



The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security

Israel, Europe and Russia: A New Paradigm?

<https://jiss.org.il/en/navon-israel-europe-and-russia-a-new-paradigm/>

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19.11.2019

French President Emmanuel Macron has recently declared that he intends to engage Russia, arguing that doing so is necessary to contain Russia's embrace of China, and Russian irredentism in eastern Europe. Macron's new policy of ending Russia's isolation (he recently hosted Putin in France and has agreed to invite Russia to the G7 summit in 2020) is the product both of realpolitik and of France's traditionally Russophile attitude, which goes back to the Franco-Russian alliance against Germany during World War One and was revived after World War Two by a shared resentment of American power. Although Macron insists that his "rapprochement" policy towards Russia will not involve any concessions on the Minsk Protocol (an agreement meant to terminate Russia's de facto occupation of eastern Ukraine), his approach constitutes a change which could have implications for Israel's relations with Russia and with Europe – a change which should not be ignored by Israel's policy makers.

Relations between Europe and Russia have deteriorated after Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine, its annexation of Crimea, and the imposition of economic sanctions by the EU in response. European opinion and decision makers are highly critical of Putin for his elimination of Russian dissidents on European soil, for his divide-and-rule involvement in European politics (including his support for populist and Eurosceptic political parties), for his military intervention in Syria, and for his authoritarianism at home.

Geopolitical tensions between Europe and Russia have put Israel in an awkward position: Israel is expected by its European interlocutors and trade partners to condemn Putin over his misdeeds, yet Israel wants to avoid frictions with Russia in order to maintain a free hand to operate against Iranian targets in Syria.

The relationship between Israel and Russia is complex. On the one hand, Russia and Israel share the hard-edged interest of avoiding incidents between the Russian and Israeli air forces in Syria (the Russians hold Israeli military capabilities in high regard). They also share the objective of eliminating ISIS and al Qaeda from the Middle East; both Russia and Israel were dismayed by the U.S. embrace of the so-called Arab Spring and by the abandonment of strong Arab leaders by America. On the other hand, Russia and Israel have different and even incompatible geopolitical interests and goals in the Middle East. Unlike Russia, Israel wants more U.S. involvement in the region. Moscow supports the

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Syria axis against the U.S.-Sunni alliance with which Israel has common interests. Since Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria, Russian military presence there has put some constraints on the freedom of action that Israel used to enjoy against Iran in Syria – even as Israel continues to operate in Syria with Russia's tacit consent.

The Russians, on their part, signal again and again that they attach great importance to a friendly relationship with Israel. On May 9, 2018, Netanyahu was Putin's guest of honor at the ceremonies marking the anniversary of the Russian army's victory in the Second World War. At the end of the ceremony, the Russian military orchestra played Hatikvah (Israel's national anthem) on the Red Square. Those symbols and images were a far cry from the hostile days of the Cold War: and must have been particularly galling to the Iranians, coming just one day after large scale Israeli air attacks on their assets in Syria.

At the same time, the fact that Netanyahu attended that event in Moscow, which was boycotted by European leaders, touches the very core of the triangular relationship between Israel, Russia, and Europe. Israel did not officially condemn Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine, its annexation of Crimea (conveniently, a foreign service strike led to abstention from the UN General Assembly vote...), and the poisoning of a Russian spy on British soil.

Israel has kept mum on those issues so as not to cross Putin, even though European governments would expect Israel to be more vocal on Russia's hostile actions against Europe. But Israel must think primarily about its ability to deconflict with Russia in Syria, and therefore it is wary not to get in trouble with Putin.

Israel's calculations and dilemmas vis-à-vis Russia and Europe are further complicated by the America retreat from the Middle East, and more specifically the withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria and Trump's decision not to retaliate in response to Iranian provocations and aggressions. This policy has the effect of enhancing Russia's standing in the region, and therefore the need for Israel to coordinate its moves in Syria with Russia and to consider Russian interests.

At the end of the day, Israel is caught in the rivalry between Russia and the West, a rivalry that is complicated by the lack of unity within NATO and by the

U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East. The EU is Israel's largest trade partner and Israel is a member of the OECD, and so Israel has an interest in maintaining good relations with the EU. On the other hand, Israel cannot afford to be confrontational towards Russia because it is only thanks to its understanding with Russia and the deconfliction mechanism that Israel is able to have the operational space necessary to fight Iran's presence in Syria – an issue of top priority for Israel.

Macron's new approach to Russia, therefore, has the potential of easing Israel's foreign policy dilemmas vis-à-vis Europe and Russia. Yet for Macron's new Russia policy to be credible, it will need to meet three conditions: NATO's key European members (especially Germany) will have to increase their military spending and modernize their armies; Europe will have to adopt a coherent and solidary energy policy vis-à-vis Russia; and Europe will also have to condition its possible contribution to Syria's reconstruction on Russian actions to diminish Iran's hold there.

The first condition is military. France is close to spending 2% of its GDP on defence (1.8%), but Germany is not (only 1.2%). Macron talks about building a European army, yet this vision will be meaningless if Germany continues to underspend on defence. As the Trump Administration turns its back on NATO, Europe will need to build a credible military capability prior to engaging Russia, as well as clarify the operative relationship between a "European army" and NATO.

The second condition is energy related. The EU talks about the need to reduce its gas imports from Russia and to have a cohesive energy policy, but in practice member states tend to advance their own interests separately. The Nord Stream project, for example, connects Russia's natural gas directly to Germany. Putin would have a harder time dividing and ruling Europeans if the EU had a coherent and solidary energy policy. Europe could also reduce its gas dependency on Russia by developing fracking, but the practice it outlawed in many European countries; the EU would also benefit from importing natural gas from the Israel/Cyprus fields – although those fields are admittedly not large enough to constitute an alternative to Russia's immense natural gas resources.

The third condition is economic. Europe has significant economic leverage on Russia because Russia is economically vulnerable. Russia's economy is the size of Spain's and it produces basically nothing besides oil and natural gas –which is why Russia is affected by European sanctions that were imposed following the invasion of eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. Europe should use its leverage on Russia for the reconstruction of Syria, whose cost is estimated at \$250 billion. Russia cannot afford that amount, and it will depend on the goodwill of Gulf states and of Europe. Europe must and can leverage that goodwill by making it crystal clear that, if solicited by Russia, it will not spend its taxpayer money to rebuild a country dominated by Iran and Russia.

Israel should take advantage of France's changing attitude toward Russia by making two points to European governments that expect Israel to adopt a tougher rhetoric on Russia: a. France, a leading European country, is itself tilting toward a realpolitik approach to Russia, and therefore Israel cannot possibly be asked to be more royalist than the king; b. If Europe expects Israel to be more vocal against Russia, then Europe itself must be more credible in its Russia policy by spending more on defense, by adopting a coherent energy policy, and by leveraging its economic clout for the reconstruction of Syria to curb Iran's influence there and in Lebanon.

JISS Policy Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family.

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