle Eastern arena, Putin marked a decisive opening towards Hamas. The movement, recognized as a terrorist group by the EU, US and of course Israel, became an interlocutor for the Russian Federation, in line with Moscow’s effort to maintain open lines of dialogue with all relevant actors in the region. Whereas Russia argued that the nature of the relationship was purely peaceful and aimed at steering Hamas closer to political compromise, Israel did not initially welcome the meeting held in Moscow between the “terrorist group” and the Kremlin. The third phase started approximately in 2010 and continues to date. This has been a diplomacy-dominated period, where the enforcers of foreign policy abroad represent the leading “élite”. At the beginning of this period, the Kremlin’s priorities had changed: the necessity of affirming the Great Power status of the Russian Federation had become central, and long-serving diplomats represented the most apt category to implement this policy.

Historically, and in the recent period in particular, three issues have found Russia and Israel in deep disagreement: Palestine, Iran and Syria.

The final part of the second chapter goes on to analyze the Israeli National Security Strategy and the Russian foreign policy concept. With their inherent differences, both share a common basis of pragmatism and *Realpolitik*, which helps them find mutual understanding in a vast range of issues.

The third and last chapter concerns the Syrian conflict, and analyzes its effect on the bilateral relationship given the diversity of interests at stake. Firstly, an overview of the conflict will be provided, with a geopolitical background and a brief analysis of the domestic political situation of Syria and an assessment of the impact of the *Arab Spring* in the country. To follow, the internal and international factions will be considered, leading the way to the international attempts to reconcile the opposing parts of the Civil War. The issue of terrorism and its impact in the conflict will be analyzed, as it represents one of the most influential factors shaping the position of Russia and is relevant for Israel, too, in the Syrian scenario. Once said information will be given, and a deeper understanding of the situation provided, the Russian interests in the conflict will be navigated through, followed by the ones of the State of Israel. A light will be shed on the 2015 military intervention of the Russian military in the Syrian conflict, the game changer in both the unraveling of the civil war and the bilateral relations between said powers. Lastly, conclusions on the impact of the Syrian conflict on these State’s ties will be drawn and an overall assessment of the relationship given.

The structure of this chapter and its development are markedly different from the previous parts of the thesis. While the first chapter is mainly historical and the second blends history and geopolitics, the last chapter focuses on the strategic implications of the Syrian conflict in the bilateral relations of

the Russian Federation and the State of Israel. It starts by analyzing the Syrian political framework, with a paragraph being specifically dedicated to the Al-Assad family and their impact in shaping Syria both politically, economically and socially. The Alawite identity of the ruling family since 1971, affecting the Sunni/Shi'a balance in the country, had a significant impact on the unraveling of the conflict and the international forces involved in the country. Hafez al-Assad, the current President's father, was a Baathist and a conservative. As for Bashar, the British-educated ophthalmologist, he attempted at liberalizing the Syrian life in several aspects, while retaining many features of his father's rule. Nevertheless, repressions were frequent and brutal, cases of internal repression by the use of tanks and airstrikes were reported under Hafez, and with the Syrian conflict unraveling, Bashar is believed to have not refrained from acting similarly. His popular support was believed to be quite satisfying for a non-democratic ruler, however the 2011 uprisings did hit his country and paved the way to a series of clashes that have endured as of today. Subsequently, the origins of the discontent and the evolution of the war are explored by taking into account the major events and issues with regards to the Russian and Israeli interests and involvement in the country. As it will be demonstrated, a number of internal and foreign actors have been involved in the conflict, and its resonance has gone well beyond the borders of the Syrian Arab Republic. Paradoxically, right before the conflict erupted, al-Assad was starting in 2011 to tighten his links with regional powers like Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia in an all-ranging attempt to expand Damascus' net of friendships, and therefore boost the social and economic conditions of his people. Unfortunately, as the civil war broke out, all regional actors severed their *in fieri* relations with Syria, and went in different directions, generally against the Arab Republic's regime (with the notable exception of Iran). Schematically, it is possible to sum up the conflict as a four-sided arena, with Damascus on one side, being supported by Iran, its proxy Hezbollah and, since 2015, Russian air force. This front is fighting against the rebels: an extremely fragmented faction with thousands of militias often fighting each other. They receive the support of Western countries like the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, however their direction is unclear and their lack of unity is a significant obstacle for their achievements. Both powers are opposed to the terrorist groups, which have blossomed since 2014 and include ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and receive funding in several ways. One of them is the indirect acquisition of weapons that had originally been channeled to the rebels, that are brought to the extremist groups through the radicalized individuals that join them; another way is the purchase of arms from foreign powers thanks to the revenues derived from the oil fields they have seized, central banks robbed and others. Those are then fought against by the regime, with Russia's support; by the rebels, as they compete for territory seizure; and by the Kurds, the last power involved in the conflict. This local population of Iraq, Syria and Turkey has been fighting in the

