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RUSSIAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS (2010-2019)

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Table of Contents

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	vi
ABSTRACT.....	vii
ÖZET	viii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I: BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	3
1.1 Research Problem	3
1.2 Research Objective.....	4
1.3 Limitation of the Study	4
1.4 Theoretical Framework and Methodology	4
1.5 Conceptual Framework	8
1.6 Literature Review.....	10
CHAPTER II: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BILATERAL RELATIONS.....	15
2.1. Israeli- Syrian Relations:	15
2.1.1 State of War	15
2.1.2 Peace Initiatives:	16
2.2. Russian-Israeli Relations	18
2.2.1 Diplomatic tensions:	18
2.2.2 1990's Post-Soviet Aliyah: Great Aliya from Soviet Russia (1990's) and Its Political implication.....	21
2.2.3 Upsurge of contacts under Putin (2000-2011).....	23
2.3. Russian-Syrian relations.....	27
2.3.1 Cooperation and Conflict.....	28
2.3.2 Changing Tactics	30
CHAPTER III: THE SYRIAN CRISIS.....	32
3.1 The peculiarity of the Syrian Uprising.....	32
3.2 Fears and Opportunities.....	33
3.2.1 Syria's Allies: Russia and Iran	33
3.2.2 Syria's Non Allies: Old friend vs. Old enemy	35
3.3 Evolution of Syrian Crisis	36
3.3.1. War by Proxy	36
3.3.2. The War against the ISIS.....	40
3.3.3. War for Hegemonic Position	42
3.3.4. The recovery of the regime (2018-2020)	44
CHAPTER IV: RUSSIAN MOTIVATIONS AND STRATEGIES	47
4.1: Russian Motivations for its Syrian Intervention.....	47

4.2: Russian Strategies Over Syria.	53
4.2.1 On diplomatic level.....	53
4.2.2 On operational level.....	57
CHAPTER V: ISRAELI MOTIVATIONS AND STRATEGIES.....	66
5.1 Israeli Policies Over Syria	66
5.1.1 Policy of Cautious Non-intervention.....	66
5.1.2 Policy of Cautious Intervention.....	70
5.2. Israeli motivations for its Syrian Intervention:	72
5.2.1 A blow for the “Axis of Resistance”.....	72
5.2.2. Geopolitical concerns	75
5.2.3 Decline in the Israeli-Palestinian question	75
5.3 Shift in Visions.....	76
5.4. Israeli Strategies over Syria	78
CHAPTER VI: THE STATE OF BILATERAL RELATIONS AND THE CRISIS IN SYRIA	84
6.1 International and regional Incentives for Cooperation	85
6.2 Areas of Convergence over Syria.....	86
6.2.1. Overlapping Motivations	86
6.2.2 Overlapping Strategies.....	90
6.3. National Gains and International Support	95
6.4. Divergence of Strategies and Potential Escalations	98
6.4.1. Duality of Positions.....	98
6.4.2 Few Engagements not directed specifically against Israel.....	99
6.4.3. Iranian Presence	100
6.4.4 Acting out of the Hotline	101
6.4.5 Encounters between Fighter Aircrafts: The S-300 crisis and the downing of the Russian plane	102
6.4.6 Supplying S-300: Real Crisis or Interim Escalation	104
Conclusion and Outlook.....	106
References	112

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBW	Campaign between Wars
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IDF	Israeli Defence Forces
IRGC	The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PMC	Private Military Company
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDF	The Syrian Democratic Forces
SNC	Syrian National Council
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
YPG	The People's Protection Units

ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the nature of the Russian-Israeli relations within the major developments that took place within the Syrian theatre particularly at the time when the Syrian uprising started to take military, regional and international dimensions. The development of Russian-Israeli relations in Syria contained many areas of cooperation and had witnessed dissatisfaction on both sides as well. Areas of cooperation were due to a wide range of common interests and foreign policy issues in the region. The study relies on the answer of the problem submitted on the descriptive analytical method in order to identify the overlapping and conflicting areas of motivations and strategies.

The study consists of an introduction and six chapters followed by conclusion and outlook. The significance of the study stems from its elucidation of the Russian-Israeli relations within the events of the most recent and significant conflicts, the Syrian conflict. The study has sought to uncover the political motives and employed strategies of both Russia and Israel towards Syria since the onset of the conflict in March 2011 until 2019, then comparing their common motives and strategies that determines the shape of their ongoing relations. The study has employed eclectic methodology, thus making use of a number of research methods such as those of the historical, comparative and that of the national interest and decision-making.

In highlighting the Russian-Israeli course of relations in Syria it was required to review the influential regional and international determinants in the Syrian crisis and their effects on the foreign policy of Israel and Russia. The study concluded that Israeli-Russian military, political and diplomatic coordination over Syria has been managed successfully to certain degree, yet distrust has limited the way for a full-fledged military and political alliance. Similarly, diplomatic standoffs and military friction could not be avoided, yet their rapprochement and cooperation continued to shape the nature of their relations.

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, özellikle Suriye ayaklanmasının askeri, bölgesel ve uluslararası boyutlar almaya başladığı dönemde Suriye sahasında meydana gelen önemli gelişmeler içinde Rus-İsrail ilişkilerinin doğasını belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Suriye'deki Rus-İsrail ilişkilerinin gelişimi birçok işbirliği alanı içeriyordu ve her iki tarafta da memnuniyetsizliğe tanık olmuştu. İşbirliği alanları, bölgedeki çok çeşitli ortak çıkarlar ve dış politika sorunlarından kaynaklanıyordu. Çalışma, örtüşen ve çatışan motivasyon ve strateji alanlarını tanımlamak için tanımlayıcı analitik yöntemde sunulan sorunun cevabına dayanmaktadır.

Çalışma bir giriş ve altı bölümden oluşmaktadır ve bunu sonuç ve değerlendirme takip etmektedir. Çalışmanın önemi, Rusya-İsrail ilişkilerini Suriye savaşında en son ve en mühim olaylar bünyesinde açıklamasından kaynaklanmaktadır. Çalışma, Mart 2011'den 2019'a kadar savaşın başlamasından bu yana hem Rusya'nın hem de İsrail'in Suriye'ye yönelik siyasi saiklerini ve izlediği stratejileri ortaya çıkarmaya çalıştı ve daha sonra devam eden ilişkilerinin şeklini belirleyen ortak gerekçelerini ve stratejilerini karşılaştırdı. Bu araştırmada, eklektik metodoloji kullanıldı; böylece tarihsel, karşılaştırmalı ve ulusal çıkar ve karar verme gibi araştırma yöntemlerinden faydalanıldı.

Suriye'deki Rus-İsrail ilişkilerinin gidişatını vurgularken, Suriye krizindeki etkili bölgesel ve uluslararası belirleyici faktörleri ve bunların İsrail ve Rusya'nın dış politikası üzerindeki etkilerini gözden geçirmek gerekiyordu. Çalışma, İsrail-Rus askeri, siyasi ve diplomatik koordinasyonunun Suriye üzerinde bir dereceye kadar başarıyla yönetildiği, ancak yine de güvensizliğin tam teşekküllü bir askeri ve siyasi ittifakın yolunu sınırladığı sonucuna vardı. Benzer şekilde, diplomatik anlaşmazlık ve askeri sürtüşmelerden kaçınılamamıştır, ancak Rusya ve İsrail'in yakınlaşma ve işbirliği ilişkilerinin doğasını şekillendirmeye devam etmiştir

INTRODUCTION

In 1991, diplomatic ties between Tel Aviv and Moscow were formally restored and societal connections were deepened especially with the continuing Russian exodus to Israel, this has resulted in strong economic and trade relations, which have strengthened their political relations and common interests concerning major regional and international issues. Yet, their relations witnessed some strain due to incompatibility in their respective foreign policies. And this former base of their relations has continued to shape their relations within Syria. Therefore, this paper is meant to explain the interstate cooperation between Russia and Israel and their comportment in Syria. To do so, it first sets the theoretical background to be able to analyse the situation in Syria. Follow the historical paths of Russian-Israeli, Russian-Syrian and Syrian-Israeli relations and explain the changing dynamics of Syrian case in the second and third chapter. Then the paper analyses the various motivations and strategies of Russians and Israelis within the chaotic situation in Syria in Chapter four and five. Their overlapping interests and strategies as well as their differences will then be analysed in Chapter six, after which a conclusion will be drawn.

In Syria, the Russian military intervention came to signal an alternative to the US and EU in the Middle East and that its role in the international system goes beyond its veto power in the UN Security Council. Furthermore, Russia has cultivated relations with a number of countries, chief among which is Israel. Both countries are guided by the primacy of security and military understanding of power. In addition, both states are aware of the importance of their cultural and economic ties. Through the prism of the Syrian war, several agreements were signed between Israel and Russia to strengthen bilateral relations in all political, economic and cultural fields. But as the Syrian crisis has troubling long-term consequences for the whole international system, Russia and Israel decided to reduce criticism of their foreign policy. Prioritizing national security shaped the Russian and Israeli policy towards the negative security implications of the Syrian crisis. So both admitted themselves to foreign policy successes from their engagement in Syria to balance their national instability.

In addition, the Syrian crisis brought forward spill-over effects on many regional countries particularly in regard to the influx of refugees in host countries. Yet, both Russia and Israel's burden share of the Syrian refugee crisis was insignificant in comparison to other regional actors. Russia and Israel did not adopt an open-door policy towards Syrians fleeing hostilities. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, the number of Syrian citizens in Russia at the end of October 2018 were 9.1 thousand, this number includes those Syrians who were in Russia even before the outbreak of the war.¹ While Israel did not take in refugees unless women and children for medical treatment only.

Proceeding from that point, it was necessary to elucidate how both countries managed to deepen their understandings and avoid confrontation and threats of their national security through making concessions, long-term commitments and investments in the other party's interests.

¹ "Syrian refugees in Russia: A Review of the situation in 2018", *Civic Assistance Committee, July, 2019*
<https://refugee.ru/en/dokladyi/syrian-refugees-in-russia-a-review-of-the-situation-in-2018/>

CHAPTER I: BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Research Problem

The Research Problem focuses on the development of the Russian-Israeli relations in light of the Syrian crisis (2011-2019), and what did their foreign policy witnessed of convergence and divergence of interests and strategies. It was necessary to study their behaviour represented by their foreign policy at the regional level. This study, through which foreign policy backgrounds and motivations of Russian and Israeli position towards the Syrian arena will be addressed. Therefore, we will try throughout this study to answer this main question:

How did the Israeli-Russian relations develop within the major junctions of the erupted war in Syria. Until the foreign policy drivers and motives of these powers are clear, the study will try to answer some sub questions which are:

- What are the motivations behind the Russian and Israeli foreign policy in Syria? Did their policies converge or diverge in Syria? What is the nature of their intervention? What is the nature of the Russian-Israeli relations within the context of the Syrian conflict?
- What is the map of the new Israeli-Russian interests imposed by Russian intervention in Syria.
- How did their overlapping interests and strategies facilitate their rapprochement.
- How did they manage to overcome their areas of differences despite potential escalations

1.2 Research Objective

This paper aims to analyze Russian-Israeli relations in the context of the Syrian crisis, especially with the beginning of Russian military intervention in Syria. The paper argues that Israel was able to formulate understandings with Russia regarding the Syrian arena. Despite the apparent contradictions between Israel and Russia's allies in the region in general and the Syrian crisis in particular, Israel managed to ensure its security interests within the numerous security implications of the Syrian war. Furthermore, the paper aims to investigate the mounting Russian role in Syrian crisis, since Moscow has upgraded its role of “indispensable middleman”.

1.3 Limitation of the Study

The selected time frame for the research is very important due to the fact that it follows nine years since the crisis, starting from 2011 until 2019. The study focuses on the Israeli-Russian understandings within the Syrian issue particularly after the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015. However, the paper takes in consideration that a common understanding emerged between the two countries on a number of global and Middle East issues rather than just in Syria.

1.4 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper is meant to explain the interstate cooperation between Russia and Israel and their comportment in Syria. To do so it first sets the theoretical background to be able to analyse the situation in Syria. Follow the historical paths of Russian-Israeli, Russian-Syrian and Syrian-Israeli relations and explain the changing dynamics of Syrian case in the second and third chapter. Then this paper will analyse the various motivations and strategies of Russians and Israelis within the chaotic situation in Syria in Chapter four and five. Their overlapping interests and strategies as well as their differences will then be analysed in Chapter six, after which a conclusion will be drawn.

The research method used in this paper will be qualitative, based on several methods. First, The historical approach that works to analyze and interpret historical events as a basis for understanding contemporary problems and predicting future conditions. Second, the comparative approach which is based on comparison in the study of the phenomenon, where it highlights similarities and differences between two or more phenomena. Third, Systems Analysis Approach: The term system is used to describe the nature of behavioral patterns that exist between the elements of the political phenomenon, and is used in the field of international relations to describe a range of relationships between political variables, Gabriel Almond believes that the political system represent patterns of interactions that exist in all independent societies, while Karl Deutsch (1964) believes that political systems are information receiving and processing units and such a model has a potential utility for decision-making units for the conduct of their foreign policy. David Easton (1965) believes that the political system is a continuous interaction within the units of the system, the components of the political system are inputs (demands,supports) and outputs (actions and decisions).

Lastly, the study adopts the approach of national interest in analyzing and interpreting the Russian-Israeli motivations in Syria. This approach was first employed by Charles A. Beard (1934) in his interpretation of the modern historical experience of the United States foreign policy, but then it became an important approach in the study of international relations especially within the contemporary theory of realism. Realists view that states are likely to formulate their foreign policy in accordance with their national interest. Thus, the survival of the state remains the core national interest of all states and a precondition for attaining their other interests. (Dunne and Schmidt 2005, 164,174). For the purpose of pursuing national interest, each state usually follows certain mechanisms as forming alliances, comprehensive relationships with the system's powers, ensuring military power, or through diplomatic negotiations and peaceful settlement.² Based on this approach, states seek maximizing their national interest and thus it could be concluded that a conflict of interests between countries is inevitable, and then conflict between them is also inevitable. Also, there is no permanent harmony or consensus of interests. Then, this

² Nourhan El-Sheikh, "Russian Policy toward the Middle East: Is Russia Going to be More Involved in the Region's Crises ?", *Al-Siyassa Al-Dawliya, Al-Ahram*, Cairo, No. 203, January 2016 (Arabic source)

approach does not presume a world in which peace prevails, nor does it presume the inevitability of war, but rather it assumes continuous conflict and effective diplomatic behavior that minimizes the threat of war by conforming opposing interests.

Data will be collected from various journal articles, books and think-tank papers. Furthermore, speeches, meetings between Putin and Netanyahu, Russian studies and Israeli national security and foreign policy studies will be major references in analyzing the course of the recent events. To avoid bias in some of the Russian and Israeli resources, diverse resources will be included as well. Sources are mostly in English, but some in Arabic and Hebrew. And as the Syrian war consists of major international and regional actors, then analyzing the development of the Russian-Israeli relations in the Syrian crisis would not be limited to developments within their bilateral relations but it would further discuss the Israeli and Russian ties with other state and non-state actors.

Russian-Israeli relations and their own foreign policy would be investigated based on the IR theory of realism. There are different schools of realism. The most common when studying realism is classical realism, defensive realism, offensive realism, and neoclassical realism.³ The theory of realism, assumes that the main driver of foreign policy is the concept of the national interest of the state and the survival of the state in the shadow of an anarchical international system based on power relations and interests. Since taking office in Russia, Putin has been trying to restore Russian glory, bring back Russia as a superpower and preserve its interests from a purely realistic point. Following the neoclassical school of realism, which argues that states attempt to change the international system based on their own preferences through increasing their own power. Therefore the states that possess more power follow more ambitious foreign policy (Rose 1998).⁴ Neoclassical realism can tell us how states according to their unique situation, relative power and motivations react to structural pressures of the international system

³ Wohlforth, C.W., "Foreign policy: Theories, actors and cases. (Smith, S, Hadfield, A, & Dunne, T 2008, Foreign Policy : Theories, Actors, Cases, n.p.: *Oxford*, 2008 p. 32, 34, 35

⁴ Rose, Gideon. "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy." *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144-72

and shape their foreign policy (dehghani Firoozabadi, 1387).⁵

The ambitious Russian foreign policy has been a challenge to the international political order and to the undisputed US/Western global dominance.⁶ In Syria, Russia posed a challenge to the western policies by its initial resistance to sanctions against the Assad government, and its opposition to forcible regime change by the international forces. But the Russian military intervention in Syria came to signal an alternative to the US and EU in the Middle East and that its role in the international system goes beyond its veto power in the UN Security Council. Yet, Russia's foreign policy decisions regarding Syria did not all start there, but earlier with its annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in Ukraine.⁷ So Moscow's activism in the region came as a manifestation of restoring a great power status that was lost after the collapse of the USSR.⁸

Furthermore, Russia has cultivated relations with a number of countries, chief among which is Israel, recognizing their core interests and security threats which has been obviously of paramount importance in the development of their relations. Both countries are guided by the primacy of security and military understanding of power. In addition, both states are aware of the importance of their cultural and economic ties. Through the prism of the Syrian war, several agreements were signed between Israel and Russia to strengthen bilateral relations in all political, economic and cultural fields. But as the Syrian crisis has troubling long-term consequences for the whole international system, Russia and Israel decided to reduce criticism of their foreign policy. Prioritizing national security shaped the Russian and Israeli policy towards the negative security implications of the Syrian crisis. First, the rise of Islamic extremists carried a negative echo to both states as they already saw themselves dealing with "terrorists" in their national borders. So, both admitted themselves to foreign policy successes from their engagement in Syria to balance their national instability.

⁵ Dehghanifirouz Abadi, S, J, "Emancipatory Foreign Policy: Critical Theories and Foreign Policy o Islamic Revolution. *Seyasat Khareji*, 5(2),1387

⁶ Carpenter, T.G, 'Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications', *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 24(1),2013, pp.1–11. p.10

⁷ Söderlund, "Russia's foreign policyA qualitative case study of Russia's motives to enter Syria" , *Linnéuniversitetet*, 2017.

⁸ Schumacher, T & Nitoiu, C, 'Russia's Foreign Policy Towards North Africa in the Wake of the Arab Spring', *Mediterranean Politics*, 20(1), 2015, pp.1–8. p. 97,98

In addition, the Syrian crisis brought forward spill-over effects on many regional countries particularly in regard to the influx of refugees in host countries. Yet, both Russia and Israel's burden share of the Syrian refugee crisis was insignificant in comparison to other regional actors. Russia and Israel did not adopt an open-door policy towards Syrians fleeing hostilities. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, the number of Syrian citizens in Russia at the end of October 2018 were 9.1 thousand, this number includes those Syrians who were in Russia even before the outbreak of the war.⁹ While Israel did not take in refugees unless women and children for medical treatment only.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

Strategy

The term “strategy” is derived from the Greek word “stratego” which means general, the Roman author Frontinus used the Greek word “strategemata” which is literally “trick of war”. For the purposes of this paper **strategy** is defined as a “complex decision-making process that connects the ends sought (objectives) with the ways and means of achieving those ends”. Those decisions range from long-term national security objectives to narrow and concrete decisions concerning battlefield tactics. While means are political (or diplomatic), economic, and military instruments of power.¹⁰ Therefore, the Russian or Israeli strategy is the plan that outlines the modes of conduct that each is seeking to achieve in order to pursue its own motivations.

National Interest

According to Hans J. Morgenthau (1952) national interest has two factors, one is demanded, and the other is changeable and decided by situations. Morgenthau discusses what the national interest is in the face of the actual world of power politics. Thus, survival among nations is the

⁹ “Syrian refugees in Russia: A Review of the situation in 2018”, *Civic Assistance Committee, July, 2019*
<https://refugee.ru/en/dokladyi/syrian-refugees-in-russia-a-review-of-the-situation-in-2018/>

¹⁰ Dennis M. Drew and Donald M. Snow, *Making Twenty-First Century Strategy: An Introduction to Modern National Security Processes and Problems*, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2006, p. 13.

central element of the concept of national interest. Once the national interest is established, a reasonable order must be set among the essentials which constitute the national interest and among the resources which are available for the pursuit of those essentials. The concept of the national interest assumes continuous conflict and threat of war, to be minimized through the continuous adjustment of conflicting interests by diplomatic action.¹¹ Although power within the framework of realism represents the basis of international relations, this power must have a purpose to be directed towards, which is securing national interest. The study of relations between two parties leads to the analysis and interpretation of the concept of national interest, and thus the national interest being the "primary key" in foreign policy.

National Security

Robert McNamara (1968) defines it as "Security is development and without development there can be no security, development means economic, social and political progress. It means a reasonable standard of living, and reasonable in this context requires continual redefinition."¹² While Joseph Nye defines it as "the absence of the threat of severe deprivation of economic well-being". According to Wolfers, security is a value of which a nation can have more or less.¹³ Others argued that states are either secure or insecure. Belal Ghannam (2016) focused on the transformation from traditional security to comprehensive human security. These definitions are linked to various dimensions of national security, which in turn represent a set of elements whose presence or absence leads to the stability or inferiority of national security, including the military, political, economic, social, cultural, geopolitical, and demographic dimension and this paper would in turn consider the national security of a state as so. However, in modern time conflicts, states act as "security maximizers" by defending their national security by countering threats not only from state actors but also from non- state actors as in the case of the Russian and Israeli rising national security threats from ISIS.

¹¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, "Another 'Great Debate': The National Interest of the United States, *The American Political Science Review*, XLVI (December, 1952), 972.

¹² R. McNamara, *The Essence of Security* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968):149-150.

¹³ Arnold Wolfers, "'National Security' as an Ambiguous Symbol," *Political Science Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1952): 481-502.

1.6 Literature Review

After the end of the cold war, the Russian-Israeli relations has been put on focus by many academic scholars, generally taking into account the Palestinian-Israeli peace settlement as an important axis in the development of the bilateral relations. Also, Syria was another fundamental axis and even a flashpoint in analyzing the Russian-Israeli relations. While changes brought by the Arab Spring and the eruption of the Syrian uprising have added multidimensional perspectives to the nature of the ongoing relations. In so, this paper would focus on the Syrian war as an major platform for rapprochement and how it had shifted the regional and international balances; thus had offered new scenarios of “temporary alliances” and “unprecedented cooperation”.

Throughout the following, previous studies related to Russian-Israeli relations are reviewed, there are studies that dealt directly with Russian-Israeli relations, studies that dealt with Russian foreign policy, and other studies that dealt with Israeli foreign policy.

Studies related to Israeli-Russian Relations

1. Anna Borshchevskaya (2016):“The Maturing of Israeli-Russian Relations” *The Washington institute for near east policy.*

The study aimed to identify the nature of relations between Russia and Israel, especially in light of a very complex environment in the Middle East, and in light of the current developments in the Syrian conflict. Anna argues that the Russian-Israeli economic and military relations have recently improved but complexities remain, especially with Russia's preservation of the Syrian regime that in return strengthens Iran’s influence in the region and poses security concerns to Israel. Among other differences are those that emerged during the visit of Hamas delegation to Russia and Putin's declaration that Hamas is not a terrorist organization. Nevertheless, neither side would want to create a serious bilateral crisis. Most likely they would continue to cooperate in Syria especially with the western retreat in the middle east and the strained relations between Israel and the Obama administration.