conflict against the terrorists to gain control of parts of the greater region of Kurdistan – which was incidentally the most attacked by ISIS. However, as they are a target of the Turkish government in its anti-Kurdish struggle, they are also attacked by Ankara and the rebels but defended, until 2018, by the United States’ funding. International reconciliation attempts occurred, notably by the Arab League, the UN and the Russian federation. As for the former, it attempted several times to strike deals with the Syrian President and learned a valuable lesson: Assad’s word is not always reliable. As such, after being twice deceived into thinking that negotiations had been successful, while in reality the regime had no intention to follow through with the agreements. Following this, a monitoring group was sent to Syria, but was criticized for being dishonest and incapable of gathering the necessary information to fulfill its objective – a veritable report on the situation to inspire a peace plan. This other attempt failed, too, because of it being directed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar in order to obtain a personal gain. Namely, the two Gulf monarchies wanted to demonstrate the the uselessness of peaceful means in the conflict given Assad’s cruelty and unreliability, and promoting the need of a foreign-led intervention.

As for the Russian role in the international reconciliation attempts, it was particularly impacting thanks to its seat of permanent member of the United Nations’ Security Council with veto power. Often backed by China, Russia vetoed several UNSC Resolutions against the Assad regime for two major reasons: it feared a void of power in the country following the President’s departure; it foresaw an increase of Sunni extremist forces in the territory in case of continued conflict, and these were particularly threatening Moscow after the Chechen experience, and with Central Asia directly neighboring the Middle East. In the case of a spillover of extremism, Russian direct sphere of influence would be impacted jeopardizing what the Kremlin considers its domestic security. The Russian ambassador at the UN perfectly explained Russian motives in Syria, calling for the: “*national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as well as the principle of non-intervention, including military, in its affairs; the principle of the unity of the Syrian people; refraining from confrontation; and inviting all to an even-handed and comprehensive dialogue aimed at achieving civil peace and national agreement by reforming the socioeconomic and political life of the country*”⁴⁸⁸. Ambassador Churkin underlined Russia’s position against foreign intervention in domestic affairs, in line with its multi-lateral approach aimed at restoring stability and prosperity rather than curbing specific fronts in the conflict. Russia did, however, mediate with Syria so as to invite it to accept international peace *fora*, alas with no durable positive effects. Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, designed a suitable plan to end violence and called for a peace fire – however, the foreign backers of the rebels

⁴⁸⁸ Ibidem.

were reported to have pushed for the non-compliance with this, in the hope to eventually take Assad down and emerge victorious from the war.

In this last part of the thesis, the Russian interests in Syria will be looked into more specifically, in order to explain the 2015 military intervention. Moreover, three scenarios are projected in order to rightfully assess the alternatives Russia had, and what their final outcomes would have been. The result of this “experiment” shows how the Kremlin felt constrained to intervene as a lack thereof would have caused direct harm to its strategic interests in all cases. Namely, were the conflict to be left to its own unraveling, radical groups would have inevitably risen and risked spilling over to Central Asia and influencing the Russian Sunni population, which accounts for 12% of the countries’ citizens. It would represent a destabilizing player in the highly instable Middle East. The second scenario pictured Syria under Western influence – thus forcing a foreign-led transition that would harm the country’s sovereignty and risked setting a dangerous precedent, justifying a procedure that is strongly rejected by Russia. Moreover, the USA was not willing to intervene directly, and its support for the scattered rebels would necessarily overflow to the terrorist groups. In the last scenario, in case of a Qatari/Turkish involvement, they would impose a Muslim Brotherhood-led government, which would necessary entail a power struggle and a steering away from Syria’s traditional Shi’a allies, once again destabilizing the region entirely. Russia’s aim, therefore, is generally to maintain the *status quo ante bellum* so as to ensure the maintenance of order in the area.