2. Krasna, Joshua (2018): “Moscow on the Mediterranean: Russia and Israel’s Relationship.” *Russian Foreign Policy Papers*.

He broadens the scenario a bit by saying that the Israeli- Russian relationship is positive, however there are three main policy areas (Syria, Iran and Palestine) where the two countries disagree. It is argued that Russia’s involvement in Syria provides complication and a brake for Israel’s activities towards Russian allies (Iranian& Syrian forces). But since the Russian intervention in 2015 the two parties understood the pragmatic weight each party yields in the national security interests of the other party. Thus, the study concludes that their interests are sync rather than identical.

3. O. Raanan and V. Michlin (2018): Israel-Russia Relations: Mutual Esteem or Cold-Eyed Utilitarianism? *The Arena, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya*.

Based on a roundtable discussion with an interdisciplinary expert panel the study discusses the different considerations affecting Israeli-Russian relations and predicts their most likely future direction. The study contained six titles: “New Relations-Old Problems, Between East and West, Tango with a Bear, Israel Should Not Overreach, The Aliyah from the Former USSR and Its Role in Israeli-Russian Relations, and Don’t Go There.” The study is unique in that it shows the harmony and contradictory views among the professionals regarding the security and politics as definers of the Israeli Russian relations. It also spotlights the cultural dynamic and the importance of Russian immigrants in Israel in defining the fate of relations between Russia and Israel. Furthermore, it follows the ironies in Russian and Israeli policies within the Syrian war which in return makes Russia the most complex foreign policy challenges to Israel and vice versa. Yet, the study concludes the Israeli-Russian ties are getting closer in the Syrian arena.

4. Scott B. Lasensky, Vera Michlin-Shapir, “Avoiding Zero-Sum: Israel and Russia in an Evolving Middle East”, *Atlantic Council, October, 2019*. (pp.141-157)

The study focused on the development of the Israeli and Russian skills, interests and strategies within Syria and how they managed so far to avoid a zero sum game despite sources of friction, and to promote both military and diplomatic channels of coordination and deconfliction. While

the main focus of the study was after the active Russian military operations in Syria and its implications on Israel's strategies. Moreover, this study takes into consideration the centrality of the United States in Israel's national security concept as an important pillar within the Russian-Israeli ties.

Studies related to Russian Foreign Policy:

1. Book by Andrej Kreutz (2007), titled: Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe

Kreutz raises a question of whether Russia is a friend or foe for the Middle East region, by providing in depth analysis of Russia and the former Soviet Union interests in the Middle East particularly towards the Arab world in a time span of a century. The book presents great problems that are still being raised today, especially in light of the Russian position on the events in Syria: What are the reasons for the Russian interest in the Middle East and its problems. Is it due to the background of economic, geopolitical or religious purposes, or for all these reasons combined. Indeed, the focus of the book is the end of the twentieth century after the fall of the USSR, which was a critical period for new Moscow's conciliatory policies in the region. But the book functions as introductory for Putin's policy within the continuing historical and political developments and rapid change in alliances. Composed of five chapters each one focuses on Russia's relations with different Arab regions as follows: First chapter focuses on the Arab east (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan) followed by Palestine, Egypt, Iraq and the Arab peninsula.

2. Study by Irina Zvyagelskaya (2016), titled: "Russia, the New Protagonist in the Middle East, pp(.73-91)

The author argues that Russia's interests in the Middle East are divided into two groups. First, the traditional interests dictated by the security agenda, and threats that may come across the Russian border, through the export of radical ideology to the Caucasus and Central Asian regions. The second is its interest in a "strong Russia" that has a special and independent approach to global and regional issues, as well as its economic interests, particularly those of the energy and arms sales sector. In the frame of this policy, Russia has developed its stance towards the civil war in Syria. The Syrian operation was fraught with positive and negative implications for Russia, but

Iriana says that “Russia can no longer return to the “making friends with everybody” formula, but this does not mean that it is impossible to build up balanced relationships with various participants in the Middle East drama.” and that Russia’s military effectiveness alone would neither ensure its full fledged return to the region nor final victory in Syria.

3. Anna Borshchevskaya (2016): “Russia in the Middle East, Motives, Consequences and prospects”

The author represents the impact of President Putin's decision to intervene in Syria through the study of the past, and the study of the development of Russian domestic and foreign policy, which concluded that Putin's policy towards the Middle East was not in pursuit of a clear interest, but in pursuit of what the Middle East represents in economic and political opportunities, global race for influence, and amplifying the subjective feeling that Russia is indeed a superpower. She also discussed Putin’s Israel policy, his attribution of Russian struggle with Chechyan to that of Israel’s with Palestinians(terrorism), his aim to make his own imprint on the peace process, and the overall improvements in bilatleral relations reflected in economic and political cooperation. She argued that despite improvements in the bilateral relationship, significant differences remain regarding Russia’s position from Syria, Hamas, and Iran.

Studies related to Israeli Foreign Policy:

1. Study by Basem Jalal Elkassem, entitled “Series of Refereed Academic Studies: The Israeli Strategy Towards the Syrian Crisis 2011–2018”.

The Study follows the developments in the Syrian crisis and their implications for Israeli national security. It further addresses the Israeli strategy in facing challenges and threats emanating from the Syrian arena. Unveiling the way in which Israel managed relations with international and regional actors in the Syrian crisis (the Syrian government, the opposition groups, Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, Turkey and the United States).

2. Study by Larry Hanauer (2016)“*Israel's Interests and Options in Syria*”

The author identifies Tel Aviv's objectives in the Syrian civil war based on a policy of power limitation to the various parties of the conflict, especially Russia, Iran and the Assad Regime. While on ground its options are limited with sporadic military engagement to prevent attacks on Israeli territory or immediate transfers of weapons to Hezbollah. Larry argues that the continued stalemate in Syria is an option that will fulfill Israel's interests more than any unfavorable outcome.

With analysis to the mainstream literature concerning the Russian-Israeli relations the thesis argues that an unprecedented rapprochement and strengthened cooperation between Russia and Israel has been cultivated within the Syrian arena, despite some rising potentials for confliction and friction; which has been dealt with in a comprehensive understanding measure by the two parties. Focusing on their perceptions, motivations, strategies and areas of convergent and divergent interests within the regional conflict, the paper would in depth add to previous scholars that have focused on the historical dynamics of bilateral relations and to those who have studied the going bilateral cooperation within the context of the ongoing conflict in Syria. Contrary to Russian-Iranian cooperation that has developed due to identical stances from the Syrian government, Moscow and Jerusalem shared quite different objectives, yet their cooperation and rapprochement is much emphasized.

CHAPTER II: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

This Chapter examines the historical bilateral relations between Syria and Israel, Syria and Russia, Russia and Israel. Although, tracing the trilateral Russian-Israeli-Syrian relations would be a comprehensive narrative, yet the dimensions of each bilateral case could yield an all-inclusive understanding to the developments of present relations in the Syrian arena. Yet, that does not imply that each case will not deal with the “third” party. On the contrary, the intertwined policies of the three parties impose the reality that the “third” party policies must be taken into account but along with the other determinants. For Instance, dealing with the Russian-Israeli relations have a detailed socio-cultural and economic dimension that is significant to the conducted study, but of less relevance to Syria.

2.1. Israeli- Syrian Relations:

2.1.1 State of War

Syria and Israel have fought three major wars (1948,1967,1973), and engaged in other regional conflicts. Mistrust and suspicion were core elements in their relations, yet some sort of coordination cannot be denied. In the 1967 war, Israel acquired by force the Golan Heights which belonged to Syria. In 1973, the mutual hostility was deepened with Syria’s attempt to regain the Golan Heights but did not succeed. In 1974, Israel-Syria Disengagement Agreement was reached, by which the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force started to monitor the buffer zone between the two countries. Despite its radicalism, Syrian Ba'ath regime since the 1970's managed not to place the question of the Golan at the top of the national agenda. Maintaining the regime, leading the arab nationalism and claiming the custodian role of the Palestinaian cause were among Assad’s main interests and Israel’s main concerns.

With the eruption of the civil war in Lebanon, Syria had signed the “red-line” agreement with Israel in 1976, and both parties had avoided confrontation during a period of mutual involvement. Although some actions committed by both sides had led to escalation and miscalculations. Yet, the war had strengthened Assad’s position especially with the Syrian-Iranian alliance that had awakened the Shi’a Lebanese against Israel and with Syria’s support for Palestinians, by which Assad came to be seen as Israel’s chief Arab adversary. But such a “positive” position was not enjoyed for long especially that developments in the Lebanese crisis had turned Syria’s prolonged position there from an asset into a liability.¹⁴ In addition, the Lebanese war had resulted in Syria’s relations with the PLO to become hostile but that did not prevent the Syrian leadership from praising the Palestinian Intifada which broke out in December, 1987.

2.1.2 Peace Initiatives:

By early 1980’s, the Arab Israeli conflict had transformed to a Syrian-Israeli conflict, as Egypt signed the Camp David Agreement in 1978, Jordan enjoyed a *de facto* peace with Israel since 1967 and Iraq got involved in two consecutive wars in the Gulf (Moshe Ma’oz, 1995). And since no Arab-Israeli war is possible without Egypt, Assad needed the protection of Moscow and the regional strength of Tehran. So he signed a friendship treaty that he long resisted with the Soviet Union in 1981 and sided with Iran against Iraq in the Irani-Iraqi war.¹⁵ Furthermore throughout the 1980’s particularly after Syria’s involvement in Lebanon, Assad started to tout for **strategic parity** with Israel as an important element in the new emerging Syrian policy, also a way to buy time and avoid the fact that Syria is left with no credible military alliances to strengthen its position in peace negotiations.¹⁶

In late 1980’s, the Syrian leadership decided to give priority for diplomacy rather than military strategy. This shift in Syrian policy was due to changes in the **Soviet Union foreign Policy**,

¹⁴ Rabinovich, Itamar. “Israel, Syria, and Lebanon.” *International Journal*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1990, pp. 529–552. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40202688.(p.551)

¹⁵ Martha Neff Kessler, “Syria, Israel and the Middle East peace process: Past success and Final Challenges,” *Middle East Policy* Vol. VII, No. 2, (February 2000): p.(67-89), pp.75

¹⁶ *Ibid*, Kessler, 2000. p.76

which distanced itself from the “strategic-parity” doctrine and had improved relations with Israel and the United States. This had led Asaad to normalize relations with Egypt in 1989 and to improve relations with the United States, so that any Israeli-Syrian settlement would be within Damascus acceptable terms.¹⁷ Despite this changing position, prospects of Israeli-Syrian settlement were clearly dim at that point as the two parties have different views of a comprehensive settlement,¹⁸ and aggravated domestic matters to deal with.

The 1990’s marked the need for peace negotiations between Israel and its long-time adversaries in the region, PLO and Syria. Oslo Accord was reached between Israel and the PLO in 1993, and a parallel less-known diplomatic movement under the canopy of the U.S brought Israel and Syria to the brink of peace. Syria’s “bottom line” of negotiation was a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights and Israel’s “bottom line” was security and political arrangements. During the track of negotiations, Israel under Rabin considered the option of full withdrawal from territories it controlled in 1967, but Rabinovich reveals that Rabin made this “hypothetical” ploy in a step to challenge Assad¹⁹, who was not responsive to the “innovative” Rabin policy.²⁰ Anyhow some progress was made in secrecy, yet no peace treaty was reached due to what Israelis and Americans describe “Assad’s slow and painful method of negotiation”.²¹

Since then, Assad felt betrayed; earlier by Sadat and later by Yasser Arafat and King Hussein of Jordan who both reached a peace agreement with Israel. He was left with no Arab coalition but with a purely Syrian cause,²² since Syria alone cannot wage a war from a position of weakness. Though believed that no Arab-Israeli peace is possible without Syria, Peres after the assassination of Rabin had pushed the track of negotiation with Syria but it too reached an early deadlock. In 1996, Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party rose to power in Israel, the negotiation process began to go off on a tangent, Netanyahu rejects any withdrawal from the Golan for

¹⁷ op. cit., Rabinovich, Itamar. “Israel, Syria, and Lebanon.(p.534)

¹⁸ Ibid, Itamar. “Israel, Syria, and Lebanon.”, p.542

¹⁹ Rabinovich, Itamar. "The Security Dialogue." In *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, 163-95. Princeton, New Jersey; Chichester, West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1998. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7s26k.9.

²⁰ Ibid, Rabinovich, Itamar. "The Security Dialogue.p.239-241

²¹ Harvey Sicherman, “Hafez Al-Assad: The Man Who Waited Too Long”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, July 1, 2000

²² Ibid, Harvey (2000)

strategic objectives, as it is seen as a vital area to protect the Israeli security, water needs and the need for new arrangements for the fate of Druze.

The election of Ehud Barak in May 1999 marked the renewal of negotiations between Israel and Syria from the point they were halted in 1996, yet they ended not being fruitful. As the Second (Aqsa) Intifada erupted in 2000, it proclaimed the failure of Oslo agreement and the lack of commitment by the Israeli government to the terms of the agreement. During this period, Bashar Al-Assad assumed power in Syria, seeking rapprochement and support to the political forces opposing Fatah movement such as the Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the Popular for the Liberation of Palestine. The Syrian government further hosted the offices of those movements on Syrian territories. Despite Israel's poignant criticism of Bashar Al-Assad position, attempts by Turkey, Russia and the United States to mediate Israeli-Syrian peace talks between 2007 and 2009 were serious to move the two parties to the stage of public announcement of the track in 2010. Although, the Syrian-Israeli peace talks orchestrated by Turkey in 2008 were suspended due to Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip.

However, since 2011 the Syrian upheaval and the accompanying foreign interventions were a milestone in the history of the Syrian-Israeli conflict, so the question here becomes for many "when will the Syrian Arab Republic and Israel be able to remain in a state of no war and no peace, and when will both refrain from crossing the red lines between them? ". Furthermore, the war in Syria had shifted regional alliances to some degree to Israel's favour especially after the Hamas movement that was once operating in Damascus but had supported the Syrian uprising against the Syrian government while the Palestinian authority in the west bank remained neutral to various events in the Syrian arena.

2.2. Russian-Israeli Relations

2.2.1 Diplomatic tensions:

Russian-Israeli relations have witnessed fluctuations since the Soviet Union's recognition of the State of Israel in 1948, until a total rupture of diplomatic relations in 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The

Soviet Union was one of the first to recognize the state of Israel immediately after its declaration, according to Philip Mendes in his book “Jews and the Left”. Not long after, Moscow allowed Czechoslovakia to sell an arms deal to Israel during the armistice of the 1948-1949 war, which led to the reversal of the battle for Israel over seven Arab countries in the first Arab-Israeli war, said Primakov.²³ By supporting Israel Stalin had a plan in mind, the dream of establishing a socialist republic in Palestine that is pro-Soviet and anti-British influence in the Middle East”. (Hiroaki Kuromiya , Stalin).

But immediately after the 1948 war, Moscow understood that the ruling Mapai party led by David ben Gurion had chosen to align itself to the Western camp over the eastern bloc. And the Soviet vision had shifted regarding the fact that Israel is a progressive socialist society, and regarding the reality and goals of the Zionist movement. Since Soviets discovered that Israel is in fact a strategic ally and instrument of Western imperialism, they again evaluated their previous policies, and reconsider their previous positions on the support of the Zionist movement. Moscow slowly began to shift side towards Arabs dating from the Six-Day War, approaching the Arab national forces (i.e PLO) against colonialism, expressed its readiness to deal with Arab governments against what the USSR called the "linchpin" of Western imperialism, Israel, cooperated with them in various fields and supported them materially and politically despite the contradiction in ideological orientations.²⁴

The interwar period 1967-1973 showed the perpetual dualism in soviet policy, how to arm the Arabs for war yet limit them to purely political action.²⁵ Conventionally viewed that nearly two decades have passed without significant official contacts between Israel and Soviet Russia, but Primakov (2009), a former Soviet Foreign Minister revealed the existence of twenty years of secret contacts and back channel between the Soviet and Israeli government. Intentions to improve relations with Israel indicate the early stage of Soviets concessions to Israel in compensation for their impulsive behavior during the 1967 war.

²³ Yevgeny Primakov, “Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East From the Cold War to the Present”, *New York: Basic Books*, 2009.

²⁴ Robert FREEDMAN, "Soviet Jewry as a factor of Israeli Foreign policy," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. IX, N° 4, Summer 1986, pp. 62-63

²⁵ Galia Golan. “Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War Two to Gorbachev”. *Cambridge University Press*, 1990

In 1971, the inner circle of the Politburo decided to initiate secret negotiations with Jerusalem in an aim to overcome the diplomatic monopoly vis-à-vis the United States.²⁶ In Israel and in Europe, Primakov had held meetings clandestinely with Israeli leaders and senior officials, and had kept strong ties with Fatah, which might in return allow more leverage for the USSR's mediator role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the 1970's Leonid Brezhnev (era of détente) allowed the emigration of 250,000 Soviet Jews, however many of the emigrants chose not to stay in Israel instead preferred to proceed into Europe in the hopes of getting to the United States (*Noshrim*). Allowing an increased emigration of Soviet Jews was a Soviet incentive to appeal to Israel and to the United States.²⁷ So the USSR's 1970's foreign policy had gradually shifted from pro-Arabs position due to the growing independence of Arab states and the increasing gains of the United States in the area. Prior to Gorbachev, the USSR's only goal was self-inclusion in the Arab-Israeli settlement process and to prevent an American mediated settlement.²⁸ The Soviet at this point sought a peace settlement for the conflict in the Middle East and avoided confrontation with superpower by all means.

In 1978 and immediately after the Camp David talks, came the Soviet recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, during the 1982 Lebanon war Soviet reticence in condemning Israel and its inaction in supporting Palestinians had frustrated Arafat and made the Soviet Middle East policy more conspicuous on not willing to risk an all-out war with Israel for the Palestinians.²⁹ Impressing Israel and the United States was made even more notable during Gorbachev's era. The first substantive meeting between Soviets and Israelis was in Paris four months after Gorbachev had assumed office; the meeting discussed a package deal for the emigration of Jews. On the issue of the settlement of Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Soviet policy had carried a substantial shift claiming to have "no magic formula" for the resolution of the conflict, but all suggestions were connected with allaying Israel's concerns over security with no account for Palestinians self determination, refugees or the fate of Jerusalem.

²⁶ op. cit. Primakov (2009)

²⁷ "Soviet-Israeli relations: Trends and prospects", *Central Intelligence Agency*, February, 1998
<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP89S01450R000100050001-1.pdf>

²⁸ Galia Golan. "Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War Two to Gorbachev". Cambridge University Press, 1990

²⁹ Golan, Galia. "The Soviet Union and the Israeli Action in Lebanon." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1982, pp. 7–16

(Galia G, 1990, p.274). This was mostly profound in the restrained Soviet reaction to Palestinian Intifada in December 1987.

2.2.2 1990's Post-Soviet Aliyah: *Great Aliya from Soviet Russia (1990's) and Its Political implication*

During early 1980's Former Soviet Union has imposed some restrictions on aliyah, especially with the official anti-Semitism of Andropov period. While restoring relations was accompanied with Israeli preconditions regarding the emigration of the Soviet Jews, with what the Soviet had already shown some flexibility during détente period. Under Gorbachev, new emigration policy was implemented regarding Jews, which in return would facilitate American economic aid. Initially under early *glasnost and perestroika* Jews were given religious and cultural freedom, while Soviet aliyah figures remained relatively small. Later Gorbachev's policy has changed to include the resumption of emigration not only on individual level but to allow all "refusniks"³⁰ to emigrate with exit visas to Israel. By 1989, the total immigrants from FSU to Israel counted for 12,932,³¹ triple the number than its previous year. This number represents the vanguard of an immigration wave that was to reach over 400,000 by June 1992.³² So, in the last years of Gorbachev's era there was a major improvement in Soviet-Israeli diplomatic relations and an expansion in economic and cultural ties. While a deteriorated relations were witnessed between Moscow and the Arab states due to Moscow's noncompliance to Arab demands regarding the mass exodus of Soviet Jewry to Israel who would have an impact on the demographic and political makeup of Paletsinian Territories.

The migration rate in 1990 had reached about 35 thousand immigrants per month. But the First Gulf war and the relative stability in Russia had decreased the numbers to 5 thousand per month in 1992. Although among Ashkenazim there was a low level of religious and cultural identity, as soon as they arrived, their role in all spheres was emphasized. In the military field, Soviet citizens become workers in Israel's aircraft industry, and are experienced in the Soviet military

³⁰ Jews in the former Soviet Union who was refused permission to emigrate to Israel.

³¹ Total Immigration to Israel from the Former Soviet Union(1948 - Present)

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/total-immigration-to-israel-from-former-soviet-union>

³² Clive A. Jones, Soviet Jewish Aliyah, 1989-92: Impact and Implications for Israel and the Middle East.

industrial complex so Russia has been interested in co-producing military aircrafts with Israel.³³ Moreover, being the largest diaspora in Israel, Russians have led to the formation of significant Russo-Israeli ties in the areas of cultural exchange and tourism.

They further had a role in reshaping the political life in Israel, in light of the analysis of the results of the Israeli parliamentary elections held in years 1992,1996,1999,2003,2006 and 2009, indicators show an increase in the political integration of Russian immigrants in Israel. The first political step by Russian immigrants was the formation of the DA party, which failed to clear the 1992 electoral threshold to win seats. In 1996, Sharansky, a former Soviet refusenik, formed a new center-right political party “Yisrael b’Aliyah”. The party was successful but in 2003 elections it merged with the center-right Likud party and Sharansky announced the end of the party.

Beside the formation of Russian parties, Russian immigrants have played a prominent role in electoral successes of major Israeli parties. The two major Israeli parties, Likud and Labor were well aware of the electoral weight of the Russian immigrants and they worked to recruit their votes in the early 1990s. But the voting patterns among immigrants are dynamic, they tend to vote against ruling parties in a number of respects.³⁴ They voted against Yitzhak Shamir in 1992, and contributed to Rabin’s victory. They voted against Shimon Peres in 1996 and contributed to Netanhyahu’s victory, voted against netanyahu in1999 and contributed to Ehud Barak’s victory, then voted against Barak and contributed to Ariel Sharon’s victory.

The Likud party by placing active immigrant personalities in key influential positions had collected the votes of many Russians, such happened when Avigdor Lieberman was appointed by Netanyhu to the position of Director-General of the Likud Party and then as Director-General of the Prime Minister's Office in 1996. But in 1998, Lieberman withdrew from the Likud and formed *Yisrael Beiteinu* (Israel is our home) party which was a blow for the Likud.³⁵ Yisrael

³³ Robert O. Freedman, “Russian Policy Toward The Middle East Under Yeltsin and Putin” *Jewish Council for Public Affairs*, September, 2001.<https://www.jcpa.org/jl/vp461.htm>

³⁴ Michael Philippov, Ex-Soviets in the Israeli Political Space: Values, Attitudes, and Electoral Behavior, *Joseph & Alma Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies*, April 2010. p.(1-19), p.12

³⁵ Asaad Ghanem, “Marginalized Groups in Israel”, *The Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies(MADAR)*, 2005. p.(312-322)- Arabic source

Beiteinu achieved electoral success especially due to Liebramans's image as a strong leader, and the nationalist, geopolitical agenda he pursued. His party's campaign was a "population and territories exchange" which was a neo-centralist alternative' to both the 'land for peace' of the left and the 'the peace for peace' concepts of the right.³⁶ In the 2009 elections, the party won 15 seats in the Knesset and in 2013 it formed a coalition with Likud named "Likud Beiteinu" that won 31 seats. In 2016, Liebrman was appointed as the Minister of Defence, the second most important post in the State of Israel. All in all, Russian character in Israeli politics is increasing, especially their support for right wing parties which had become clear from 1999. Furthermore, their own parties became a competitor to the traditional Israeli parties which cannot deny the "Russian Street" impact on geopolitics. While in the economic sphere the "Russian street" have a higher potential to the development plan of Israel because of the composition and the structure of this new olim.³⁷

2.2.3 Upsurge of contacts under Putin (2000-2011)

Under Putin's new foreign policy cooperation and friendship constituted a chief part of Israeli-Russian relations while mistrust persisted. The two parties disagreed on several regional issues yet their disputes never turned out into crisis.³⁸ Their nature of relations in the decade prior to the Syrian war constitutes an important determinant if we are to predict the future of the conflict in Syria. And later, it will be argued that cooperation and mistrust continued to form their relations in the context of the Syrian War. But for now, the paper will present aspects of their historical reinforced relations represented in an increase in trade rates between the two countries, increase in the exchange of visits between Moscow and Tel Aviv, and an increase in the military cooperation deals. While Keeping in mind that this relationship was intersected by stops of mistrust, as in the Georgian dossier, Russian mediation of the Isreali-Palestinian conflict and in the case of arming Iran and Syria.

³⁶ Vladimir (Ze'ev) Khanin (2010) The Israel Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) party between the mainstream and 'Russian' community politics, *Israel Affairs*, 16:1, 105-123, DOI: [10.1080/13537120903462035](https://doi.org/10.1080/13537120903462035)

³⁷ Moshkova, T.D. (2018). Russian-Israeli relations: the role of the Russian-speaking community of the State of Israel. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 18 (2). DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2018-18-2-387-399. p.392

³⁸ Debkafile, (in English), Jerusalem, in FBIS-NES-2005-0113, January 12, 2005. Also see: Andrej Kreutz," Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe", Praeger Security International, 2007, p.75

Putin's rise to the presidency at the beginning of the century had resulted in rapprochement with Israel in several fields, comes first among them the issue of combating "terrorism" resulting from radical Islam, as the two parties share their concerns about the radical Islam represented by Hamas for Israel and by Muslims of Chechnya for Russia. During the second chechan war (1999–2009), Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon showed support for Russia's hard line Chechen policy, simultaneously Putin's tilt toward Israeli hard line Palestinian policy during the second Intifada.³⁹ Putin's policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict became evenhanded, taken in account the burden of Chechen war.⁴⁰ Israel had supported Putin's Chechen policy and linked it to its conflict with Palestinians. Among poignant western criticism of Russian policies in Chechnya, Russia calculated the political gain of Israel's support. In January 2004, Russia abstained from a United Nations vote condemning the security barrier Israel had constructed between Israel and the Palestinian territories.⁴¹ In addition to understandings on security level, Putin and Sharon had Chemistry on a personal level, Sharon was a fluent Russian speaker and considered Putin a close friend to him, in a meeting held in late April 2005 between the two leaders, Sharon told Putin "I want you to know that you are among friends here".⁴²

During the April visit, Putin met with Russian Jews, the visit carried a cultural sensitivity and an increasing trend in Russian politics regarding the protection of Russian-Jewish émigré.⁴³ Putin also visited the Wailing Wall, and Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial.⁴⁴ In addition to cultural, diplomatic and personal Israeli-Russian ties, Russia did not want to offend Israel yet did not want to forego strong ties with Middle Eastern regimes.⁴⁵ Russia continued supplying PLO, Syria with weapons and supported Iran's nuclear program, which were both perceived as threats to Israel's national security, at the same time assure Israelis that those weapons will not be used against them and will not change the balance of power in the region.

³⁹ Katz, Mark N. "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy." Middle East Quarterly 12 (2005): p.(51-59), p.58

⁴⁰ Robert O. Freedman, "Russian Policy Toward The Middle East Under Yeltsin and Putin" *Jewish Council for Public Affairs*, September, 2001.<https://www.jcpa.org/jl/vp461.htm>

⁴¹Katz, Mark N. "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy." Middle East Quarterly 12 (2005): p.(51-59), p.55

⁴² "PM Sharon meets with Russian President Putin", *Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 28 April,2005.

⁴³Bailey, Megan, "A Strategic Alliance: An Exploration of Israeli-Russian Relations" (2014).Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection.

⁴⁴ "Putin is the closest thing to a friend Israel has ever had in Moscow", *KyivPost*, January 14, 2016.

⁴⁵ Katz, Mark N. "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy." Middle East Quarterly 12 (2005): p.(51-59),p.57

However, Israel was alerted by Moscow's ambiguity and emergence as the international guardian of Syria-Iran Hezbollah nexus. Putin's act of quick congratulations to the success of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 Iranian presidential elections had highlighted the gap of his policy with the west even more than his act of welcoming the Hamas election victory in the Palestinian authority.⁴⁶ Other political events in the Middle East had marked the rising Israeli concern of the Russian dual strategy. During the Second Lebanon war, Israel claimed the transfer of Syrian-supplied Russian made missiles to Hezbollah, a claim that had been denied by the Russian Foreign Ministry in Moscow.⁴⁷ Ehud Olmert's first trip to Moscow after the war of summer 2006 revolved upon getting assurances to curtail the Russian support to Syria and Iran, while Olmert received no real assurances from Putin.⁴⁸

Furthermore during that same period, Russia was active in antagonising western efforts in the United Nations Security Council resolutions concerning Iran's nuclear programme and the international tribunal to try the killers of Rafiq-Al Hariri, which in the two cases Iran and Syria became highly dependent on the Russian diplomatic support at the UN.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Russia's not listing neither Hezbollah nor Hamas in its list of terrorist groups, which was released in July 2006,⁵⁰ had displeased Israeli leadership as Russia was perceived to befriend Israel's archenemies. And even the high-level reception of Khaled Mashal (the head of Hamas Political Bureau) to Moscow in March 2006 and 2007 had worsened the Israeli-Russian relations more than pushing forward the peace talks in the Middle East.⁵¹

Avigdor Lieberman was received in Russia following the reception of Hamas delegations, both visits by Israeli and Palestinian politicians marked nothing but again one thing "Russia's double

⁴⁶ Nizameddin, Talal. "Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon: Russia and the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Nexus." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 86, no. 3 (2008): 475-500- p.489

⁴⁷ "Russia, Israel Embark on an Unprecedented Defense Cooperation Agreement", *Defence Update*, September 6, 2010.

https://defense-update.com/20100906_israel-russia.html

⁴⁸ Nizameddin, Talal. "Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon: Russia and the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Nexus." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 86, no. 3 (2008): 475-500- p.499

⁴⁹ Nizameddin, Talal. "Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon: Russia and the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Nexus." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 86, no. 3 (2008): 475-500- p.495

⁵⁰ Russia: Supreme Court Approves List Of 17 'Terrorist' Groups", *RadiofreeEurope Radio Liberty*, July 28, 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1070153.html>

⁵¹ Alek D. Epstein, "Russia and Israel: A Romance Aborted?", *Russia In Global Affairs*, VOL. 5 No. 4 October – December 2007.p.180-190, p.184

standard policy”. A day after Lieberman’s visit, reports revealed that ultra-advanced Russian weaponry was being sold to Syria.⁵² Although that was received with discomfiture to Israel’s national security, but from a realist perspective, it was not supposed to be seen as such because Russia had cultivated relations with Hamas that proved to have some links with chechen militants, which is in itself a threat to Russia's own national security.

So Russia’s position of not taking ultimate sides was a bulwark for its relations with Israel not to turn into a crisis. In October 2006, 15 years of re-established diplomatic relations between Israel and Russia was celebrated in Moscow.⁵³ In 2008, visa requirements between the two countries got cancelled.⁵⁴ This had followed the Russo-Georgian War, which had affected their nature of on-going relations. The purchased Israeli anti-aircraft systems by Georgia were on display in Georgia.⁵⁵ Although, prior to the **Russo-Georgian war** Israel had cut its military exports to Georgia on behalf of Russia’s desires. But during the war, Georgia had relied heavily on the Israeli Hermes 450 UAVs.⁵⁶ These had contributed to some of Russia’s losses, but it also made Russia realizes that it had to build up its capabilities, said Ulrike Franke, a drone researcher at the European Council on Foreign Relations.⁵⁷ In 2009, Moscow bought twelve Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles – two Bird Eye 400 systems, eight I-View MK150 tactical UAVs and two Searcher Mk II tactical short range UAVs⁵⁸. Other deals followed, in 2010 a military cooperation agreement was signed in the field of unmanned systems, counter terrorism and asymmetric, urban warfare fields.⁵⁹ Russian-Israeli military cooperation was a bargain in which Israel would maintain an arms embargo against Georgia, at the same time Russia would refrain from supplying each of Iran, Syria and Pakistan with weapons. Yet, the terminated Israeli-Georgian

⁵² *ibid*, p.185

⁵³ “Beginning of Meeting with Prime Minister of Israel Ehud Olmert”, Kremlin, October 18, 2006 <http://en.kremlin.ru>

⁵⁴ “Israel and Russia to launch visa-free travel as of Saturday”, *Jerusalem Post*, September 17, 2008

⁵⁵ “Israel’s Military on Display in Georgia”, *Forward*, September 11, 2008

⁵⁶ “How Israel Trained and Equipped Georgia's Army”, *Wired.com*, August,19,2008.

⁵⁷ Patrick Hilsman, “How Israeli-designed drones became Russia’s eyes in the sky for defending Bashar Al-Assad,” *Middle East Eye*, July 16, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/07/16/syria-war-israel-russia-drones/>

⁵⁸ “UAV Sale Marks a New Milestone in Russian-Israeli Defense Relations”, *Defence Update*, Apr 13, 2009 https://defense-update.com/20090413_israeli_russian_uav.html

⁵⁹ “Russia, Israel Embark on an Unprecedented Defense Cooperation Agreement”, *Defence Update*, September 6, 2010.

https://defense-update.com/20100906_israel-russia.html

military cooperation was back on the table in 2011, when Russia was reported to risk the agreement by supplying Syria with anti-ship missiles.⁶⁰

On the economic level, the extraordinarily large “Russian lobby” in Israel had contributed to strengthening economic ties between Israel and Russia. But the Russian-Israeli trade relationship have increased under Putin’s tenure (rising from 1.154 billion US dollars in 2000 to 2.769 billion US dollars in 2008)⁶¹. Russia has dominated Israel’s oil imports, and participated in the 2000-2009 negotiations on the development of the Israeli gas industry, but without concluding an agreement.⁶² Raw materials and primary products are among other Israeli imports from Russia, while Israel mainly supplies Russia with high-technology products and medical equipment. Also, joint efforts to form economic organizations was made, like the Israeli-Russian business council, the council holds conferences in the presence of several experts in the economic field to consult on projects and common interests. Yet the trade volume is low compared to the potential, that is due not only to customs but to lack of trust and transparency between the two parties.⁶³ But still the lack of trust had more of a destabilizing effect on the political atmosphere than on the economic one.

2.3. Russian-Syrian relations

This Section follows the historical developments in the Russian-Syrian relations, first by focusing on Soviet-Syrian policy, the outbreak of relations in the late Soviet era, the implication of the collapse of Soviet Union on Syria and lastly the Russian-Syrian relations particularly since Putin’s rise to the presidency and Bashar Al-Assad being the successor of his father. Foremost, this paper is more concerned with the last period, and tries to detect the implication of this period in shaping the current Russian policies in the course of the Syrian war. Although, this section

⁶⁰ “Israeli Arms Sales to Georgia Back on the Table?”, *Eurasianet*, Feb 27, 2011.

⁶¹ “Foreign Trade of the Russian Federation with Far Abroad Countries,” Russian Federal State Statistics Service, <www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09_12/IssWWW.exe/stg/d02/26-05.htm>.

⁶² Guzel Nurieva, “Natural Gas Factor in Israel-Turkey-Russia “Energy Triangle”, *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 2017, Vol: 4, No: 1, ISSN: 2147-7523 Vol: 4, pp. 102-129, p.114

⁶³ Michael khoury, “Russian’s Economy and Trade Relations with Israel”, Memorandum No. 129, *Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies*, July 2013.

might not clearly answer the posed question, yet it definitely forms a roadmap for better reading of events and motivations discussed in the third chapter. Also, it must be noted that the Russian-Syrian relations deviates from the previous pattern of bilateral Syrian-Israeli and Israeli-Russian relations, in that it involves the multi nature of economic, military, ideological and political dimension. In addition, Soviet-Syrian alliance is best portrayed as *strategic interdependence* that none of the two slots of Syrian-Israeli and Israeli-Russian relations could be identified with.

In 1955, Syria's domestic instability and regional insecurity had driven it in the direction of the USSR for defensive considerations. But since Assad's advent to power in November 1970 Syria became the USSR's major Middle Eastern ally, signing arms deals, and economic and technical agreements. In Mid and late 1970's regional developments were in Syria's favour, especially with Egypt's desertion of the Arab camp and its drift from the Soviet orbit. Since then, Moscow has consolidated relations with Damascus as Syria became an increasing regional military and political power; nevertheless, Moscow was seeking an increasing leverage in the Arab world. For Moscow, the Baath regime was the socialist arab regime, but beside the Syrian ideological affinity with the Soviets , Syria hosted the Soviet in Tartus naval base under an agreement in 1971; it was the only naval base outside the Soviet Union. Russia has maintained the usage of the port as Tartus is a geostrategic asset on the Mediteranean and is critical for the Russian national security interests. Yet Russia's current position in its last foothold has no more than a political lever to protect its interests by affecting the outcome of the Syrian civil war.⁶⁴

2.3.1 Cooperation and Conflict

Following the perspective of the historian Efraim karsh, this paper tracks the Soviet-Syrian relations that evolved along three interconnected axes: the Arab-Israeli conflict, the rivalries in inter-Arab arena and Lebanese war. Through those axes the relations ranged forth and back between cooperation and conflict. Beginning with the major junctures of Arab-Israeli conflict, the Soviets were anxious to prevent the outbreak of the 1973 war as they were committed to détente and were afraid that their Arab allies might turn to the United States- the only power

⁶⁴ Christopher Harmer, "Russian Naval base Tartus", *Institute for the Study of War*, July 31, 2012.

capable of forcing concessions on Israel. During the war, Moscow antagonized its allies when it tried to impose a ceasefire agreement on Egypt and Syria, that they both ignored. Despite this, during the war the Soviet had supplied Syria with war *materiel* by air and sea on an unprecedented scale. Even before the war, the Soviets were pouring military equipment to Syria, yet delaying arm supplies to Egypt. In addition to arm flows to Syria, Soviet advisers were deployed within the Syrian armed forces and regular Soviet units were performing supportive activities such as surveillance and naval operations. Following the end of the 1973 war, the Soviets were even offered an opportunity of being engaged in the negotiation process rather than holding a real role in the talks. ⁶⁵

Soviet-Syrian relations had sunk to low point following the Syrian involvement in Lebanon , Brezhnev's policy towards the Syrian Lebanese policy carried overt criticism, Soviets wanted Assad forces to withdraw and the conflict to be quickly settled given the rift in relations between Syria and Moscow's allies (PLO,Iraq), in which siding with one part would alienate the other. However, Assad totally ignored the Soviet demands, and advanced further with *Pax Syriana* in Lebanon. In late 1976, Soviet criticism disappeared and a gradual recognition of Syria's legitimacy in Lebanon emerged. Even the arms embargo that was imposed on Syria, was taken half-heartedly and was soon lifted after Assad threatened the Soviets to cancel their port services in Tartus. After the recovery of relations, a change in the balance of Soviet-Syrian relations came following Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in November,1977. Assad recognized that the strategic balance between the Arabs and Israel had been upset, and since then Syria's dependency on Moscow's military aid grew, thus Moscow's bargaining position vis-a-vis Syria had been enhanced. Given Assad's weak position in late 70's, Syria started to identify itself with the USSR until it pushed the conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1980. ⁶⁶

The downturn of relations began with Michael Gorbachev's ascendance to power in 1985, at times when Syria's relations with Iraq and the PLO were hostile as well as a risk of Syrian military confrontation with Israel was faced. Unlike his predecessors, Gorbachev was more willing to antagonize Assad, criticizing Assad's claimed "strategic parity" with Israel, exploiting

⁶⁵ Efraim Karsh, "The Soviet Union and Syria: The Asad Years", *Chatham House Papers*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs (London: Routledge, 1988), p.11-18

⁶⁶ Op.cit. Efraim Karsh (1988).p.47-53

Syria's increasing isolation and economic plights.⁶⁷ Although that did not imply that the Soviets had abandoned their interests in the Middle East, they adopted different tactics with the West with some continuity in its previous policies. Under his rule, Gorbachev was concerned to prevent the monopoly of the United States on the Arab-Israeli political process. Yet, he sought to improve diplomatic ties with Israel perhaps before reaching settlement for the Arab-Israeli conflict. In October, 1991 the full restoration of diplomatic ties between Moscow and Tel-Aviv, the increased cooperation between the United States and Soviet Union in the Arab-Israeli peace process, Soviet's cultivation of relations with Egypt, the change in quantity and quality of Soviet arms exports to Syria and the emigration of Soviets Jews to Israel had all served to aggravate differences between Soviets and Syrians.⁶⁸

2.3.2 Changing Tactics

Post-Cold War era, Syria had turned to the United States as a superpower able to take Damascus demands in consideration. While relations with post Soviet Moscow and Damascus never disappeared but they were resumed in a different form.⁶⁹ Russia has maintained a naval depot in Tartus, and wanted to reactivate its role in Syrian-Israeli dimension of the "Peace Process" to boost its prestige especially under foreign ministry Yevgeny Primakov. But Russia was left out because Israel refused to let Russia play the role of mediator in the Arab-Israeli "Peace Process".⁷⁰ In late 1990's, the old friend of Russia, Hafez Al-Assad, visited Moscow in a turning point in relations as a revival of political contacts and military aid was witnessed. Nevertheless, no peace agreement was compromised between Israel and Syria neither by Clinton nor by Yeltsin's government.

With Putin's rise to power, a new epoch of Russian Middle East history had started. Following the first half decade of Putin's rule, Russia's relations with the east Arab states (Syria, Lebanon and Jordan) was driven by political self-interest pragmatism, and Putin's policy was free of anti

⁶⁷Gorbachev policy in the Middle east. *Central Intelligence Agency*, September, 1987.<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90T00114R000800380001-9.pdf>

⁶⁸ Freedman R.O. (1997) Moscow and the Middle East since the Collapse of the Soviet Union: A Preliminary Analysis. In: Kanet R.E., Kozhemiakin A.V. (eds) *The Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.*(125-158) p.126)

⁶⁹Andrej Kreutz," Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe", Praeger Security International, 2007, p.18

⁷⁰ Andrej Kreutz," Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe", Praeger Security International, p.21

–West or pro-Arab sentiments. Although relations with Syria were crucial, however Moscow was cautious of the negative repercussions from Israel and the US if such a rapprochement goes so far. Russia was still concerned about the Middle Eastern settlement especially its role as an Arab-Israeli mediator between the Israeli-Syrian, the Israeli-Lebanese, and the Israeli-Palestinian. Although, Russia's concessions to Israel demands were remarkably high and Russia even assured Israelis that missile sales to Syria wouldn't change the balance of power in the region but Israel was reluctant to accept Russia's increasing role as powerbroker while such a role was more welcomed by Arab states especially that they felt threatened following the US invasion of Iraq.⁷¹ Moscow as well was unhappy with the U.S military action for regime change in Iraq, as to Moscow's ears Syria could face a similar fate. On the issue, President Putin commented "even if there are people who do not like the regime in this country, it should not be changed under pressure from outside."⁷²

Russia re-emergence in the Middle was remarkable, from its direct role in the Iranian nuclear file, through its reception to the delegation of the Islamic Resistance Movement "Hamas", to the welcoming of the productive visit of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Moscow in 2005 that involved military and economic dimension and was an attempt to attract international powers to restore a degree of balance to Syrian policy after the changes that occurred in the region following the events of September 11, 2001. Simultaneously, Russia associating itself with Syria was paradoxical with its unwillingness to jeopardize Israel's security particularly after Ariel Sharon's support for Putin's Chechyan policy. In response, Russia denied anti aircraft systems Syria's requested. So mostly, Russia not only revised its Middle eastern policy, but it also came with an innovative policy of maintaining relations with all players in the Middle East.

⁷¹ Op.cit Andrej Kreutz, 2007

⁷² Russia: Putin says similar situation over Iraqi regime could arise with Syria,'ITAR-TASS, (in Russian), in FBIS-SOV-2003-0411, April 11, 2003

CHAPTER III: THE SYRIAN CRISIS

3.1 The peculiarity of the Syrian Uprising

The Syrian case differs from other Arab uprisings, and these differences can be attributed to the sensitivity of the Syrian case for most of the regional and international actors and the certain characteristics in the structure of the Syrian political, social and military system which made-in the short run- the government less vulnerable to fall. The Following chapter would first focus on certain features of the Syrian case, the position of the regional and international actors from “political transition” in Syria. Lastly, the stages of the Syrian crisis given the fact of its evolving nature, which accompanied with changes in the foreign policy of most involving actors.

Politically, Syria lies within an axis of influence in the region that differs from and contradicts what might be called the western axis that the other Arab countries who witnessed the uprisings are aligned to. Syria has been the only stalwart Arab supporter of Iran, and the only corridor through which Iran can influence its project in the Levant.⁷³

Syria-Iran nexus has been functioning for so long, and any threat to the alliance would call for a proactive employment of all the forces and capabilities to prevent the break out, unlike the regimes that are allied with the West; as they were left to their fate in the face of the escalating mass movements that took place in their national border.⁷⁴

The Arab uprisings had witnessed a swift change in governments, while in the Syrian case the change “if it ever took place” was slow as the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad drew some lessons from the Arab leaders and decided not to give in soon as did the Tunisian President Zine al-Abdine bin Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. In the two years since the beginning of the revolt, the Syrian government was entrenching, the Syrian army has not disintegrated, nor have the merchant classes of Aleppo. That was due to Assad's tight control over the military, by which elite brigades were under the control of family members, also the armed forces available

⁷³ Jubin Goodarzi, “Iran: Syria as the first line of defence”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, July, 2013.

⁷⁴ Akram al-Bunni, “The peculiarity and complexity of the Syrian revolution”, *Souria Houria*, December, 2011.(Arabic source)

to President Bashar al-Assad are far superior than other Arab forces, unlike the Libyan military under the Qaddafi.⁷⁵ This will later explain Moscow's great focus on the status and future of the Syrian military establishment, which it prepares by virtue of its training and arming as the main guarantor of Russian influence in Syria.

In addition, Assad had sought the support of international allies unlike Libya's Muammar Qaddafi who never took this step.⁷⁶ Another factor that did not hasten the fall of the Syrian government was the formal Syrian opposition's inability to bring quick developments on the ground, due to its lack of the political leadership and the organizational network.⁷⁷ Thus, the unorganized moderate opposition groups paved the way for its competitors of Islamist rebel militants to fill the void as the war progressed.