The 2015 intervention, besides the goal of keeping regional stability, opposing the rise to power of rebels/Muslim Brothers or extremists, and impeding a unilateral resolution by foreign intervention inconsistent with International Law, saw Russia mainly focused on the issue of ISIS and other terrorist forces. Detailed analysis on this issue is given, specifying the expansion these forces were witnessing and the verge of collapse of the regime. The limitations of the intervention are outlined: Russia was to enact an expeditionary, air force-led, coalition-based and limited action in the country. The interests in the Arab Republic are underlined, such as the Tartūs naval basis, and the implications for domestic politics in Russia. Light is shed on the perceived previous exhaustion of other means by Moscow: the military intervention had not been long foreseen nor hoped for, but was understood as the only possible mean to achieve the Kremlin’s objectives. At the same time, it is fundamental to underline how the Russian presence in Syria is in perfect compliance with international law: while the UNSC is the only world forum entitled to allow the use of force, this is also allowed in the case of a state’s direct invitation – and this has been the case with Damascus and Moscow. Assad invited Putin to deploy his armed forces in the country to support his struggle, and after a Parliament’s approval, the Russian President was legally allowed to accept the proposal and proceed militarily. Lastly, the role of Iran is accounted for, as it represents the major obstacle in the Russian-Israeli

relations in Syria. Indeed, Jerusalem's interests in the conflict are mainly directly related with Teheran's influence therein. Not only has the Islamic Republic deployed its Revolutionary Guard in the civil war, but its proxy and Israeli enemy on the Lebanese front Hezbollah is also involved and was becoming dangerously powerful and close to the Golan Heights. As such, Israel has no significant interests as for the successor of Assad – it would indeed hope for the regime to endure, as an unusual stability had been found between the two. However, aware that this would probably encompass some territory being ceded to other forces, and knowing that the Jewish State would have no possible role in mediating the conflict settlement, Jerusalem refrained from making remarks in support or denounce of the regime. It has instead provided direct aid to the wounded on the other side of the Golan Heights in order to showcase its benevolence, and has been carefully patrolling this area to impede a pro-Iranian base-building there. Indeed, Israel's main interest is to avoid an expansion of Teheran-related forces in such proximity with its territory. As such, the Russian intervention did in fact increase Israel's concern as this caused Iran to be lifted of a burden it was carrying alone – the support for Assad – and allowed its forces to focus on other pressing issues, such as the conflict against Israel. As for the terrorist and extremist forces, Jerusalem does not perceive them as a direct threat since they are also too engaged in the Syrian conflict to attempt at Israel's national security. Hence, Russian and Israeli interests in the civil war are not identical. Sometimes they can even be conflicting, as Israel intervened militarily several times in the Syrian territory to impede weapon transfers to take place between the Iranian forces and Hezbollah, or to destroy critical Shi'a facilities. Being Moscow a strategic partner of Iran, and given their joint pro-Assad cooperation, Israel's action had to be coordinated with Russia, even more so as to avoid unintentional attacks between the two partners. For this reason, a tactical cooperation was started, and since late 2015 President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu have been meeting with high frequency to coordinate their action, impede (or apologize for, as in the case of Israel) inadvertent attacks and share insights about the conflict. Moreover, instead of fearing Russia for its relationship with Iran, the Jewish State takes advantage of this unlikely triangle in order to use Moscow as an indirect channel of communication between the two enemies. In addition, the meetings are used as a means to invite the Kremlin to minimize its support for Iranian armament, as well as its nuclear development. Thus, Israel benefits from its fruitful relations with Russia through the latter's relationship with Iran, and since the Kremlin allows the Israeli Air Force to operate in the territory of Syria without interfering with its objectives.

In conclusion, thanks to the increased and open dialogue with Israel, Russia has opened a new and solid track of Middle Eastern diplomacy, playing the role of mediator in the several fractures characterizing the area. The Kremlin's influence in the region as a Great Power has been highly enhanced by its global stature. At the same time, thanks to its ties with Russia, Israel has access to

channels of communication with its own enemies, while also coordinating its extra-territorial airstrikes to avoid unpleasant diplomatic incidents. As for what the future holds, both countries have a strong interest in maintaining the quality of their cooperation: Russia can continue projecting Great Power status and Israel can certainly benefit from a strategic and all-ranging ally like Moscow.