While socially speaking, the ethnic, religious, and sectarian pluralism that constitutes the Syrian society had played an essential role in prolonging the war as many sectors of the society remained hesitant from taking sides, especially with the rise of Islamist regimes in neighboring countries which was perceived as upcoming Islamic alternative in Syria as well.

3.2 Fears and Opportunities

3.2.1 Syria's Allies: Russia and Iran

Concerning the sensitivity of the Syrian revolt to the various regional and international players, it would be sufficient to present the interests or threats emerging from a "political transition" in Syria on the policy of the engaged actors. To start with are the Syrian government's main allies, Iran and Russia. Iran reviewed the ouster of the Syrian government as a genuine threat to its own regional influence especially on Hezbollah and over the Arab-Israeli question, also Iran perceived that any transition in Syria could hold the possibility of an upcoming Sunni-dominated

⁷⁵ Dimitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy*, *Carnegie Endowment*, February, 2013

⁷⁶ Alterman, "Getting Syria Right", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, April, 2012

⁷⁷ Yezid Sayigh, "The Syrian Opposition's Leadership Problem", *Carnegie Endowment*, April, 2013.

government hostile to Tehran. By early 2012, Iran boosted its initial material support for the Syrian government, and the elite Quds Force applied by all means the scenario of preserving the Syrian government in dominant position, if not in full authority. Beside being the main backer of the Syrian government, Iran acted as long-term spoiler by building itself in Syria, and therefore preventing the Sunni leadership from turning Syria against Iran in the future.⁷⁸

Though Iran's support for Syria was based on preserving the ideologies and figures of the Syrian government, Russia's support for Syria was seen as a challenge to the western policies not as a step to preserve symbols of the Syrian regime itself, thus Moscow refused any international intervention in Syria. Again, in the heydays of the Syrian crisis Russia sought preeminence over the low profile and the unwillingness of the US to intervene in Syria, its intervention came on the basis of a geopolitical leverage and as a pressure tool on the US to lift the economic sanctions imposed on Moscow. Syria became the laboratory of regional power struggle, or as Trenin described it a “quintessential early-twenty-first-century confrontation and the contestation that pits Russia against the West ”.⁷⁹

In the period between March 2011 and August 2015, Russia provided political, diplomatic (Veto at UN Security Council) and military support (advanced weapons and conventional small-arms and light weapons (SALWs) to the Syrian government. So Russia's decision not to upgrade its military strategy was due to the absence of the possibility of foreign military action in Syria which it secured and due to the belief that with the assistance of myriad domestic and foreign Shiite militias the Syrian government would be able to control the internal situation given the militarily and politically weak opponents.⁸⁰ Thus, Moscow continued political coordination with regional and international powers supporting the Syrian government, such as China without directly and publicly engaging militarily in Syria until September 2015.

⁷⁸ Jubin Goodarzi, *op. cit.*, (2013).

⁷⁹ Dimitri Trenin, *op. cit.*, (2013)

⁸⁰ Al-Dassouky, “Russia's Role in Syria: Reality and Tendency”, Rouya Turkiyyah, Spring 2018, p. 65 pp. 63-57. (Arabic)

3.2.2 Syria's Non-Allies: Old friend vs. Old enemy

Syria's allies proved that they do not abandon it. But their support has been underestimated by some regional actors causing miscalculations in their Syria's policy while other actors have taken this into consideration and refrained from articulating a quick public regime change policy. Following the former category, Turkey's policy was far more visible as Ankara saw the Syrian unrest as "national matter". JDP's Syrian policy was based on misleading assumptions of weaknesses of the Syrian government and that it would soon be left alone in the international arena.⁸¹ Therefore, Ankara was resolute to pursue a quick regime change policy. So it has openly sided with the SNC anticipating the toppling of the Assad, armed and trained the opposition groups. In so, the Turkish leadership was aiming at establishing new regional order, as a government ruled by a Sunni Islamist movement in Syria could make the JDP government closer to its neo-Ottoman aspirations in the Middle East and North Africa. This dramatic shift in Turkey's policy had marked the break off with Damascus after a 10-year honeymoon, it is also an end to a decade-long of improved relations with Tehran which sided by the Syrian regime.⁸² Yet the division in Turkish and Iranian stances marked a broader regional struggle as the two were seeking to reap the gains of their policy outcomes and a greater sphere of influence over the region. But Turkey's overambitious policy has witnessed reversal of fortunes and turned to be futile and counterproductive.⁸³ The protracted Syrian civil war has severe implications on Turkish national policies; particularly those related to the increasing Syrian refugees influx into Turkey, the revival of PKK, and the Republic's regional isolation.

Unlike Turkey's quick regime change policy, Israel's approach from a political transition to take place in neighboring Syria was perplexing, as it wanted not to overthrow the Syrian government that kept the Golan front secure and stable for decades, at the same time Israel had an uncompromising endeavor to weaken Syria and limit its regional influence due to the fact that Syria is a major pillar in the axis of resistance alongside Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah. On ground, Israel did support opposition groups, yet it did not formulate its agendas based on an absolute

⁸¹ Gencer Özcan, "If the Crisis is What We Make of It: Turkey and the Uprisings in Syria", in *Analyzing Foreign Policy Crises in Turkey: Conceptual, Theoretical and Practical Discussions*, Fuat Aksu and Helin Sarı Ertem (Eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017: pp.178-198. p.187

⁸² Aras, *Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill*, *Middle East Quarterly*, 2012, pp. 41-50, p. 50

⁸³ Gencer Özcan, *op. cit.*, p.197

victory by the opposition. When Iranian forces became massively deployed on Syrian soil, Israel articulated its red lines concerning the proximity of Iranian forces and concerning its “cautious” position against interfering in the Syrian quagmire. But Iran is not the only player in Syria that has a profound impact on Israel’s policy. Perhaps Russia’s initial support for Syria and Iran might have positioned it at the opposite corner with Israel, yet Israel and Russia were able to find a middle ground of interests and avoid confrontation.

3.3 Evolution of Syrian Crisis

So far, four phases have shaped the geopolitical developments in Syria, the initial phase is war by proxy which started soon after the uprising broke out in 2011 and major regional and international actors took sides in the conflict. The second phase started at the time when ISIS became “everyone’s target” and an international war under the banner of fighting “terrorism” became to shape the events in Syria in 2014. The third phase started when Russia reinforced its military campaign in September 2015 and had in turn emphasized “a war of position for hegemony” to take place. As this paper is concerned with the developments of Russian-Israeli relations, then the third phase would be of major relevance as Russia’s intervention has dwarfed the ambitions of some regional actors while broadening the prospects of others. Nevertheless, the beginning of a new phase does not imply the end of the phase that preceded it and that is due to the overlapping developments in Syria. Yet, the defeat of ISIS in 2018 and Moscow’s ability to turn Syria into Russian protectorate have perhaps drawn the Syrian crisis to its fourth phase yet not the final one.

3.3.1. War by Proxy

Tracing the evolving nature of the Syrian war is a fundamental element in following changes in policy and interaction of the many actors involved in the war. In a year period after the upheaval broke out in Syria, a proxy war emerged by which many international and regional actors were involved. The Syrian crisis constituted a state of international polarization, it also constituted a greater hotbed of regional polarization, while the latter effect has been more direct due to

geographical proximity, sectarian overlap, ideological incoherence, the size of interests and struggle for influence.

The Syrian crisis became a theatre of proxy war between rival regional coalitions. It has shifted the paradigm in the Middle East. Turkey, the United States, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, European states, Iran, Russia are the powers who took sides in the conflict making Syria a war by proxy for regional supremacy. “Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had promoted ‘a proxy Sunni-Shia war’ in Syria and ‘poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad” said Joe Biden in a talk at Harvard in October 2014.⁸⁴ Not has only Turkey promoted Sunni-Shia war by its support for radical groups but also proxy war against the PYD; which Turkey perceives as terrorist group and extension of PKK. Syrian Kurds, who were once politically marginalized by Damascus, later became major player in the struggle for power in disintegrating Syria and Turkey’s primary target.

The erosion of the state system, and the fragility of the security institutions in conjunction with the US policy of disengagement from the Middle East has made proxy warfare an effective tool to limit conflicts in the twenty-first century rather than bringing an end of ongoing proxy wars.⁸⁵ State actors have utilized proxies, but superpowers have varied in their capability to leverage proxies in Syria. The United States has armed and trained moderate opposition groups such as the Free Syrian Army but as the Syrian opposition splintered the Pentagon dropped its support and established the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a kurdish alliance that included Arabs and ethnic minorities.⁸⁶ In another shift of U.S policy, Kurds got betrayed as the U.S has endorsed Turkish military operations against Kurdish forces and pulled back its troops from northwestern Syria.⁸⁷ So the Obama and Trump administration has adopted short-term transactional proxy

⁸⁴ Patrick Cockburn, “Whose Side is Turkey on?” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36 No.21, November 6, 2014.

⁸⁵ Mona Alami, “After the Syria withdrawal, it’s time the US rethinks the use of proxy forces”, *Atlantic Council*, November 18, 2019.

⁸⁶ Tom O'Connor “What’s Happening in Syria: Everything You Need to Know About Proxy War Between U.S., Russia, Iran and Turkey”, *News Week*, March, 2018
<https://www.newsweek.com/whats-happening-syria-everything-you-need-know-proxy-war-us-russia-iran-turkey-829412>

⁸⁷ “President Endorses Turkish Military Operation in Syria, Shifting U.S. Policy”, *The New York Times*, October 7, 2019. “The U.S. Is Now Betraying the Kurds for the Eighth Time”, *Intercept*, October, 2019

relations, which in return might make their capability to make military allies less likely in the future.

Russia has been an influential actor, but Putin's options for political war were vastly limited so it relied on proxies and its asymmetric engagement that it inherited from its Soviet past. In Syria, Russia has deployed Private Military Companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner group, or built more local formations such as the Fifth Assault Corps.⁸⁸ Moscow even continued its reliance on non-conventional warfare even after its direct military intervention due to the ongoing nature of proxy warfare in Syria. However, unlike the United States, Russia's proxy relations are not based on short-term approach, but on cohesive strategy that demands long term strategic relations with its allies. For instance Iran has become an essential part of Moscow's strategy to confront the west as Moscow views many regional actors' incentive for intervention as being driven by a common "desire to rob Iran of its most important Arab ally—Syria".⁸⁹

In contrast to Russia's commitment to deploy less Russian troops in Syria, Iran has evolved its hybrid model of warfare by adopting a "whole-of-military" approach,⁹⁰ to the extent that Russia has outsourced the ground campaign to Iran. In the high intensity Syrian battlefield, Iran has deployed paramilitary forces such as the *Basij* Organization⁹¹ and its own conventional army (artesh). However, Iran's engagement in irregular warfare has not been limited to its dispatchment of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force,⁹² in Syria, Iran and its proxy militias, including the Lebanese Hezbollah and other foreigner Shiite Muslim militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Bahrain were deployed and commanded under IRGC-QF.⁹³ Iran's deployment of its proxies came in early and grueling times; Iraqi Shiite militias began fighting alongside Assad forces in early 2012, Hezbollah captured the strategic Syrian town of

⁸⁸ Haid Haid, "Reintegrating Syrian Militias: Mechanisms, Actors, and Shortfalls", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, December, 2018.

⁸⁹ Dimitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy*, *Carnegie Endowment*, February, 2013

⁹⁰ Paul Bucala, "Iran's New Way of War in Syria", *Institute for the study of War*, February, 2017

⁹¹ The Basij is the fifth branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, an auxiliary Iranian militia that is engaged in activities such as conducting internal security, enforcing state control over society, policing morals, and suppressing dissidents.

⁹² Seth G. Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March, 2019.

⁹³ Nader Uskowi, "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel", *Atlantic Council*, September, 2018

Qusair from opposition fighters in 2013, Afghan Shiite fighters (Fatemiyoun Brigade) were pivotal in capturing Aleppo in December 2016 and also in other battles of Daraa, Damascus, Hama, Homs, Latakia, Palmyra, and Dayr az Zawr.⁹⁴

Through a number of important victories along with the convergence of interests with Russia, Iran has upgraded its post-conflict strategy and its desire for a safer corridor of influence. Yet, Iran's success in its Syria project is better not to be overestimated, as Iran suffered substantial casualties among its own commanders and its proxies, U.S. sanctions, Israeli strikes, regional isolation, fragile economy and pressures from its allies (mainly Russia) which has all helped its ambitions for "regional hegemony" to become dim.

While Saudis and other states' military and political support for opposition rebels was primarily perceived as a counterweight to the threat of the Shiite Axis.⁹⁵ However, their contradictory commitment had sharpened the antagonism between Shiite and Sunni as both parties were seeking no retreat in their policies. However, in contrast to Iran, Saudi Arabia is not adapted to fight proxy wars and conduct complex intelligence operations during grueling chaotic conflicts, particularly in Syria where it lacks an understanding of the Syrian society and groups involved and of the dynamics at hand. In addition, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the opposition has been asymmetrical, unlike the one between Iran and the Assad government.⁹⁶ Also, the lack of engagement by its traditional US ally has made it less influential. As a result, Riyadh had to overly rely on external actors, which were less efficient, less watchable and less controllable,⁹⁷ thus resulting in the Saudi engagement being too little and too late.⁹⁸ So by and large, proxy warfare in Syria is an ongoing fight between international, regional state actors as well as non-state actors, as the one between Turkey vs. Kurds.

⁹⁴ Ranj Alaaldin, "Iran Used the Hezbollah Model to Dominate Iraq and Syria", *The New York Times*, March, 2018

⁹⁵ Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, VIII : 3, 2014. pp.25-34, p.25

⁹⁶ Roxanna Sjöstedt, "Syria: Iran's and Saudi Arabia's new playground?" Lund University, <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=8909212&fileId=8910952>

⁹⁷ Adelphi Series, "Chapter Four: The regional struggle over Syria", Adelphi Series, (2013b) 53:438, pp. 105-148, p. 121

⁹⁸ "Rivalry Between Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Proxy Case of Syria." *All answers*. November, 2018. *All Answers Ltd.* <<https://ukdiss.com/examples/rivalry-iran-saudi-arabia-syria-0288.php?vref=1>>.

3.3.2. The War against the ISIS

The rise of ISIS has changed the geopolitics of the whole middle east region, by which non-state actors came to set the agenda and claim to be post-state entities that supersede Westphalian definition.⁹⁹ ISIS seemed to be the enemy of everybody, yet its myriad opponents were divided and lacked unity. With the rise of ISIS, the United States has recommitted itself to the region and formed the international coalition to defeat ISIS. The U.S refused to admit Iran to its anti-ISIS coalition, although the Shia state was clearly one of the most effective potential opponents of ISIS.¹⁰⁰ In other words, defeating ISIS became a common interest of the most important actors in the region, however it did not unite state actors with opposing views: Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United States.

Yet many states have exploited the “geopolitical shift” to push their foreign policy agendas in Syria under a banner of “fighting terrorism”. Starting with the Assad government, that managed to present itself as a partner to countering extremism. For Syria as well as Iran, ISIS was considered as a "useful" enemy. Also, Russia’s pretext for intervention was fighting Daesh in the first place, but its intervention has bolstered ISIS and al-Qaeda in presenting themselves as fighting a second “jihad” against Russia. Russia continued to direct its strikes, claiming that it was fighting ISIS.¹⁰¹ While it was mainly confronting opposition rebels composed of moderate groups supported by the US, and Sunni States. So it can be said that the Russian intervention to confront ISIS has turned into a geopolitical confrontation Between Russia and the United States.¹⁰²

On the other side of the political spectrum, Turkey was accused of turning blind eye to foreign fighters crossing its territory to join ISIS in Syria because it considered that jihad would provide

⁹⁹ Michael M. Gunter, “Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey”, Middle East Policy Council, *Middle East Policy Council*, March, 2014

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Lister Charles , “Russia’s intervention in Syria : protracting an already endless conflict” , Brookings , October 21,2016 , <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2015/10/21-russia-intervention-in-syria-lister> , (accessed : March5,,2019)

¹⁰² Aleksashenko.sergey , “A three sided disaster : the American , Russian , and Iranian strategic triangle in Syria” , Brookings , October16, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2015/10/16/a-three-sided-disaster-the-american-russian-and-iranian-strategic-triangle-in-syria/> Accessed on:April 14,2020.

a quick way to topple President Assad.¹⁰³ Although, ISIS has posed a significant threat to Turkey, yet in the battle of Kobani Turkey did not become embroiled in the defence of Kobani against IS in order to avoid strengthening the position of its other primary enemy –the PYD\PKK. Yet, that does not indicate that Turkey was not active against ISIS, but its role in the U.S-led coalition against ISIS has been “limited” which in turn has furthered its conflict with the PKK. On the other hand, Israel came out with some gains from the rise of ISIS, as it continued its airstrikes against Iranian positions, cultivated relations with the Kurds on the basis of their prowess in fighting ISIS, along with its relations with the Syrian regime on the basis that its the better alternative than ISIS, although on ground ISIS did not pose a real threat to Israel’s national security as much as it did to Turkey.

All in all,the coalition airstrikes against ISIS in Syria have been a double-edged sword. First, they have resulted in the deaths of FSA fighters and civilians as in the case of Raqqa. Second, eradicating ISIS became the “priority” of the coalition and did not run simultaneously with the strategy of reaching political transition in Syria.¹⁰⁴ Also, members of the coalition were acting as units into itself, for instance Tukey refused coalition aircraft to operate from Turkish bases, private donors from Gulf countries funnelled money to ISIS on the basis that Jihadism would accelerate the toppling of the Assad government.¹⁰⁵

Despite the conventional alliances formed to eradicate ISIS as the US-alliance, the Russian Iranian alliance, the threat of ISIS has also brought strange bedfellows as in the case of the U.S. support for the Syrian Kurds (PYD) during the failed ISIS siege of Kobani during September-October 2014. Also, the coalition’s indirect cooperation with Shia militia as in Tikrit-Iraq.¹⁰⁶ However, the U.S aid to PYD was criticized by Turkey as PYD is an extension of PKK. Thus, Turkey refused to enter the fray against ISIS in Kobani unless PYD allied itself with Syrian opposition to overthrow the Syrian government.¹⁰⁷ So if the rise of ISIS came to prove something

¹⁰³ Tim Eaton et al, “Western Policy Towards Syria: Applying Lessons Learned, *Chatham House*, March, 2017, pp.2-38, p.26

¹⁰⁴ Lina Khatib, “The Islamic State’s Strategy: Lasting and Expanding”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June, 2015. pp.1-34 ,p.25-26

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p.27.

¹⁰⁶ Iraq Tikrit: Looting and Lawlessness Follow Recapture,” *BBC News*, April 4, 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32181503.

¹⁰⁷ How to Deal with Syria's Kurds: Turkey and the PKK," *The Economist*, October 4, 2014, 59.

it was just adding another fiasco to the Western policy and its credibility towards Syria by the existence of a wide gap between its say and action, poor communication among its allies, and the lack of a clear future strategy. Moreover, it paved the way to Russia to articulate its Middle eastern project vis a vis the West.

3.3.3. War for Hegemonic Position

Unlike in Libya, where the intervention of the international community has been remarkable particularly with NATO assuming command of military operations. As at the end of March 2011, 18 NATO members conducted a military campaign with air and naval strikes against Colonel Mu'ammar al-Gaddafi's forces, and enforced the no fly zone under "Operation Unified Protector" namely: "Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Jordan, Netherlands, Norway, Qatar, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom and the United States".¹⁰⁸ While in Syria, divergence among external powers has made the international community reluctant to intervene and indecisive in taking military intervention as in Libya. In addition, Russia's shift in position from just vetoing the UN resolutions regarding western military intervention as in Libya and Iraq to a more "long-term challenge for the Euro-Atlantic community".¹⁰⁹ Thus, Syrian crisis marked the divergence between Russia's approach to international intervention and that of the rest of the international community, as Moscow decided to prevent "the libyan scenario" from taking place in Syria by all means possible, this obstinacy expose deep flaws in post-Cold Western doctrine on international intervention and has paved the way for "Moscow's empowerment".¹¹⁰

The changing Russian role during the Syrian crisis had imposed political facts that could not be ignored, the shift of its strategies in search for "regional hegemony" had implications for other external actors' approaches to the region and to the course of their relations with Russia. Russia's

¹⁰⁸ Aysegul Aydin, "Foreign powers and intervention in armed conflicts", California: Stanford university press, 2012, p 107.

¹⁰⁹ Brice Didier, "The Syrian Conflict and Russia's Search for Regional Hegemony in a Contested Middle East: Implications for the Euro-Atlantic Community", *EU Diplomacy Paper, October, 2017. Pp.2-28, p.6*

¹¹⁰ Charap, Samuel, "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention", *Survival*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2013, p. 35. pp.35-41

ability to confront complex multi-dimensional foreign policy issues on both diplomatic and military level proved the failures within the European countries and the United States policies towards the region and their inability to act as security actors. Although, Russia's assertiveness does not necessarily imply "the rise of the rest" in post-American world politics nor a revival in the cold war paradigm.¹¹¹ The latter could be explained in the light of the less dependency of EU members on the US as a security superpower provider. But admittedly, Russia by supporting the Syrian government has contributed to certain extent to the political divisions within the EU through the burden of migratory flows toward Europe,¹¹² but also with the terrorist attacks that hit several European cities.

Russia has played the role of military, diplomatic actor, unlike the EU who was almost absent in the diplomatic peace process negotiations in Syria. While Trump's Syria policy should not be undermined, especially with his support for Syrian rebels, his determination to eradicate ISIS and his robust military responses on Iran. In addition, the US has been reluctant to the Russian entrenchment and the disturbing effect of Putin's aggressive policies in the region. In April 2017, Trump bombed a Syrian military airport in response to a chemical attack, Russia was blamed for the chemical weapons attack.¹¹³ Yet the United States has continued cooperation with Russia on a number of issues, illustrated by the unprecedented opportunity given to the United States in the Israeli arranged trilateral meeting in Jerusalem. The meeting had given Russia and the United States an opportunity to discuss their matters of dispute, and also paved the way for upgrade in the Russian Israeli relations. Iran was a core issue; Israel and the United States had made their request to Russia to remove Iran from Syria. However, Putin was unlikely to make concessions on Iran unless it would help accelerate the Russian "success scenario" in Syria. Therefore, Moscow in return has asked them to recognize the legitimacy of the Assad government.

¹¹¹ Brice Didier, "The Syrian Conflict and Russia's Search for Regional Hegemony in a Contested Middle East: Implications for the Euro-Atlantic Community", *EU Diplomacy Paper, October, 2017. Pp.2-28, p.22*

¹¹² Lightfoot, Jeff, "US View: Atlanticism at Risk", in Oliver, Tim (ed.), LSE IDEAS, *Dahrendorf Forum Special Report, SR022, May 2016, p. 10.*

¹¹³ US says Russia bears responsibility for Assad's gas attack – as it happened", *The Guardian, 7 April 2017, retrieved 11 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2017/apr/07/us-syria-response-donald-trump-assad-pentagon-live>*

Proceeding from the point that Russia's reassertion came as a challenge to the western approach of resolving conflicts, a successful Syrian story out from the Russian intervention will help Russia to market itself as an effective conflict mediator.¹¹⁴ So, Russia started to reform the Syrian military by providing military education, training and monitoring. Also, leading a successful disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of rebel forces, as well as post conflict stabilization and reconstruction. Nevertheless, Moscow's Syria policy has recently been challenged by its own proxy allies, Iran's domination over Syrian military structures and Assad's continued dependency on Iran and his inflexible stance on reconciliation.¹¹⁵ So to Russia's rationale, assuming "regional hegemony" cannot be conceived without cooperation with regional powers and the west. As Russia does not envisage any political transition, reform, and reconciliation without cooperation with other state actors.

3.3.4. The recovery of the regime (2018-2020)

In 2018, the defeat of ISIS and the reinstatement of government control over vast swaths of territory backed by Iranian ground troops and Russian air support have perhaps drawn the Syrian crisis into a new phase. This phase is branded by diplomatic and military shifts in the policies of the involved regional and international actors. In September 2018, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian Vladimir Putin reached an agreement at Sochi to establish a demilitarized zone in Idlib Governorate, northwestern Syria, which has become the last stronghold of the government's opponents. However, the terms of the agreement never fully implemented due to pro-government offensives and rebel counter offensive within the "demilitarized zone".

In December 2018, the United States under Trump administration announced the withdrawal of its troops located in northeast Syria after the degradation of ISIS's military and logistical capabilities. Trump's decision had repercussions on forsaking the Kurds and fuelling the ambitions and anxieties of local and regional actors over the power vacuum. Following the announcement, Kurds sought open discussions with the Assad government to deter any possible

¹¹⁴ Alexey Khlebnikov, "Russia and Syrian Military Reform: Challenges and Opportunities", Carnegie Middle East Center, March 26, 2020

¹¹⁵ Ibid, Alexey Khlebnikov (2020).

Turkish incursion along the Turkish–Syrian border. Moscow was among those who benefited from the U.S disarray by presenting itself as preferred interlocutor to all regional and local players;¹¹⁶ especially to those U.S allies who got rattled by the indecisive U.S policy. For instance, under Russia’s facilitation, some Arab governments sought rapprochement with the Syrian government after they failed to achieve any of their policy objectives; Bahrain and UAE reopened their embassies in Damascus and Saudi Arabia warmed up to President Al-Assad. For many, talks about reconciliation between Assad and the Arab world mark a war’s denouement.¹¹⁷

However, some rebel groups refused to begin reconciliation talks with the central government. On 9th October 2019, Turkey that has supported the rebel groups, launched an offensive in north eastern Syria named operation peace spring; the third major Turkish military operation since 2016. The operation began after the approval of President Donald Trump, during a phone call to President Erdogan. After the attack began; Trump announced he would extricate U.S forces from “ridiculous endless Wars” abroad.¹¹⁸ In the same manner following the previous US announcement to withdraw in 2018, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) sought the support of the Syrian armed forces that later became deployed on a substantial amount of SDF territories.

By late 2019, The Syrian troops resumed operations and controlled more than forty towns and villages in the northern areas and by February 2020, they recaptured major strategic and logistical important cities and posts as Marte al-Numan and Aleppo to Damascus highway (M-5). Those advances by the Syrian forces did not prevent Erdogan from clinging in his adventurous policy towards Adlib, although nothing could be done except accepting the status quo and

¹¹⁶ “The US withdrawal from Syria”, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, Strategic Comments-Volume 25, January 2019. <https://www.iiss.org/~/publication/189d474e-6220-4fe3-a1bc-fc10a827ba50/the-us-withdrawal-from-syria.pdf>

¹¹⁷ Frederick Deknatel, “Talk of the Endgame in Syria Dodges the Question of Recovery”, *World Politics Review*, February 2019.

¹¹⁸ Cohen, Forgey “Trump slams ‘ridiculous Endless Wars’ as he defends dramatic shift in Syria policy”, *Politico*, October 7, 2019. <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-slams-ridiculous-endless-wars-as-he-defends-dramatic-shift-in-syria-policy-turkey-erdogan-kurds-isis/>

issuing strong condemnations since there is no clear strategy on the horizon.¹¹⁹ So recent developments in Syria are in Damascus's favor, but whether this phase is a final one is a bit controversial. Damascus is positioned in the jaw between Tehran and Moscow; two competing powers that make a future settlement blurrier than any time ever.

¹¹⁹ Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey's hands tied as Syrian army makes gains in Idlib", *Al-monitor*, January 31, 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/turkey-russia-syria-idlib-maraat-numan-ankara-is-desperate.html>

CHAPTER IV: RUSSIAN MOTIVATIONS AND STRATEGIES

4.1: Russian Motivations for its Syrian Intervention

The return of Vladimir Putin to third term presidency in March 2012 has marked new rules of the Russian political, diplomatic and military engagement in the Middle East. However, the Syrian crisis has been the most prominent to test the Russian political orientations, especially with the US retreat-to an extent- from its policy of “conflict settlement”. So understanding the international, regional and domestic motives behind the Russian involvement in Syria should be understood in relation to three main areas: Russia’s Middle East policy, Russia’s national interests and the US new rules of engagement or disengagement in the region.

Russia’s motivation for its intervention in Syria is driven by its broader policy of the Middle East region which is the restoration of the country's power on the global stage by playing an active role in that region. Since the eruption of the Syrian crisis, the Kremlin has foreseen Syria as the key testing ground for its aspiration of leadership due to its significant importance as the main Russian client in the volatile region and its geographical position between Moscow’s other allies. Before the Syrian crisis, Russia’s policies on Syria were shortsighted. And it was concluded by researchers (2009) that Russia's Middle East policy could be divided into two components: Iran and the rest of the region.¹²⁰ Yet the outbreak of the Syrian war has shifted the focus on Syria and proved that relations with Syria and with other state actors in the region can not be of marginal importance. Thus for Moscow, its involvement in Syria is about issues much bigger than Syria and the regional interests that could be the outcomes from turning Syria into a geopolitical foothold are yet numerous.¹²¹ While for many observers, the Russian policy in Syria is just another way of plunging itself into a new quagmire.¹²²

¹²⁰ Olikier, O., Crane, K., Schwartz, L. H. and Yusupov, C. (2009), *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications*, RAND Report, Santa Monica: RAND, P. 113.

¹²¹ Dimitri Trenin. “Russia in the Middle East, Moscow’s objectives, priorities and policy drivers.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 25, March 2016. p.3

¹²² Philip Gordon, “Putin Is Making a Mistake in Syria — and Russia Will Pay the Price,” *Washington Post*, September 28, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2016/09/28/putin-is-making-a-mistake-in-syria-and-russia-will-pay-the-price/>; Max Fisher, “why Putin is doomed to fail in Syria”, *Vox News*, October, 2015.<https://www.vox.com/2015/10/1/9431773/putin-russia-syria-doomed>

Since the overall region instability and the civil war in Syria and Libya, Russia has updated its list of allies in the region by adopting a new model of constant maneuvering that attracted old and current US allies in the region. The renewal of Russia's bargaining power has put Russia in a position to overcome its international isolation and to renegotiate trade sanctions imposed by the US and EU on it after the annexation of the Crimea. So geopolitical factors are still Russia's main policy objectives, yet it has had many diverse drivers. Domestic stability and the containing of the Islamist extremism to expand into Russia and its post-soviet neighbors is of another important concern.¹²³ Intervining in Syria with the pretext of fighting international "terrorism" will help Russia improve its international image and offers it an opporunity to find new partners.

At the same time, Russia's aim to protect the religious minorities by demonstrating a moderate view of the Muslim world could be stated as one of the drivers behind the Russian influence in the larger Middle east. The Russian discourse of protecting Christians in Syria is a tool to affect the positions of some countries regarding Russian intervention. As when Moscow says that it is working to protect Christians in the Middle East, it addresses Western societies, especially right-wing forces that exploit the slogan "to defend Christians" in their campaigns. Besides, religious minorities had not been offered protection. According to a report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, "From March 2011 to September 2019 at least 124 attacks on Christian places of worship have been recorded by key actors in Syria, 75 of which at the hands of Syrian Regime forces, 10 at the hands of ISIS."¹²⁴

Other motives are sometimes beyond security concerns and historical attachment, but of economic nature. Russian arms sales to Middle eastern countries is an important tool of Russian foreign policy.¹²⁵ Arms sales are an important source of national income and building political alliances. The Middle East / North Africa region is the second exporting region of Russian

¹²³ Ibid, Dmitri Trenin p.1

¹²⁴ The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), "Targeting Christian Places of Worship in Syria is a Threat to World Heritage", September 5, 2019

¹²⁵ Eugene Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None" *Carnegie endowment*, 31 october, 2019. p1-44, p.3

weaponry after Asia (17.8% of total exports in 2000-2016 period).¹²⁶ Syria, Iraq and Egypt each receive 1.4% of Russia's arms exports, Yemen 1.2%, Algeria 9.1%, Iran 2% the UAE 0.7%.¹²⁷ Russia takes into consideration the Israeli sensitivities in its armament relationship with Iran and Syria, and makes sure that proceeding its traditional customers with care is not incompatible with it being a reliable arms supplier. For instance, Russia has not reneged on weapons contracts with Syria prior to the start of the civil war. Furthermore, its military involvement in Syria carried economic motivations as Russian forces demonstrated certain equipment there that is likely to interest countries in the region and abroad.¹²⁸

One of the further factors is the energy sector, which some referred to as one of the main factors behind Russia's rushing towards Syria arguing that Syria has a significant location as a possible site for gas pipelines and oil resources, which in the future would either increase the dependency of Syria on Moscow (by Russia's exploration of Syrian gas and oil) or increase the dominance of Russia on European gas market via Syria.¹²⁹ By contrast, David Butter perceives the significance of the potential Syrian gas or Syria's significance on Russian gas dominance of the European gas market as far fetched factor that influences Russian military intervention in Syria.¹³⁰

Moreover, the changes in global alignments and international forces had a counterweight on the Russian policy in Syria. The US pullback from the region had reduced the risk of confrontation between superpowers yet it had given an opportunity for Russia to lead a more efficient role than an "indispensable middleman"-an actor whose presence is necessary even if not sufficient-but of an "reassurance grantor" to US partners in an uncertain regional environment.¹³¹ The Russian activism in Syria was perceived by many as a challenge to the United States especially due to tensions between Moscow and Washington following the Obama administration criticism of Russia's crackdown on domestic protests amid Putin's reelection in 2012. Again, the US sanctions and poignant criticism of Russia's annexation of Crimea and war in Ukraine in 2014,

¹²⁶ Richard Connolly, Cecilie Sendstad, Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter. The Strategic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia, Russia and Eurasia Programme, RIIA, March 2017, p. 17

¹²⁷ R. Connolly, C. Sendstad, op. cit., p. 17

¹²⁸ Isabelle Facon "Russia's quest for influence in North Africa and the Middle East, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, July 2017, p.1-23, p.15

¹²⁹ Salam Al-Saadi, "Russia's Long-Term Aims in Syria", *Carnegie endowment*, October 6, 2015.

¹³⁰ David butter, "Russia's Syria Intervention is Not All About Gas", *Carnegie endowment*, November 19, 2015.

¹³¹ See Rumer, op. cit, p.5

by which the US and the west have embarked upon a new era in relations with Russia.¹³² While others see Moscow's entry to the Middle East and Syria in particular as a response to Washington's implicit messages about its desire for a partial withdrawal from the middle east since it has signed the U.S.–Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in the late era of president George W bush. Thus, Moscow has intended to fill the vacuum created by the partial voluntary departure of the US from the fertile crescent.¹³³

So whether Russia is challenging the US or not, no one can deny that the US officials are not interested in Syria as much the Russians are interested in reviving the Soviet influence there. Although the international situation has shifted away from the atmosphere that had governed the world during the Cold War, the US was not to stand watching the Russian growing influence in a region that mobilizes the focus of the international community. “Those who are in a strong position in this region will have strong positions in the world” said Fyodor Lukyanov of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, a government advisory body.¹³⁴ Russia has realized that the Syrian war would help it to engage more equitably with Washington in a playing field, making the United States a co-equal ally in Syria and Russia a “co-leader” with the United States. This has been a key objective of Russian diplomacy in the Middle East and the wider world.¹³⁵

The eruption of the Arab uprisings in 2011 had accelerated Russia's concern on reaching a crossroads on its policies in the region after years of restoring Russia's global influence and making significant progress in relations with many regimes. Those transformations that swept the region threatened the Russian spheres of influence. Since then its key objective was to engage in new loci of influence and contacts, among is forging closer relations with Israel¹³⁶ and to stop the advance of the Arab Spring before it reaches the republics of Central Asia and Russia itself. Russia looked back nostalgically to the dictatorial regimes and refused any international intervention in internal affairs. In the Libyan case, although Russia withdrew its support for

¹³² Olga Oliker et al, “Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context”, *Rand Cooperation*, p.1-31. P.31

¹³³ Nasser Saed et al., “The motives of Russian intervention in the Syrian crisis” DOI:10.21928/juhd.20161225.03, e-ISSN: 2411-7757, p-ISSN 2411-7765 -(arabic source)

¹³⁴ In the Middle East, Russia is Reasserting Its Power”, *The Economist*, 25 March 2017.

¹³⁵ Isabelle Facon, op. cit.p.7

¹³⁶ Zvi Magen, “Russia and the Middle East: Policy Challenges”, INSS, May, 2013, P.1-72. P.8

Qaddafi's regime and participated in the sanctions against it, but it opposed NATO's forcible intervention in Libya and any regime change in the Arab world.¹³⁷ It abstained from the United Nations Security Council vote on Resolution 1973 authorizing military intervention for humanitarian purposes in Libya. Moscow's objection to regime change stems from the principles of state sovereignty and noninterference and also from the concern of who would replace the deposed leader.¹³⁸ Also Russia has growing concerns over its own legitimacy that why it opposes the western powers when it comes to legitimacy and regime change.¹³⁹

The overthrow of "friendly" regime is perceived by Putin as a threatening precedent to his own rule. Pavel Felgenhauer, an independent military analyst based in Moscow said "They killed Saddam. They killed Qaddafi. Now they want to kill Assad. And Putin believes he may be next in line". In Syria, Russia has learned well from the lessons in Libya, that was most evident in its change of rhetoric and its exacerbated use of veto on UN resolutions in the Security Council. Indeed, the libyan war was a prelude that had sparked Moscow's skepticism regarding the West's credibility in applying UN resolutions¹⁴⁰. And to prevent a libyan scenario in Syria, Russia has supported the Assad regime to the extent possible. In Russia's reasoning Assad's fall would create economic and security problem to Russia and the whole region.¹⁴¹

Analyzing Russia's motives regarding maintaing the Assad is far a controversial factor. Before and after the direct military involvement on 30th of September, Russian officials made statements that revealed no full commitment on keeping the Assad regime. Putin's former Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov said during the meeting of the tenth conference of the London International Strategic Studies Institute that "if we become sure that Assad cheats, we may change our position".¹⁴² And again he told TASS on 19th October which followed the direct military deployment "one can try to negotiate an agreement with the moderate opposition and compromises would have to be mutual." Such and similar statements made Russia's motives

¹³⁷ No UN mandate for Libyan ground operations, regime change – Lavrov, rt.com, April, 2011.

¹³⁸ Dimitri Trenin, "The Mythical Alliance: Russia's syria policy, Carnegie Endowment, p.1-36 p.6

¹³⁹ Hannah VanHoose, "Understanding the Russian Response to the Intervention in Libya, Center for American progress, April, 2011.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. para.5

¹⁴¹ Zvi, op. Cit p.58

¹⁴² Sergei Ivanov: Russia may change its position on Syria if Assad deceives, (TASS), September 21, 2013

towards Assad a bit uncertain, or what Winston Churchill's referred to Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma". At initial stages, Russia was not invested in the figure of Assad himself ¹⁴³ and was not ready to make clear statements regarding its full-fledged support to Assad whose fortune was seen with little chance of survival. According to President Putin, "Moscow's aim of intervening in Syria is to primarily defend the institutions of the Syrian state, not President Assad, and we do not want a situation similar to that of Libya, Somalia or Afghanistan".

Later on, the military support meant full-commitment to keep or restore regime power but Russia did not want to face any criticism of a potential policy failure in Syria, especially with the rising threat of ISIS. So, it supported the regime but demonstrated another strategy. The strategy of defeating Islamist radicals by forming a counter-coalition to the US led coalition against Daesh which had excluded Russia. Moscow was concerned that Syria would be overrun by Islamic radical organizations who vowed to attack Russia and had recruited over 2,000 Russian nationals in its ranks. So, Russia favoured Assad as a means to an end (national interests) not an end in itself. ¹⁴⁴

Although it is struggling with western imposed sanctions and domestic crisis, Russia's activism in Syria and elsewhere is by no means a way of positioning itself as a great power in geopolitical firmament and a reflection of its capability to wield power beyond its direct borders. But since foreign policy drivers are influenced by inner politics, Russia's assertive foreign policy in Syria should not be analyzed without referring to Russia's domestic context. Although it is a bit difficult to say that aggressive move outside state borders is a way to distract focus from the economic crisis taking place at home.¹⁴⁵ But it could be set for other objectives like preserving the regime, and enhancing the state's position which in turn divert focus on inner crisis. Ball notes that Russia utilizes information warfare by fostering a domestic narrative of a strong and assertive foreignpolicy to ensure the regime's survival and bolstering its legitimacy. And recently information warfare became the modus operandi of the governing regime not an adjunct to

¹⁴³ Lina Khatib, "A Comprehensive Strategy for Syria: Next Steps for the West", Carnegie Middle East Center, March 4, 2014.

¹⁴⁴ Simon Sarahdazyan, "Russia's Interest in Syria is Not Assad", Carnegie Corporation, October 20, 2015

¹⁴⁵ Mikkel Bøgeskov Eriksen, "Russia's engagement in Syria - What are Russia's motives" Royal Danish Defence College, October, 2017.

Russian statecraft.¹⁴⁶ Whether the employed strong foreign policy rhetoric regarding intervention in Syria has succeeded cannot be easily detected, but it could be said that it has achieved what it was employed for, enhancing Russia's position and preserving the Syrian government.

On the other side, Russia's pretext to intervene in "stabilizing" the unrest in Syria was another way to divert international and domestic attention from its "failed" strategy in Ukraine. Virtually, Russian goals are connected to its Syrian strategy and unlike the United States, they have a much longer horizon. Syrian card has served Russian interests in distracting attention away from its actions in Ukraine, with the likely end result of sanctions regime being softened – and its position as an international actor being enhanced especially when tackling ISIS was still a mutual plan alongside western powers and with its attempts to convince the west that Ukraine has failed to implement the Minsk protocols.¹⁴⁷ Although intervening in Syria was perceived by shock in western circles and as a gamble by the Kremlin, its potential benefits ultimately outweighed the risks in the eyes of the Kremlin's strategists and Russia has presented itself as a champion on all political, diplomatic and military levels.¹⁴⁸

4.2: Russian Strategies Over Syria.

4.2.1 On diplomatic level

More than eight years after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Assad has stayed in power that is in large part due to Russian diplomacy and military backing from the early beginning. The Russian engagement has begun with political, diplomatic and economic support for the Assad government and then culminated into direct military support synchronized with political and diplomatic support. However, this section would focus on the Russian diplomatic efforts in Syria which stems from the Russian «Tsar» shift of roles from a spectator of events to a distributor of

¹⁴⁶ Ball, Y. D. (2017) *Protecting Falsehood with a Bodyguard of Lies: Putin's Use of Information Warfare*, Center for Security Studies, ETN Zürich,

¹⁴⁷ Keir Giles, "What Russia Learns From the Syria Ceasefire: Military Action Works," Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, March 3, 2016, available from <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/what-russia-learns-syria-ceasefire-military-action-works>.

¹⁴⁸ Dimitry Frolovskiy, "What Putin Really Wants in Syria", *Foreign policy*, February, 2018

scenarios and core coordinator among the various actors of the region, holding a stick from the middle between allies and adversaries.

Russian diplomatic tools constitute of using its veto in the UN Security Council to block draft resolutions on Syria, leading peace talks between Syrian government and the Syrian opposition, engaging in reconciliation talks with different opposition groups separately, negotiating peace plans on the resolution of the conflict with major state actors (United States, Turkey, Iran) and the art of making friends with all actors, even those who are in acute confrontation with each other.¹⁴⁹ Regardless of the effectiveness of these diplomatic dynamics, Russia had created alternatives to the western backed UN peace process in Geneva and also terminated the western monopoly on political settlement. It has succeeded in giving a sense of legitimacy and diplomatic protection to the Syrian government and had softened the western position on Assad.¹⁵⁰ It has also reconfirmed its status as a power broker in the region. Through diplomacy, Russia had- to some extent-achieved its own regional and international interests. Although its initial plan from its return to the middle east had more to do with global geopolitics than regional alliances.¹⁵¹ In Syria, Russia burst onto the scene not only as part of the diplomatic process but as a key leader in ensuring the political settlement and the subsequent transition process. Even other actors started to seek Russian diplomacy to get their regional interests. Thus, in the words of the Russian analyst Maxim A. Suchkov, Russia can praise itself for getting what it was aiming for :” being consulted, heard and feared”.¹⁵²

Moscow has long held that the only solution to the crisis in Syria is the Syrian National Dialogue. In 2011, Moscow welcomed the reform package announced by Assad and considered it necessary to give the Syrian leadership enough time to implement the announced reforms, and made contacts with the Syrian opposition in an attempt to persuade it to start dialogue with

¹⁴⁹ Irina Zvyagelskaya, “Russia, the New Protagonist in the Middle East”, *Russian Academy of Sciences*, p.73-91, p.84

¹⁵⁰ Dimitry Adamsky, “Moscow’s Syria Campaign Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy”, *The Institut français des relations internationales*, July, 2018,p.1-36, p.13

¹⁵¹ Andrey Kortunov, “The Astana Model: Methods and Ambitions of Russian Political Action”p.53-63, p.54

¹⁵² Maxim A. Suchkov, “What 2018 looks like for Russia, US regarding Syria”, *Al-Monitor*, December, 2017.

Read more:

<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/russia-syria-us-2018-tillerson-lavrov-assad.html#ixzz66xTy8TAB>

Syrian government. So Russia's diplomacy was implemented to keep the Syrian government in power and to block any opening for legitimizing international intervention. By September 2019, Russia has casted 13th veto of UN resolutions criticizing Syria.¹⁵³ Russia's diplomacy was highly projected by the 2013 Russian initiative by which the Foreign Minister Lavrov announced a Russian proposition to eliminate chemical weapons in Syria, and that the United States should not carry out punishing military strikes against the government. This tactic of engaging the US in joint effort has enhanced Russia's reputation as a shrewd diplomatic actor and a peer competitor to the US in the region.¹⁵⁴ Russia succeeded in achieving a diplomatic victory, as it prevented a military strike against Syria. But this initiative has its dark side, especially with the subsequent use of chemical weapons in Syria, which became a source of tension between Moscow and Washington although it was aimed to increase cooperation between the great powers.

International Astana meeting on Syria, which was initiated by Astana trio (Russia, Iran and Turkey) in January 2017, was one of the main international diplomatic tracks beside the UN-sponsored talks in Geneva that aimed to resolve the Syrian conflict. The process reached an agreement that called for cessation of hostilities between forces fighting on behalf of the Government of Syria (GoS) and anti-government groups in four Syrian "de-escalation" zones in southern and western Syria (was mainly held by opposition). The four zones are: parts of Idlib province (including some parts of northeastern Latakia, western Aleppo and northern Hama province), Eastern Ghouta, the Rastan and Talbiseh enclave in northern Homs province and parts of Daraa and Quinetra.¹⁵⁵

The set up of "de-escalation" zones was part of the strategy that aimed to ensure military successes for the Syrian army in those areas as Russia had repeatedly said that it only applied for "moderate opposition" excluding in that Al-Nusra and ISIS.¹⁵⁶ Astana peace talks had given Russia an opportunity to expand its own diplomatic relations with Syria's immediate neighbours, especially with Turkey and Iran being the main guarantors in the negotiations. Iraq and Lebanon's recent attendance as observers States to the 13th round of the high-level meetings was

¹⁵³ Russia casts 13th veto of U.N. Security Council action during Syrian war, Reuters.com

¹⁵⁴ Eugene Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None" *Carnegie endowment*, 31 october, 2019. p1-44, p.9

¹⁵⁵ Syrian war: All you need to know about the Astana talks, Aljazeera, 30 October, 2017.

¹⁵⁶ ibid

much welcomed by Moscow. Russia is also reaching out the inclusion of Egypt and UAE, as they both re-established relations with Damascus, and the latter ability to re-engage Syria in the Arab League and bring capital investment in Syria's economy.¹⁵⁷ Israel was not party to the talks, yet through Astana talks Russia has co-opted Israel to increase its stakes in the Syrian geopolitical game and was also determined to secure the southern Syrian borders.¹⁵⁸ Other credentials were to be achieved by Russia with the Astana peace initiative on the level of national interests. For instance, Putin has used the Astana talks as a pretext to partly withdraw Russian troops to boost his Presidential Election Campaign in 2018.¹⁵⁹

In January 2018, Russia started a new branch of negotiations which hosted a Congress of Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi. The congress witnessed boycotts by main armed Syrian opposition and Kurdish groups who resisted the Russian effort as it legitimizes President Assad and circumvent the decisions of the UN backed Geneva conference.¹⁶⁰ Although Russian diplomacy has achieved little in an overall settlement of the conflict, it has resulted in some cases in achieving long term regional interests. President Putin had ratified an agreement that was later signed by the Syrian president in late 2017 to extend the Russian naval facility lease on Tartus for 49 years, the lease allowed Russia to keep up to 11 warships including nuclear vessels.

Russia has made some efforts to the inclusion of PYD\YPG in Geneva and Astana peace talks,¹⁶¹ but those efforts were never accomplished due to pressure from Turkey.¹⁶² Putin invited Kurds to Sochi talks in the aftermath of the Turkish Operation "Olive Branch", but they refused to take part.¹⁶³ In addition, Russia has mediated between Syria and the Kurds by allowing Kurdish representation in Moscow. Also, Russia has offered Damascus some proposals for the establishment of Kurdish autonomous region, as Russia favoured a scenario of federal Syria. But

¹⁵⁷ Samuel Ramani, "Russia's efforts to expand the Astana process in Syria", *Middle East Institute*, October.2019.

¹⁵⁸ Mona Alami, "Russia's Local and Regional Approach to Syria", *Carnegie Endowment* July 31, 2018.

¹⁵⁹ Kozhanov, Nikolai "Was will Russland in Syrien." *Le Monde diplomatique*, 09.05.18. <https://monde-diplomatique.de/artikel/!5502253>

¹⁶⁰ Oliver Carroll, "Russia Syria peace talks achieve little beyond further division as fighting continues in Afrin", *Independent*, January, 2018.

¹⁶¹ "Russia to involve Kurds 'more actively' in post-war Syria", *Kurdistan24*, 30 October, 2017.

¹⁶² Özden Zeynep Oktav et.al, "Violent Non-state Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases", Springer, 2017, p.(1-233), p.85

¹⁶³ Olivier Piot, "The Kurds Trapped By The Military Escalation In Syria", *Orient XXI*, 7 March 2018.

those proposals were rejected by Syria.¹⁶⁴ So, in the early 2019 mediation talks between the Kurds and Damascus, an autonomous kurdish state was not put on the table by Moscow; as the Russian Foreign Ministry told the Kurdish representative that Russia was ready to “work together to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria ”.¹⁶⁵

4.2.2 On operational level

Political analyzes differ in the characterization of Russian intervention, both in terms of determining what it is, its trends, and its legal legitimacy. This difference generates contradictory concepts through which it is difficult to define tactical and strategic features. However, what could be agreed upon is the return of the Russian actor to the region on both diplomatic and operational level.

Hybrid Warfare

All the factors combined, between progress and retreat, conventional weapons in unconventional spaces, mercenaries within the army, as well as other factors such as informational and diplomatic wars, and demographic reconfiguration of Syria, are an extension of the new Russian war strategy called “hybrid war”^{166 167} in which conventional war has merged with asymmetrical forms of military warfare. Or what is sometimes called “the Gerasimov doctrine”, the concept implies that the “rules of war” have changed among the Russian strategic community under the

¹⁶⁴ Bozarslan, M. “Syria rejects Russian proposal for Kurdish federation”, *Al-Monitor*, 24 October 2016. Accessed on February 4, 2020 from: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/10/turkey-russia-mediates-between-kurds-and-assad.html>

¹⁶⁵ Ofra Bengio. “The Improbable Rise and Uncertain Future of Syria’s Kurds”, *The American Interest*, 15 April, 2019

¹⁶⁶ Michael Kofman, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts”, *War on the Rocks*, March, 2016

¹⁶⁷ Interestingly enough, this approach, which is outlined by M.Kofman elsewhere, strongly resonates with the traditional Israeli strategic-operational modus operandi bearing the same name and promoting the same logic of an emerging strategy (astrategia behithavut) in warfare against the hybrid enemy. See M.Kofman, “Moscow School of Hard Knocks: Key Pillars of Russian Strategy”, *War on the Rocks*, 17 January 2017, <https://warontherocks.com>; for the Israeli approach of this type, see: D.Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, Pale Alto: Stanford UP, 2010, chapter 3; M.Finkel, *On Flexibility*, Pale Alto: Stanford, UP, 2011; E.Shamir, *Transforming Command*, Pale Alto: Stanford UP, 2011.

Russian Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov prior to Syrian Intervention. The doctrine also states that non-military means have started to be effective tools in achieving strategic and political tools, to the extent that “they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness”¹⁶⁸. The Russian strategy in Syria illustrates the notion of “New generation war” combining soft and hard power in a single integrated strategy, from military operations to ceasefire agreements with local field commanders and village heads (muhtars).¹⁶⁹

Russia’s reliance on non-linear means of warfare has been an innovative strategy in waging wars, yet it is not the whole strategy. As the Russian Syrian strategy has preserved the conventional warfare by enhancing its conventional capabilities and deterrence benefits, so it is wrong to believe that it will not escalate its fight when necessary, that was the case in the battle of Aleppo at the end of 2016, in which the Russian raids reached 400 raids a day. Russia also followed scorched earth policy in Syria which aimed to end any alternatives to adversaries on the ground, and to force the United States and Turkey to change their foreign policies. It also recruited paramilitary forces to “get the job done” at lower costs. Russia used the offered opportunity of international war against ISIS, despite declaring that their military goal from Syrian intervention was to target ISIS, on ground Russians have done little to defeat ISIS. Overall, the evolution in strategies has been the direct product of the changing fortunes of the Assad government.

Russia always emphasizes an exit strategy unlike Washington, which often finds itself stuck in human and economic swamps, Moscow always seeks to establish options for retreat and withdrawal. In Syria, Russia redeployed its air and ground forces more than once, and deployed specialized units such as military police in the cities it regained control, it did so twice when it announced its intention for withdrawal on March 2016 and January 2017, each time it closes a new chapter of intervention, reviewing political gains, normalizing its military presence with its allies, and sending internal messages that it was not involved in a single military campaign, in pursuit of Stalin's famous phrase: “In the Soviet army it takes more courage to retreat than to advance”.

¹⁶⁸ Mark Galeotti, “The ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and Russian Non-Linear War”, *In Moscow’s Shadows*.

¹⁶⁹ Dimitry Adamsky, “Moscow’s Syria Campaign Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy”, *The Institut français des relations internationales*, July, 2018.p.1-36, p.11

Direct Military Engagement

In Summer 2015, the Syrian government was on the brink of total collapse. Thus, Russia was left with two options since it failed to find an alternative to incumbent Assad, either to intervene militarily to rescue the regime or let the Syrian regime collapse. The latter was undesired among Russian officials as it would be an embarrassment for Moscow who opposed regime change of “legitimate” governments and presented itself as the protector of the Syrian regime. At the same time the defeat of Assad would be interpreted as a victory for the United States and would ease the arrival of Islamist organizations to power.¹⁷⁰ Given the speed trajectory of the Syrian civil war, Moscow’s conduct towards and following the intervention was driven by three strategic principles according to Dimitry Adamsky: First, controlling tensions in the region by cultivating relations with all parties in the conflict and demonstrating itself as part of the problem and part of the solution. Second, adopting the principle of reasonable sufficiency ”razumnaia dostatochnost” by which maximum benefits are generated by the minimum intervention in Syria. Last, adopting a flexible approach to the followed strategy within the dynamic developments.¹⁷¹

The first fully fledged Russian engagement in Syria began on 30 September 2015, Russia launched airstrikes against opposition and deployed aircraft to the Hmeimim Air Base. It applied the US-approach of focusing on air campaigns instead of ground forces.¹⁷² However Russia’s deployment in Syria had begun long before the actual date of the direct intervention. On September 12 (*All Source Analysis*) imagery of Taganrog Central airbase, a base for Russian operations in eastern Ukraine, showed training of airborne troops. Such preparations were expected to be for long-range deployment in Syria rather than for snap-inspection. Earlier, In mid August sources of Syrian opposition reported the presence of Russian militia in Slinfah and also

¹⁷⁰ Eugene Rumer, op. cit, p.10

¹⁷¹ Dimitry Adamsky, “Moscow’s Syria Campaign Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy”, *The Institut français des relations internationales*, July, 2018.p.1-36, p.8,9

¹⁷² Nikolay Kozhanov. “Russian Policy Across the Middle East Motivations and Methods”, *Chatham House*, February, 2018. P.1-32, p. 2

reported the killing of Russian officer in rebel rocket attack¹⁷³. Other sources showed earlier arrival of shipments and deployment of Russian forces in Alawite-majority province of Latakia in early July 2015 which even accelerated in late August. On August 20, the Russian transport vessel *Nikolay Filchenkov* passing through Bosphorus had on deck at least four Kamaz trucks and one GAZ-66 trucks plus four BTR type armored personnel until it arrived at Latakia.¹⁷⁴ On 13th September fifteen buses had arrived carrying Russian military personnel to Hama City. These were all indicators that Russia's involvement in Syria would not be limited to air operations and equipment to support the Syrian regime but to deploying troops forward along the Syrian regime's front line which is considered as game-changing¹⁷⁵ for the fate of the Syrian regime and the agendas of regional and international actors involved. Later by mobilizing large numbers of armies, aircraft, armored vehicles, artillery and anti-aircraft missiles, Russia has been able to strengthen the Syrian government after losing control of more than two-thirds of its territory. Moreover, the war was an opportunity to test Russian military troops in contingencies, including facing the worst possible scenarios but also sending strong signals to adversaries and disloyal neighbours.¹⁷⁶

The Russian military buildup in Syria was not in massive numbers unlike its effective deployment of highly trained armed forces during the military invasion of Georgia and Ukraine¹⁷⁷ Its military political objective from the limited deployment in Syria was to signal for outside powers a limited fashion of intervention. While airlifted assets and few personnel were at that stage to perform the current mission that would later be the spearhead for a larger follow-

¹⁷³ Michael Weiss, "Russia Puts Boots on the Ground in Syria," Daily Beast, September 1, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/01/russia-puts-boots-on-the-ground-in-syria.html>; "Russian Officer Killed in Rebel Rocket Attack on Lattakia," Syrian Observer, August 17, 2015, http://www.syrianobserver.com/EN/News/29665/Russian_Officer_Killed_Rebel_Rocket_Attack_Lattaki

¹⁷⁴ The Cargo On Russian Landing Ship," Bosphorus Naval News, August 22, 2015, <http://turkishnavy.net/2015/08/22/update-the-cargo-on-russian-landing-ship-nikolay-filchenkov/>.

¹⁷⁵ Hugo Spaulding et al. "RUSSIAN DEPLOYMENT TO SYRIA: PUTIN'S MIDDLE EAST GAME CHANGER", Institute for the Study of War, September 17, 2015.

¹⁷⁶ Simon Saradzhyan: Yes, Russia's Military Is Training for a 'Mega War.' That's What Militaries Do, August 30, 2016, retrieved from: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/yes-russias-military-training-mega-war-what-militaries-do-17529>

¹⁷⁷ Can Kasapoğlu, "Act of Desperation or Game Changer? Russian Deployments in Syria, Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, 2015/6. P,1-20, p.8

on force and a “Mega war”.¹⁷⁸ Applying the US-approach of focusing on air campaign instead of ground forces,¹⁷⁹ the Russian military succeeded to operate unopposed in the Syrian airspace due to the few if not any air defense capabilities of the anti government forces. Russia’s S-400 advanced missile system, which was deployed after a Turkish aircraft had shot down a Russian aircraft in November 2015, has acquired it a potent anti-access/area-denial A2/AD capability over the Levant and eastern Mediterranean.¹⁸⁰ While, Russia’s tremendous air defences in Syria should neither be overestimated nor underrated. As they are not “game-changers”, they have so far failed miserably against Western and Israeli air forces in Syria.¹⁸¹ At the same time they allowed Russia to evaluate its different air defence assets under real combat conditions and hence enhance its future capability.¹⁸²

Nonetheless, Russian military experts did not underestimate the combat effectiveness of anti-government forces who were seen as “enemy with new formation” and as real threat to Russia on ground¹⁸³. They were equipped with similar military capabilities of state actors (armor, artillery, reconnaissance, intelligence and UAVs), and were able to switch back and forth between guerilla tactics to those of state militaries. Russia followed air operations to destroy fighters and their hardware, while ground warfare was carried to control the transportation infrastructure and to rebuild the Syrian army. Russia has carried the training, advising, equipping and rebuilding of the Syrian army who then carried out most of the ground warfare with its allies: Hezbollah, Shia militias and IRGC.

The Russian Mercenaries also have a part in those operations, their main task in Syria is to participate in high-risk offensive operations on the Kremlin’s behalf. Given the wide scope of

¹⁷⁸ Peter Beaumont, "Russian military buildup hints at wider war in Syria," *The Guardian*, September 30, 2015, accessed August 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/30/russian-military-buildup-hints-at-wider-war-in-syria>

¹⁷⁹ Nikolay Kozhanov. “Russian Policy Across the Middle East Motivations and Methods” Chatham House, February, 2018. P.1-32, p. 2

¹⁸⁰ “Russian Military Capabilities in Event of Western Strike on Syria,” Reuters, April 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-factbox/russian-military-capabilities-in-event-of-western-strike-on-syria-idUSKBN1HJ2TE>

¹⁸¹ Robert Dalsjö, Christofer Berglund, Michael Jonsson, “Bursting the Bubble: Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region: Capabilities, Countermeasures, and Implications”, March 2019, p.45.

¹⁸² Plopsky, Guy, “Russia’s Air Defenses in Syria: More Politics than Punch,” *BESA Center Perspectives Paper No 618*, 18 October, 2017

¹⁸³ A.Tikhonov, “Sirijskaia proverka boem”—“Terroristi novoj formatsii” [Syrian ordeal by fire—The terrorists of new formation], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 29 August 2017, <http://archive.redstar.ru>;

their activities, mercenaries carry out offensive missions either independently or next to the Syrian military. Mercenaries were delegated an important role in restoring the cities of Palmyra and Deir Ezzor during 2016 and 2017. The massive use of mercenary units (ChVKs in Russian), whose activity reflected the penetration of Russian hidden fingers in foreign conflicts, is a new dimension of Russian foreign policy and a way of outsourcing military operations. Unlike the US or Western Private military companies (PMCs), Russian mercenaries are not engaged in security and stabilization missions, not even supporting tasks but purely military functions.¹⁸⁴ In this regard, Russian PMCs are effective tools to achieve economic and geopolitical goals and widen Russia's areas of influence as well as reducing the cost and losses, giving it a space of low-cost military escalation.

Wagner company and Turan unit (Known as spetsnaz iz SSSR)” are the most prominent Russian PMCs in Syria.¹⁸⁵ Wagner's size has varied over the course of the Syrian war, a Russian press source (2017) estimates Wagner had 2,500 people on the ground. Wagner's role in Syria raised concerns among US policy makers, especially with the persistent attempts by Moscow to deny responsibility for the activities of Wagner.¹⁸⁶ However, Wagner became less influential in Syria than what it seems. Since 2017 the quality of Wagner's personnel has been gradually decreasing, this can be attributed to its dramatic defeat in early 2018 when 200 Wagner personnel were killed in a battle with joint US-Kurdish forces. In addition, a *Foreign Policy* report has revealed that Wagner's role has been significantly reduced in favor of other PMCs like Shield and Patriot that are likely to belong to the Russian Defense Ministry. So its ranks in first-tier military contractors has declined but is now forced to work as a contractor in smaller units alongside new competitors.¹⁸⁷ Despite all the changing fortunes of Wagner, its name has recently emerged in reports about its engagement in Libya in support for Haftar forces.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Aleksey Makarkin, “Rossiyskie CHVK v Sirii,” *Polit.ru*, February 13, 2018, <http://polit.ru/article/2018/02/13/syria/>.

¹⁸⁵ Sarah Fainberg, “Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict”, *Ifri, Russie.Nei.Visions*, No.105, December 2017, www.ifri.org.

¹⁸⁶ Nathaniel Reynolds, “Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 8, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442>.

¹⁸⁷ Neil Huer. “The Rise and Fall of a Russian Mercenary Army” *Foreign Policy*, October 6, 2019

¹⁸⁸ Alec Luhn, Dominic Nicholls, “Russian Mercenaries Back Libyan Rebel Leader as Moscow Seeks Influence in Africa,” *Telegraph*, March 3, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/03/russian-mercenaries-back-libyan-rebel-leader-moscow-seeks-influence/>.

In conclusion, It can not be said, however, that Russia through its new hybrid strategy was able to advance its military campaign in Syria, and was able to turn the scales in its favor and that of its ally, the Syrian government. At the same time, it cannot be denied that some strategies had paid off handsomely, as Russia has returned to the international arena since a long time of absence, especially in the Middle East.

Cooperation with other actors

As previously stated, Russia is working closely with all actors in Syria . Turkey, Israel and the US have established airspace deconfliction agreements with Russia. Iran, Hezbollah and their other proxy forces have long been a ground support for Russia. Russia's delicate game in cultivating relations with its friends and their adversaries have added layers of complexity to developments in the Syrian war. Its balance of cooperation between Iran and Israel, who are adversaries, remains the most complicated and double edged. Russia allows Israel to strike Iranian positions (T-4) in close proximity to Russian aircrafts yet support the Iranian military activism. ¹⁸⁹

In October 2015, a deconfliction hotline, between the Russian aviation command center at the Hmeimim air base and a command post of the Israeli Air Force, was established to prevent aerial clashes in Syrian airspace. The hotline constitutes of the two sides notifying each other of the actions of their aircrafts. Avoiding confrontation in Syrian airspace between Russian and Israeli aircrafts has been a demonstration of burgeoning cooperation. Although some incidents were inevitable due to the Russian contingent's A2/AD capabilities that had transformed the Syrian airspace from a permissive combat airspace into a contested one,¹⁹⁰ within which U.S.-led coalition and Israeli aviation assets were obliged to operate.

¹⁸⁹Seth G. Jones, Nicholas Harrington, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, "Dangerous Liaison:Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 2019.

¹⁹⁰ Can Kasapoğlu, "Control of the Syrian Airspace:Russian Geopolitical Ambitions and Air Threat Assessment", *SWP Comment*, April, 2018

On one hand, Moscow has issued many warnings to Israel not to strike targets of Syrian government. However, when Israel did so, the Kremlin's response came with no blowback. Therefore, Moscow's warnings to Israel turned to be directed more towards the Syrian and Russian audiences rather than towards Jerusalem. Otherwise, if the Kremlin had not shown any response, Russian influence would appear weak and its commitment to the regime would be much questioned. Moreover, Russia is unlikely to intercept Israeli or coalition aerial assets unless its own forces are subjected to potential casualties or if the assets approach Russian military installations too closely without prior notice.¹⁹¹

On the other hand, Russian political intimidation for Israel is parallel with its continued strategy in Syria of upgrading Syria's air defence systems, which in return would deter the Israeli strikes. Claims regarding the effectiveness of the Syrian (Russian-produced) air defence systems in shooting down missiles varied between Syrian/Russian and Israeli military statements and media resources.¹⁹² Claims made by Syrian forces on downing Israeli warplanes and Israeli military denial or downplaying of its losses has almost become a standard practice. Such claims were also made by Russia on Syrian behalf, where it claims that Syrian aged S-125, S-200 systems had shot down several missiles for US and other western allies.¹⁹³

In rebuke for Israeli and western attacks which culminated after the elimination of opposition factions in southern Syria, and the end of the armed presence in the vicinity of Damascus, in conjunction with these victories of the Syrian army, Russia has made announcements to support Syria with sophisticated S-300 missiles. Following the downing of an Ilyushin-20 reconnaissance plane in late September 2018, Russia has made such an announcement. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said the delivery of S-300 is set to boost security of the Russian taskforce in that country. But this step by Moscow was seen by some analysts within the framework of changing Russia's strategic vision in Syria as it constraints Israeli activities and challenges the deconfliction mechanism that was established in 2015. While Andrei Frolov, a military analyst and editor-in-chief of the Russian journal *Eksport Vooruzheny* (Arms Export) sees such a move

¹⁹¹ Plopsy, Guy, op. cit "Russia's Air Defenses in Syria.."

¹⁹² "Syrian Air Defense Shoots Down Intruder Israeli Warplane, Hits Another One", *Sputniknews*, 17 March,2017; "Israel Defense Forces Deny Claims of Losing Aircraft Over Syria", *Sputniknews*, 17 March,2017;

¹⁹³ Peter Beaumont and Andrew Roth, "Russia claims Syria air defences shot down 71 of 103 missiles", *Guardian*,14 April,2018

by Moscow a symbolic one, a way to save face and flex muscle.¹⁹⁴ In all, Russia has adopted a highly flexible strategy in avoiding high political-military confrontation that would lead to major escalation between parties, at the same time Russia has not applied a low confrontation level in order to sustain its indispensability.¹⁹⁵ Emerging with better abilities of mediating conflicts rather than resolving them.

Beside Moscow's high adaptive strategy, not so high confrontation levels in Syria is attributed to the US decreased will for a direct military confrontation in zero-sum Syria. Since the Russian intervention, Washington has sustained limited military and diplomatic cooperation with Moscow. Different strategic objectives in Syria and chronic distrust between them had made cooperation impossible even in the field of 'counterterrorism'.¹⁹⁶ But amid this chaos, the United States relations with Russia is dependent on its ever lasting long term goals of securing Israel and curbing Iranian expansionism.

Russia has also cooperated with Syrian Kurds in their fight against ISIS. In late 2017, Gen. Yevgeny Poplavsky said that Russia's Aerospace Force has carried out 672 combat flights in support for the YPG, hitting over 1,450 targets in the eastern part of Syria's Deir ez-Zor province.¹⁹⁷ Such cooperation was for tactical and temporary objectives, because Russia has always prioritized its relations with Turkey with that of the kurds. In so, it suffices to mention that Russia in January 2018 has greenlighted Turkey to carry its Operation "Olive Branch" in Afrin, as the biggest evidence of the difficulty of imagining the preponderance of the relationship with the Kurds over the relationship with Turkey in the balance of Russian accounts.

¹⁹⁴ Maxim A. Suchkov, "Is Russia's S-300 delivery to Syria a game-changer?", *Al-Monitor*, October 10, 2018 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/10/russia-syria-israel-s300.html#ixzz67hOLzVdE>

¹⁹⁵ Dmitry Adamsky, p.7

¹⁹⁶ Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, "Collision Avoidance: Lessons From U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria", *Carnegie Endowment*, March, 2019.

¹⁹⁷ "Kurds to provide security for Russian task force on eastern bank of Euphrates River", *Tass Russian News Agency*, 4 Dec 2017, Accessed on February 4, 2020 from: <https://tass.com/defense/978971>

CHAPTER V: ISRAELI MOTIVATIONS AND STRATEGIES

Israel's Motivations and Strategies in Syria stem from its predefined red lines, future vision, inner politics and foreign policy determinants. Similar to other involved actors in Syria, Israel suffers from internal problems and external pressures. The former had pushed it to escalate externally in an attempt to unify the internal front behind the political leadership whose popularity has declined due to investigations related to corruption charges, and its failure to meet the economic needs, and security threats. While internal motives are tactical, external motives are strategic, led by preserving their national security interests. This chapter would tackle the Israeli motivations and strategies within the major developments of the Syrian war amid the evolution of the regional strategies of Russia, Iran, the United States and the emergence of new actors like ISIS. Additionally, the chapter argues that Israel had shifted its strategies to fit its future vision, yet its objectives remained invulnerable.

5.1 Israeli Policies Over Syria

5.1.1 Policy of Cautious Non-intervention

There is no doubt that the war in Syria was a major Israeli concern, and its consequences might have an echo in Israel more than any other country. The fall of the regime there may change the entire geostrategic map in the region, and it may threaten the balance of power that has existed since the disengagement agreement signed by the late President Hafez al-Assad and Israel under the auspices of Henry Kissinger in 1974. However, the Assad government was never Israel's best option and a dismantled Syria into Kurdish, Alawite, Christian, Druze and Sunni enclaves has always been seen with big-long term advantages. So in "post Assad Syria", Israel neither advocated a libyan scenario, where after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi state weapons were smuggled and flowed to local militias, nor an Egyptian one, where Muslim brotherhood was a

dominant force in post revolutionary Egyptian elections. On the contrary, Israel did not adopt a position on a “Post Assad scenario“.

In the first half of the Syrian war, Israel adopted an early policy of non-intervention in the Syrian dossier stemming from its limited influence on Syria’s domestic politics, due to its potential allies there being few and extremely weak. Also, its past experience in Lebanese civil war and its inability to shape a favourable outcome there had dominated the thinking of Israeli leaders.¹⁹⁸ So at an earlier stage its stance remained passive. It made it clear that it had no intention to intervene in the Syrian civil war beyond the scope of its predefined security red lines.¹⁹⁹

Although it was -to some extent- drawn to decide on the future of Syria and the Syrian government but such a development was not in Israel’s favour, in the words of Itamar Rabinovich (2013), a former Israeli ambassador to the United States and Israel’s chief negotiator with Syria in early 90’s, “ Israel’s recent entanglement in the Russian-American conflict over the future of Syria is a negative development, It should refrain from being drawn into the crisis and into Syrian politics, and protect its vital security interests firmly, but cautiously and discreetly”.²⁰⁰ Explicitly, initial non-intervention did not only mean engaging in open speculation regarding the fate of Assad. On the contrary, Israel had defined its red lines and evaluated possible risks of Syria’s disintegration.

Observers within Israel had regarded the wave of potential democratization in the Arab world with timid hope and strong hesitance²⁰¹. While the series of violence and killings in the Syrian war and the inability for democratic transition to take place following the Arab Spring had been well-used by Israeli government in a way to present itself as the most democratic state in the

¹⁹⁸ Udi Dekel, Nir Boms, and Ofir Winter, Syria: New Map and New Actors: Challenges and Opportunities for Israel, Memorandum No. 156 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2016), pp. 19-23.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Itamar Rabinovich, ““The Devil We Know” Revisited: Israeli Thinking on the Future of the Assad Regime,” INSS Insight, no. 427, May 19, 2013,

²⁰¹ “Mideast revolutions could be good for Israel, says Peres,” *The Associated Press*, March 28, 2011.

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/mideast-revolutions-could-be-good-for-israel-says-peres-1.352374>. Amos Yadlin, “The Arab Uprising One Year On,” in *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications*, Guzansky, Yoel and Heller, Mark A., eds. (INSS Memorandum No. 113, *Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies*, March 2012, p. 15.

region. Skepticism over regional instability, rise of political Islam, and an overture to increase Tehran's leverage were among the dominant Israeli concerns from the upheavals. The Syrian case was a clear case on the Israeli equivocal tone towards the upheavals. At the outset of the Syrian uprising, Israel saw that it would be an opportunity to strike the radical axis in frame of confrontation with Iran without committing itself to an extensive warfare. In December 2011, Ehud Barak asserted that the ouster of Assad would be a major blow for Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, but he added that Assad's removal carries certain uncertainties about the border security.²⁰² Especially after a series of clashes between the IDF and Palestinian refugees,²⁰³ where it was believed that Assad has done this intentionally to divert attention from the anti-government protests at home and to deliver a message to Israel that instability in Syria would have grave implications on the quiescence of the borders. Yet Israeli officials stayed wary of speaking publicly about the fate of Assad.

The shift in Israel's pre-war policy of "Keeping the devil we know"²⁰⁴ was significant in the Syrian war entering its second year. Israel had condemned the massacres of Syrian government amid the inevitability of Assad's fall. In 2012, Israel offered humanitarian aid to Syrians and Netanyahu condemned the Houla massacre.²⁰⁵ And it so followed, Efraim Inbar, the head of the BESA Center for Strategic Studies said that "There are no good options, but the Israeli interest is that Bashar not survive." A former head of the IDF's Strategic Planning Division, Brig. Gen. (ret) Shlomo Brom said that "At first, I was one of those who said that the best possible scenario is that Assad put down the rebellion like his father did" But now, Israel's interest is that Assad not be victorious" as Syria had pitted the US against Russia and Saudi Arabia against Iran.²⁰⁶

²⁰² Joel Greenberg, "Israeli officials say Syria's Assad is doomed". *Washingtonpost.com*, Dec 14, 2011.

²⁰³ "Golan: Israel troops fire on pro-Palestinian protesters".(2011) *bbc.com*.

²⁰⁴ "The expression "the devil we know" was famously used by former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2005 when he explained to President George W. Bush why he opposed the US President's desire to topple Bashar al-Assad. President Bush became hostile to the Syrian President who supported the rebellion in Iraq against the US occupation and opened his borders to jihadi infiltrators and military equipment in support of the rebellion. While not enamored of the Syrian President, Sharon thought that from Israel's perspective it was preferable to have a familiar regime in Damascus rather than face an uncertain future and the prospect of the Muslim Brotherhood, the only organized opposition in Syria, taking over the country."

²⁰⁵ Tova Lazaroff, "Israel Offers Humanitarian Aid to Syrian People," *Jerusalem Post*, March 5, 2012. <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=26045>; Barak Ravid and Reuters, "Netanyahu: Israel 'Appalled' by Syria Massacre; Iran and Hezbollah Must Also Be Held Responsible". *Haaretz*, May, 2012. <https://www.haaretz.com/netanyahu-israel-appalled-by-syria-massacre-1.5163898>

²⁰⁶ Mitch Ginsburg, "Israel's interest: That Assad not be victorious", *Times of Israel*, 2013

Although the change in the conventional thinking regarding the maintenance of the left Ba'ath regime started to gain momentum much earlier in 2007 after a nuclear facility was found near Deir Al- Zour, which Israel had attacked applying its "Begin doctrine".²⁰⁷ However, at the war's initial stages Israel was still ambivalent whether it should publicize such policy since Assad's demise could give potential rise to Islamist regime antagonist to Israel next to the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.²⁰⁸

Despite Israeli concerns of Islamist rise, Israel has different interests in Syria than those of the US and other western countries. It was primarily concerned with the Iranian forces exert adjacent to its borders more than with the destabilizing regional influence of Sunni extremists. For Israel, the Sunni extremists main goal was undermining the "legitimacy" of secular Arab regimes and resisting the Shi'a regime in Iran more than waging a war against Israel. This formula of Iran and Assad's government being a mutual enemy for both Israel and Sunni extremists had many implications on Israel's early and wary position from the conflict. At the outset of the conflict, the Assad government wanted to link the opposition with Israel in order to prove that the civic uprising is a conspiracy staged by "enemies". In so, the rising opposition would be left embarrassed as well as Israel since it had adopted the early policy of non-intervention.

So as the war progressed, Israel preferred to stay impartial towards the various vexing policy dilemmas the war offered, warning all parties to refrain from challenging Israeli interests. Even on an international level, Israel non-steep leaning towards the Obama administration position in Syria was obvious as it was met with the risk of alienating Russia, a major Syrian ally that could retaliate Israeli interests simply within Syria (by Iran) or even in Russia.²⁰⁹ But the evolution of regional strategies of other powers had forced Israel to shift its impartial policy.

²⁰⁷ Israel's strategy of preemptively striking the nuclear facilities of its regional enemies.

²⁰⁸ Benedetta Berti, "Israel and the Arab Spring: Understanding Attitudes and Responses to the "New Middle East" *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 2013. P.130-146, p.135.

https://www.fpri.org/docs/chapters/201303.west_and_the_muslim_brotherhood_after_the_arab_spring.chapter8.pdf

²⁰⁹ Ariel (Eli) Levite, "An Israeli Perspective on Syria". *Carnegie endowment*. June 2014.

5.1.2 Policy of Cautious Intervention

Israel left its policy of non-intervention especially in light of the transformation that took place in Syrian battlefield with the Russian direct military intervention that has strengthened the influence of Iran and Hezbollah. Israel had opted for its “bystander” stance to a more proactive one. This Israeli proactive approach was indeed the result of losing the trump card of downing Assad, which could have had an effect in the first three years of the war. But had lost its effectiveness after Russia entered the war on the side of the regime, which impedes the freedom of the Israeli movement in Syria, especially the freedom of the Israeli destructive attacks against the Syrian government.

In late 2015, Netanyahu announced for the first time that Israel operates in Syria from “time to time” and he addressed Israel’s military coordination with Russia over Moscow’s involvement in the Syrian civil war.²¹⁰ The role of Israel in the Syrian war became a matter of curiosity for many observers especially after the assassination of several figures of Hezbollah and Iranian officers who were active in Syria. A major Hezbollah figure, Samir Kuntar was killed by an Israeli airstrike in December 2015 after he has been involved in fighting in Syria for two years.

Israel’s tone of policies in Syria after the Russian involvement not only exacerbated in targeting Iran and Hezbollah but also in providing military and humanitarian aid to rebels in Southern Syria. Prior to Russian intervention, Israel has provided limited humanitarian aid and limited medical assistance to over 5,000 Syrians in Israeli hospitals.²¹¹ Meanwhile, following the Russian intervention Israel intensified and publicized its humanitarian aid ²¹² including food supplies, receiving children and women for medical treatment in Israeli hospitals²¹³ and admitting injured rebels tandem Jordan’s refusal to admit the treatment of any of them.²¹⁴ Israel has been working

²¹⁰ Jack Moore, 2015. “Benjamin Netanyahu Admits That Israeli Forces Operate in Syria”. Newsweek.com

²¹¹ Nir Boms (2017) Israel’s Policy on the Syrian Civil War: Risks and Opportunities, Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs, 11:3, 323-336, DOI: [10.1080/23739770.2017.1430006](https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2017.1430006)

²¹² “Israel is courting Syrians Hearts and minds to keep Hezbollah away”, Washingtonpost, 2017.

²¹³ Exclusive documentation: Syrian children are transferred to Israel, *ynet.co.il*, September, 2016. 19. Accessible in Hebrew: <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4857142,00.html>

²¹⁴ Elizabeth Tsurkov, “Israel’s Deepening Involvement with Syria’s Rebels,” *War on the Rocks*, February 14, 2018. Accessible online: <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/israels-deepening-involvement-syrias-rebels/>

on Operation Good Neighbor which was launched in 2016 to provide this aid to Syrians.²¹⁵ The provision of aid required Israel to maintain contacts with civilian leadership on the Syrian border. Israel adopted a more aggressive policy in arming the rebels in 2017 when US- Russia's deal failed to satisfy Israel's interests in keeping Iranian militias 60 kilometers far from borders.²¹⁶ Israeli support came to an end by the closure of the "operation good neighbor" due to the Syrian regime control over many southern territories in June 2018.²¹⁷

Israeli policies are primarily connected to the support and understanding it gets from the United States. But the new emerging narrative of the United States retreat from the region has posed some challenges to Israel especially under Obama's administration. At the same time, this reality reinforces Netanyahu's much-preached doctrine that Israel must look after itself.²¹⁸ Unilateral Israeli attacks took place after Israel's recognition that it has failed to pressure the US into direct involvement in Syria. Thus, Israel decided to exploit the Russian understanding which has turned a blind eye to the Israeli attacks. Israel aspires to Russia's role in preventing Iran from establishing a large military infrastructure in Syria, and from its presence in south-western Syria. But with President Trump's rise to power, the US support for Israeli interests has increased, which made Israel moves without fear or hesitation in the region, while it makes sure that no breaches are made to deconfliction hotline with Russia.

The rise and fall of the Islamic state had strategic ramifications on the whole region. At the time when ISIS had expanded its control over Syrian territories, Israel had reconsidered its interest in the fragmentation of Syria. First, The mounting successes of ISIS would be faced by an increase cooperation between the United States, Iran, and Assad, and possibly also Turkey and Saudi Arabia, in the campaign against the Islamic State, especially after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action reached in 2015. With the success of the campaign, Israel's fear was that Iran and

²¹⁵ "Operation Good Neighbor: Israel reveals its massive humanitarian aid to Syria", *The Times of Israel*, 19 July 2017

²¹⁶ Op.cit Tsurkov (2018).

²¹⁷ As war nears end, IDF shuts 'Good Neighbor' Syrian aid program, *The Times of Israel*, 13 September 2018

²¹⁸ Cathrine Moe Thorleifsson, "A Fragile Cold Peace: the Impact of the Syrian Conflict on Israeli-Syrian Relations", NOREF, December 2013

Hezbollah would gain what ISIS had lost and develop their capabilities in the northern Golan.²¹⁹ Second, If it happened and ISIS managed to come in power, Israel was concerned that it would have ambitions to attack Israel in the long term. So the defeat of ISIS was neither a preference nor an ultimate goal. The emergence of ISIS and the critical shift in the fate of Assad and his allies was seen by some as an advantage.

In 2018 annual assessment of the Institute for National Security Studies, provided to the Israeli president Reuven Rivlin, reported a potential northern war with three main forces: Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria were ranked as first threat. The second threat is the risk of a military confrontation with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The danger of the Islamic State came in the third and last place despite its defeat.²²⁰ Interestingly enough a third-place threat for Israel might turn an ally. Israeli intelligence report by Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center was leaked stating that the interests of Israel and the Islamic state may meet temporarily in Syria, due to the importance of Iran confronting both of them, which might suggest an alliance between the two parties.²²¹

5.2. Israeli motivations for its Syrian Intervention:

5.2.1 A blow for the “Axis of Resistance”

The Syrian-Iranian alliance, that has begun in the 1980's and share an ideology of anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, and support of Palestinian paramilitary groups, has long been a major threat to Israel. The only way toward a Syrian-Iranian break is a dramatic change in either the country's regime.²²² This hope was far-fetched especially with Bashar's revival of Syrian partnership with Iran and its militancy toward Israel. In addition, Bashar's support for Hamas,

²¹⁹ Yossi Kuperwasser, “The Disintegration of Syria and Its Impact on Israel,” *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, August, 2015.

²²⁰ <https://www.inss.org.il>.

²²¹ Yonah Jeremy Bob, “Report: Israel, ISIS interests aligned against Iran,” *Jerusalem Post*, November, 2017; <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Report-ISIS-Israel-temporary-allies-against-Iran-515358>

²²² Jonathan Gilbert, “The Iran-Syria Axis: A critical investigation”, p.36-42, *Stanford Journal of International Relations*, 2010, p.36-42, p.41.

Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah in their stance against Israel. Therefore, despite these complex realities and the absence of a peace treaty and deteriorating relations and clashes between Israeli and Syrian forces in Lebanese war, Bahsar had maintained quiet borders with Israel since 1974. This all had played a role in the dual Israeli position from the Syrian President during the wave of instability that has crushed the country. As stated earlier, Israel was motivated that the eruption of Syrian war would result in regime change and thus a Syrian-Iranian break of alliance would follow. Its goal of weakening its enemies grew parallel with its aims of cultivating strategic alliance with Sunni Neighbouring countries.²²³ Israel finds itself totally isolated and its ability to influence change is limited, while the Syrian war was seen as a pretext that would allow Israel to engage with Sunni states in the region, and build deeper ties actors within Syria.

In the same context, the division of Palestinian political forces over the situation in Syria has played an influential role in determining how Israel perceive changes in Syria, especially with the former existence of the political leadership of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and some other Palestinian factions in Damascus. With the eruption of the sectarian war, the Islamic Jihad movement avoided engaging in political polarization over the Syrian conflict, and has managed to maintain a positive relationship with the Syrian government. While Hamas movement tried to combine its ideological affiliation with the “Muslim Brotherhood” and its affiliation with the “Axis of Resistance”, but it did not succeed in that.²²⁴ By the end of 2012, the movement had broken off its long-standing alliance with the Syrian government, declared bias towards the Syrian opposition, the “soft exit” of the former politburo chief Khaled Meshal from Damascus and his refusal to support the Syrian government in public.²²⁵

Hamas’ shift was perceived with much hope within Israel, as the strategic partnership between Hamas and Syria which was based on a common enmity toward Israel would come to an end. For Israel, Hamas’ exit would constitute a blow to the Resistance Axis, as Hamas’ drift away has posed a serious challenge to the axis regional influence, by stripping the axis from its symbolic

²²³ Cathrine Moe Thorleifsson, “A Fragile Cold Peace: the Impact of the Syrian Conflict on Israeli-Syrian Relations”, NOREF, December 2013

²²⁴ Deeb, Raja, “The Palestinians in Syria: A Renewed *Nakba* in the Shadow of the Syrian Crisis, *Badil Resource Center*, 2014. (*Arabic source*)

²²⁵ Valentina Napolitano, Hamas and the Syrian Uprising: A Difficult Choice, *Middle East Policy*, September, 2013

panIslamic image and in turn triggering a sectarian regional conflict.²²⁶ The Sunni-Shia division became palpable when the movement reinforced its partnership with the Sunni camp composed of Qatar, Egypt (under Morsi) and Turkey that played an essential role in supporting Hamas economically and politically, at the same time they have convinced Hamas to soften its militant stance against Israel.²²⁷ At that time, Hamas did not hasten to repair relations with the “resistance or refusal axis”.²²⁸ But later Hamas felt isolated by the Sunni camp as it lost the bet on the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the explosion of the Gulf-Arab dispute with Qatar, and the great pressure exerted on Qatar to comply with the conditions imposed on it, including stopping the support of Hamas and working to remove its officials from Doha. In so, Hamas has lost one of its last regional supporters after already being estranged from the resistance. With the mounting pressures on the movement, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu found it the best opportunity to deliver a final blow to Hamas by a massive war on Gaza in July 2014.²²⁹

This time, Hamas was looking forward to mending relations with Tehran sooner than later. Following the war on Gaza, Ahmed Yousef, Haniyeh’s former top advisor, issued an article emphasizing the strategic relationship with Tehran. He further said that Khalid Meshaal should be heading to Tehran soon to meet with top Iranian leaders.²³⁰ In 2017, Hamas senior leaders visited Iran for the first time after a long time of deteriorated relations, the visit came as a step to show that relations with Tehran have fully recovered. Although Iran was cautious in dealing with Hamas yet Tehran resumed financial support for the organization and was keen to maintain relations with it.

The resumption of ties between Hamas and Iran was disappointing for Israel, the Iranian support for Hamas has definitely come with a series of threats to Israeli security. As Hamas intensifies its logistical and security cooperation with Hezbollah, it would complement the ring that Iran seeks to impose on Israel, which extends along the Lebanese and Syrian borders. In so, Hamas will

²²⁶ Harel Chorev, Hamas and the Crisis within the Resistance Axis, *The Moshe Dayan Center*, May 26, 2013

²²⁷ Bilal Saab, "A New Hamas in the Making?" *National Interest*, December 20, 2011, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/new-hamas-the-making-6272?page=s...>

²²⁸ Erik Mohns and André Bank, "Syrian Revolt Fallout: End of Resistance Axis?" *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 3 (2012): 25-35.

²²⁹ Ramzi Baroud, "Mending 'axis of resistance': Hamas goes back to square one", *Middle East Eye*, February 13, 2015

²³⁰ Ahmed Yousef "Iran, Hamas and the Palestinian Issue", *Alwatanvoice*, January 10, 2015. (Arabic source) <https://pulpit.alwatanvoice.com/articles/2015/01/10/353651.html>

compel Israel to disperse its military forces and distribute them on several fronts. Not long after, Hamas has sought rapprochement with the Syrian government via Iran.²³¹

5.2.2. Geopolitical concerns

Besides, Israel is motivated to strengthen its position in the Golan Heights, this tenaciousness became more eminent with the eruption of the Syrian war. The Golan is a fertile region with water resources and is a potential oil resource.²³² Beside its natural resources, the Golan's strategic position is significant to Israel's complex geostrategic position which has made its presence in the Golan a matter of necessity increasingly emphasized under Benjamin Netanyahu's rule, where any withdrawal from the Plateau was not on the political agenda. Unlike Shimon Peres who argued that in the missile era defensible barrier and topographical advantages are of decreasing value.²³³ Peres vision carries some weight in Israel, but the right Likud gives special weight to the topographical superiority in Golan. The Golan heights eastern line, the one that approaches to Damascus(60 kilometers), has defensive advantages than no any other line in the plateau can confer, and Israel's control over the Golan enhances the safety of the strategic Haifa bay area on the mediteranen coast and Israel's surveillance capabilities deep into Syrian territory from Mount Hermon in Northern Golan.²³⁴ The deterrence value the Golan provides, had a stabilizing effect in the region that current Israeli officials can by no means accept any change in the rules of the game there, and if any; aggression is the alternative.

5.2.3 Decline in the Israeli-Palestinian question

With the exacerbated violence of the Syrian war and the dehumanization of the Syrian people , the world's attention largely turned away from the Israel-Palestine.²³⁵ And we witnessed a large

²³¹ Ahmad Abu Amer, "Hamas leadership seeks to restore ties with Syria", *Al-Monitor*, April 3, 2019
Read more: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/hamas-support-syria-golan-heights-relations-assad.html#ixzz6HnSYWOk8>

²³² Toi Staff, "Major oil reserve said found on Golan", *The Times of Israel*, October 7, 2015.

²³³ Shimon Peres with Arye Naor, *The New Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 77-78.

²³⁴ Efraim Inbar, "Israel's Presence on the Golan Heights: A Strategic Necessity", *Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security*, May,2019, <https://jiss.org.il/en/inbar-israels-presence-on-the-golan-heights-a-strategic-necessity/>.

²³⁵ François-Xavier Plasse-Couture, "Effective abandonment: The neoliberal economy of violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories", *Security Dialogue*, Oct2014, Vol. 44 Issue 5/6, p449-466.

scale of violence and an expansion of settlements planning in the West Bank and East Jerusalem of almost 10,000 housing units advanced for construction by Israel in the period between 1 November 2016 to 31 October 2017.²³⁶ Israeli violations had gone without condemnation and Palestinian movements had been weakened in the course of events in the Middle East. Fatah movement has been weakened by the preoccupation of its traditional allies (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan) who have come closer to Israel in secret and publicly to normalize relations with it. Rapprochement with Israel was that time apart from reaching a just solution to the Palestinian cause but under the pretext of confronting Iran as a common adversary.

Furthermore, the Syrian war has recontextualized the Arab-Israeli conflict.²³⁷ Although, the rhetoric of resistance against Israel has not lost its momentum among the Arab societies but many Arab governments, especially Gulf countries have been keen seeking rapprochement with Israel, in an exploitative measure to the failure of the “Axis of resistance” in stabilizing the region.

5.3 Shift in Visions

Israel’s motivations had been evolving to fit the development in the regional Syrian dimension. Larry Hanauer, in his study conducted in 2015, had stated five Israeli objectives from the Syrian conflict: Containing Iran and preventing Iranian transfers of weapons to Hezbollah, minimizing Russian Political and Military influence, promote a weak Assad Regime, delegitimizing Syrian claims to the Golan Heights, and constraining Sunni militants but not necessarily ISIS.²³⁸ However, Israel has retained some of its objectives yet reassessed some others, in particular those related to minimizing Russian influence and the weakening of Syrian government.

²³⁶ Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. A/HRC/37/43.

²³⁷ Hadeel Ouies, “How the Syrian War Shifted Attitudes Towards Arab–Israeli Rapprochement”, *Washingtoninstitute*, October 4, 2019.

²³⁸ Larry Hanauer, “Israel’s interests and options in Syria”, *Rand Cooperation*, 2015.

First, the initial Russian involvement had posed some obstacles to Israel, as Israel does not necessarily view Russian interests in the region as matching with its own. Russia's commitment to save the Syrian government backed by Iran and Hezbollah and the transfer of Russian weapons from the Syrian regime to its allies comes at the expense of Israel's security. Furthermore, the presence of Russian forces had posed limitations to Israel's freedom of action and triggered the possibility of mishaps between Russian and Israeli aircrafts. Later on, the mounting role Russia has played in Syria had forced Israel to cooperate with Russia rather see Russia as hindrance to its actions in Syria. Netanyahu's hurried visit to Moscow following the Russian intervention concludes Israeli strive for Russian recognition of Israel's interests and for enhancing operational coordination between the nations and preventing friction and erroneous assessments.²³⁹

Second, keeping on the Assad "the devil we know" was met with another dilemma of "weakening the regime". The Israeli interest in undermining Syrian regime and its legitimacy over its claims to the Golan Heights was paradoxical with the rise of the "an unknown commodity" which was in that case the radical Islamism (another threat to Israel). Simultaneously the victory of Assad would strengthen the "Shiite axis of evil" (Iran, Hezbollah).

In general, Israel sought to ensure the weakness of the Assad regime without promoting its collapse. Therefore, maintaining the "old situation" was the best option for Israel, in which the Assad regime survived in Damascus but had limited influence in other parts of the country. In so, the arrival of any hardline Sunni party to the reins of government in Syria would be prevented, and Iran's actions would be limited which guarantees the security of Israel in the foreseeable future.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Dekel, Udi, and Zvi Magen, "Russian Involvement in Syria: What Has Changed, and the Significance for Israel," *Institute for National Security Studies*, Insight 752, October 7, 2015. As of December 14, 2015: <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=10699>

²⁴⁰ Op.cit, Larry Hanauer, 2015

5.4. Israeli Strategies over Syria

Campaign Between Wars (CBW)

In its broader military strategy Israel continues to operate under the ancient adage “If you want peace, prepare for war.” And recently Israel has waged “Campaign Between Wars” by focusing on Syrian territory. Campaign Between Wars (CBW) strives for proactive and offensive action based on extremely high-quality intelligence and clandestine efforts, all with the aim of defending Israel’s security interests without engaging in high intensity warfare. Israel’s longstanding air campaign in Syria is a demonstration of the CBW, and it is carried against what Israel considers the most destabilizing actors in Syria (Iran and its proxies).²⁴¹

Campaign Between Wars is not a new IDF military doctrine. Former IDF General Gershon Hacoen considers that the strategy dates back to 1964, that is, three years before the war with Syria in 1967.²⁴² He adds that “CBW has been applied in current events in Syria aiming at: 1) preventing the buildup of a terrorist front on the Golan Heights; 2) preventing Tehran’s military entrenchment in Syria; and 3) preventing the acquisition of long-range precision missiles/rockets by Hezbollah and other Iranian-propped militias”.²⁴³ However, Israel has adopted different strategy with the opposition groups that included military, financial and humanitarian aids, yet was not consistent. Therefore, this following part would shed light on the Israeli strategies with Iran and its proxies, rebel groups, ISIS and the Kurds based on its articulated redlines, its future vision and strategic interests.

Israeli Redlines

Israeli security chiefs have been the most followers of the Syrian war front, collecting intelligence while keeping low public profiles, as seeking neither to be seen as the instigator of a

²⁴¹ Gadi Eisenkot, Gabi Siboni, “The Campaign Between Wars: How Israel Rethought Its Strategy to Counter Iran’s Malign Regional Influence”, *The Washington Institute*, September 4, 2019.

²⁴² Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoen, “Rethinking Israel’s Syria Campaign”, *BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,074*, January 27, 2019.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

US strike, nor as provoking a Syrian response.²⁴⁴ Israeli strategies are linked to its redlines vis-à-vis Syria. Israel considers the establishment of any base or any permanent stay in Syria as a red line, and this has been the most present engine in Israeli moves. Disturbing the Iranian military presence and its allies in Syria and trying to prevent them from establishing permanent military bases, especially in the border areas. As Israel fears that those bases would strengthen their position in future wars, and turn them into a new frontline in northern Israel as is the case in southern Lebanon.

Regarding the operational measures Israel is targeting Hezbollah members and undermining the transfer of weapons to them. The Israeli military has always relied on the airspace to settle military confrontations with its opponents in the region, and since 2011, air strikes targeting Syrian installations, Hezbollah forces, and Iranian bases have increased yet in a defensive manner. At early stages of the Syrian war the pressured Syrian government and its allies were too occupied by the civil war to open a new front against Israel. So Israeli attacks in Syria were not on a daily basis, and Israel took no credit for them. But that manner has changed especially with the post ISIS defeat and the reconrol of large swathes by Syrian army. By late 2017 to early 2018, Israel feared the presence of Iranainan troops in southern Syria, given the fact that they are embedded within the Syrian army, and thus Israel had adopted a more offensive manner and greater frequency in striking the Iranian targets.²⁴⁵

In addition, Israel had increased the frequency of its military and humanitarian supplies to some rebel groups in Southwestern Syria. Publicizing the latter while keeping the former a covert.²⁴⁶ Israel has established communication channels with some Syrian armed groups to preserve geopolitical interests as perpetuating the conflict in Syria, and incurring the axis of Iran - Syria - Hezbollah, military and economic losses; especially since Israel does not see some Syrian opposition groups as a threat to it in the short term. But with the Syrian army controlling most of the border strip with the occupied Golan Heights, and the entire border with the Jordanian side, it

²⁴⁴ Mitch Ginsburg, "Israel's interest: That Assad not be victorious", *Times of Israel*, 2013

²⁴⁵ Elizabeth Tsurkov, "Israeli Policy Toward Syria 2011 - 2019", *Center for Middle East Studies*, June, 2019.p.1-11. (p.8), Accessible online:

https://www.du.edu/korbel/middleeast/media/documents/tsurkov_occasional_paper_2019.pdf

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

appeared that Israel has lost the ability to communicate with the Syrian opposition in southern Syria; leaving the rebel groups feeling betrayed.²⁴⁷

While with the Islamic State Israel had dealt a bit differently in curbing it, low operational but high diplomatic profile as it cooperated with the international coalition to defeat ISIS by providing information about the locations and the movement of the group. It can be said that Israel did not scheme a direct military strategy against the Islamic State, as it did not prioritize a soon scenario of ISIS's defeat. First, ISIS affiliates did not conduct a single attack on Israel,²⁴⁸ Secondly, the decline of ISIS was a favourable scenario for Iran to prolong its interests in Syria.²⁴⁹

Indeed, Israel has been very concerned about the development of a partial alignment of interests between the United States and Iran due to the struggle against the Islamic State.²⁵⁰ Therefore, among the swift rise of ISIS, Israel has kept close eye on Iranian weaponization to Hezbollah and carried direct killings of Hezbollah and Iranian figures including the prominent Hezbollah member Jihad Mughniyah, along with IRGC Colonel Ali Reza Tabatabai in an area close to the borders.

However, Israel had come closer to Syrian kurds as they both shared a common interest in defeating ISIS. From 2014 and onwards, the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party-PYD) and its armed wing (YPG) emerged as the only regional sub-state actor in torn-Syria to encounter the Islamic state. The PYD/YPG proved to be a deterrant against dangerous anti-Israeli forces emanating from both Sunni and Shi'a Islamist radicals in Syria.²⁵¹ Kurds' prowess in fighting IS has pushed many Israeli politicians to advocate the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. Furthermore, Israel has supported Syrian Kurds with humanitarian aid and gathered intelligence from them,²⁵² yet was uneasy about PYD\YPG links to Iran and its

²⁴⁷ Tsurkov, "Inside Israel's Secret Program to Back Syrian Rebels". *Foreign policy*, September 6, 2018.

²⁴⁸ Graham Allison. "Why ISIS Fears Israel." *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*. August 8, 2016.

²⁴⁹ Meir Litvak, Emily B. Landau, and Ephraim Kam, "Iran in a Changing Strategic Environment". *INSS*, February 2018.

²⁵⁰ Itamar Rabinovich, "Israel and the Changing Middle East", *Brookings*, January, 2015, p1-11, p.10

²⁵¹ Ofra Bengio, "Israel and the Kurds: Love by Proxy", *The American Interest*, 18 March, 2016.

²⁵² Ibid.

dubious relationship with the Syrian government.²⁵³ Rauf Baker, in his paper published by BESA center, argues that Syrian Kurds are the most qualified candidate that Israel can rely on in confronting Iran's penetration. He also added that Beside the strategic, political and security benefits of strengthening relationship with Syrian Kurds, Israel can benefit in economic terms by investing in energy projects such as launching an oil pipeline through Jordan to Israel.²⁵⁴

In the past five years Israel claims to have conducted close to 100 air raids in Syria, using fourth generation aircraft such as the F-16 and F-15.²⁵⁵ In early 2019 the departing Israeli chief of staff even claimed to have hit "thousands" of targets since early 2017, dropping more than 2000 bombs in 2018 alone.²⁵⁶ Israel came to understand that Iran's project to 'Lebanonize' Syria is becoming a fait accompli, and its ability to alter the existing reality was dependent on leveraging its ties with Russia to restrain the Shiite Axis but neither Israel was able to convince Russia nor Russia was fully able to understand Israel's security needs. Since 2017 Israel followed a more aggressive policy towards Iranian bases and weaponry shipments and it even opposed the cease-fire agreement reached by US and Russia to establish "de-escalation zones" in southwest Syria in July 2017 as it enables Iran presence in the region.²⁵⁷ By early 2018, escalation between Iran and Israel had been witnessed on a daily basis to include Israeli airstrikes at Iranian UAV facilities, at the T-4 Air Base, and the first Iranian attempt to stage an armed drone attack in Israel. Furthermore, Netanyahu carried a threat to hit the Syrian Regime if it allowed more Iranian military plethora on Syrian soil. But Israel still preserves a high coordination level with Russia, in hope to achieve full withdrawal of Iran from Syria, which was seen, impossible in the short run.²⁵⁸

²⁵³ Özden Zeynep Oktav et.al, "Violent Non-state Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases", *Springer*, 2017, p.(1-233), p.84.

²⁵⁴ Rauf Baker, "The Syrian Kurds: Israel's Forgotten Ally", *BESA Center*, October 14, 2017.

²⁵⁵ Amos Harel, "Israel struck Syrian and Hezbollah arms convoys nearly 100 times in five years, top general says", *Haaretz*, 17 August, 2018

²⁵⁶ Bret Stephens, "The Man Who Humbled Qassim Suleimani: An interview with Lt.Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, Israel's chief of staff", *New York Times*, 11 January, 2019

²⁵⁷ "Netanyahu: Israel Opposes Cease-fire Deal Reached by U.S. and Russia in Southern Syria". *Haaretz*, 17 July 2017.

²⁵⁸ "Will Russia force Iran out of Syria?", *Al-Jazeera*, 29 Aug 2018.

Israeli vision of future Syria

Beside the scope of its security red lines, Israel's strategies in Syria could be driven from its vision of future Syria. The best future settlement scenario in Syria that serves Israeli interests, was referred to in one of the memorandums published by Israeli Institute for National Security Studies(INSS); is "hybrid political order" based on weak central Alawite rule and strong local centers of power with the dependency of the local forces on the regional and international patrons involved. So a scenario of reversion to the status quo ante in Syria is not within the options that formulates the Israeli policy, but a scenario in which Syria is divided into sectoral and religious enclaves, an Alawitestan, a Kurdistan, a Sunnistan, a Shiastan, and a Druzistan existing alongside the dominance of Iran and its proxies.²⁵⁹ Moreover, the memorandum argues that there are three components of power that Israel can apply to promote its interests over future Syria: cooperative relations with internal and external actors operating in Syria, use of hard power, and the use of soft power.

Israel has already applied many of the various powers it possessed. Hard power components at Israel's disposal are direct military action against military targets, action against advanced weaponry stockpiles of Syrian army that could be transferred to Hezbollah or Shiite militias, tipping the military balance of power by supporting various factions not necessarily Israeli allies but "the adversaries of Israel's enemies", the declaration of a no-fly zone in the Golan Heights and southern Syria, prevention of the deployment of forces of the Iranian Shiite axis in the Golan, and cooperation with Jordan in establishing a special security zone in southern Syria and the Golan Heights. The memo proposed other hard tools like cyber warfare against the radical axis and impairing the channels of aid and support supplied by patron states to the radical elements operating in Syria.²⁶⁰ While soft power tools include humanitarian aid to Syrians, establishment of "safe zones", help imposing international sanctions on the Syrian regime and on its economic patrons particularly Iran, and cooperation with buffering forces whether state or local actors to mediate with Sunni radicalists not to take action against Israel.

²⁵⁹ Carmit Valensi, Udi Dekel, and Anat Kurz, "Syria – From a State to a Hybrid System: Implications for Israel", *Institute for National Security Studies*, January, 2018. P.7-73, p.51

²⁶⁰ *Ibid* (Carmit Valensi, Udi Dekel, and Anat Kurz), p. 56-57

Strategic Interests

Israel's strategy over the Golan became more intensified with the eruption of the Syrian war more than any time before on both operational and diplomatic level; any spillover could have disastrous effects on the fate of Golan and on Israeli national security objectives. Netanyahu has always asserted the Israeli strategic depth of the Golan until recently with his statement of "just imagine what would have happened if Israel weren't present on the Golan"²⁶¹ and earlier when he articulated that any threat to the Golan would be a violation to Israeli red lines and that Israel will not allow Hezbollah or any backed Iranian groups to turn the plateau into a "terror front". On operational level, Israel has attacked pro-Syrian government military positions there and enhanced the physical infrastructure of the border; invested in a new border fence, deployed artillery forces and other means of electronic surveillance, and created a new Combat Intelligence Collection Battalion.²⁶² On the diplomatic level, Israel negotiated with Russia and the US over the status quo of the Golan, Russia promised pushing Iranian forces over 80 kilometers from south western borders while Israel asked for a full withdrawal of Iranian from Syria. While Trump administration appeared to be audacious in framing the Israeli interests, especially with its recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan on March 25, 2019 in a dramatic shift from decades of U.S. policy.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Noa Landau, How Secret Netanyahu-Assad Backchannel Gave Way to Israeli Demand for Recognition of Golan Sovereignty. <https://www.haaretz.com>, Mar 22, 2019

²⁶² Jonathan Spyer, How Israel Navigated through the Hurricane of the Syrian Civil War. *TheTower.org*. March 2016.

²⁶³ Steve Holland, Jeff Mason, "Trump recognizes Golan Heights as Israeli, boosting Netanyahu and angering Syria," *Reuters*, March 25, 2019.

CHAPTER VI: THE STATE OF BILATERAL RELATIONS AND THE CRISIS IN SYRIA

The rising role of Russia in the international arena and its role in the Syrian crisis has forced it to deal with the multiple actors involved in the war, especially in light of its foreign policy that has been characterized by flexibility, vigor and selectivity for its goals. But its relationship with Israel over Syria is the one with “the most intimacy”.²⁶⁴ Proceeding from this point, this chapter will shed light on the Israeli and Russian interests of cooperation and the factors that ensure the convergence of their policies in Syria and some of the international regional issues.

The Syrian conflict came to constitute the possibility of a rapprochement between the two countries in line with their common interests. Russia’s interests have been served with its aspiration for an influential regional and international position that has shifted the course of the Syrian war. While some of Israel’s interests have overlapped the Russian interests and thus has enabled their rapprochement in Syria, The manner of rapprochement has been emphasized and cooperation has been intensified with the Russian military intervention in September 2015, reflected by making concessions, avoiding criticism, frequent visits of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Russia, described by the Russian media as “intense”, the visit of the Russian President Putin and high-level officials to Israel. Thus, their convergence has been translated into scoring goals in their national domains and support of their political regional views.

Although, mistrust has persisted to frame their relations within their common ground of understandings. Yet, their alignment in Syria has been interrupted by serious misunderstandings and escalations, which has not evolved into a real crisis. In the erupted escalation, Russia and Israel managed to reach *modus vivendi*, as neither side wanted to cause a serious bilateral crisis.

²⁶⁴ “Israel and Russia in delicate balancing act over Syrian war”, *Financial times*, April, 2018, Accessed on: <https://www.ft.com/content/115bd4fa-4256-11e8-93cf-67ac3a6482fd>

Russia is highly committed to contain whatever happens inside the Syrian arena within Syria. However, that has not avoided Moscow from issuing warnings and political intimidation towards Israel, yet, it turned out that Moscow's intimidation policy carried "commitment" messages to the Syrian and Russian audiences rather than "threats" towards Israel. Over all their differences of views as regards Syria ranged from their different stances towards actors in Syria, Russia's military reinforcements to Syria and its allies, Israel's hyperactivity and the time when both sides were not acting within the rules of their engagement.

6.1 International and regional Incentives for Cooperation

The fertile regional and international environment played an eminent role in building a rapprochement between Moscow and Tel Aviv, which has gone beyond Syria. This section will address some of the important International and regional incentives that could have paved the way for greater cooperation in Syria. Those are mainly related to Russia's new Middle East policy and the retreat of the United States from the region.

Israel recognized the rising Russian influence in the Middle East believing its goals within the Syrian arena or elsewhere will only be reached by holding good relations with Russia, who acts as Global Player and policy designer. Other Israeli need for Russia stems from the decline in the American "pivot" role and the incompatibility that arose between Israel and the Obama administration. Furthermore, Israel has been interested in cultivating relations with powers that have leverage over its adversaries,²⁶⁵ so Russia would be in that case Israel's only address to keep the Iranian presence away from Southern Syria without committing itself to an extensive warfare in the area.

For Russia, its survival in advocating a central role in Syria is contingent on coordination with Israel. First, Israel through its alliance with the United States plays a significant role in determining security in the region and thus cooperation with Israel guarantees the safety of Russian positions in Syria. Second, Israel eases the western stance from the Russian international

²⁶⁵ Lasenky, Shapir, "Avoiding Zero-Sum: Israel and Russia in an Evolving Middle East", *Atlantic Council*, The MENA Region: A great power competition, PP. 141-157, Chapter no.09, p. 153.

violations in Ukrainian war and its annexation of Crimea. Additionally, Russia has taken advantage of the declining American role in the Middle East and its defiance to Israel's demands. Lastly, the cultural and economic ties between Russia and Israel form a solid ground for high levels of cooperation on the Syrian dossier.²⁶⁶

6.2 Areas of Convergence over Syria

Despite their different foreign policy motivations, Russia and Israel have some overlapping motivations and strategies in Syria. This section will address three areas of their overlapping motivations of intervention in Syria that facilitated their “marriage of convenience” and convergence of interests. The Russian-Israeli relationship is driven by pragmatism, in which the two parties try to find a middle ground of interests and put their disagreements and strategic affiliations aside and engage in what is called a “boxing strategy”. They are neither allies nor enemies but they both need each other. Israel, seemingly, recognizes that Russia is neither an enemy nor an ally. Michael Oren, a former Israeli ambassador to the US told Times of Israel: *“It’s useless for us to pretend that Russia is going to be an ally, but we don’t have to make them enemies either. We can reach a modus vivendi with them.”*²⁶⁷

6.2.1. Overlapping Motivations

First overlapping area of motivation is coordinating engagement with Sunni states, Russia and Israel found the Syrian war as an opportunity to cultivate relations with regional states (Turkey, Saudi Arabia). For Russia, although Saudi Arabia was the main driving force behind the intensified campaign to destroy Assad’s government, Putin wanted to build understanding on the assumption of their common interest of “containing the so-called Baghdadi “Caliphate”. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is a key player in oil production and the recent low prices level, which

²⁶⁶ Nikolay Kozhanov, “Russia's difficult balancing act between Iran and Israel”, *Al-jazeera*, Feb 1, 2020.

²⁶⁷ Raphael Ahren, “As US withdraws, Jerusalem spooked by Moscow’s growing control over Middle East”, *Times of Israel*, October 18, 2019

carries certain threats to Russia's own economy. While for Israel, engaging with Sunni states is important for its regional isolation particularly during the critical time the region is going through. For instance, Saudi Arabia's policy of severe hostility to Iran facilitated the way for bolstering the Israeli-Saudi undeclared alliance.²⁶⁸ Israel's Chief of Staff, General Gadi Eisenkot made an interview with Saudi newspaper "Elaph", where he showed support for Saudi claims not only against Iran but also against Hezbollah, he further said that Israel is ready to exchange intelligence with the Kingdom to confront Iran.²⁶⁹ However Ofir Haivry, an Israeli political philosopher, argued that close relations with the Saudi Kingdom at the moment will cost Israel painful concessions either in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement or in the permanent settlement in Syria.²⁷⁰

Another regional power that both Russia and Israel want to build rapprochement with was Turkey. So, before Israel's public intervention in Syria, Israel decided to settle its dispute with Ankara after tense relations on the background of the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010. The importance of resuming relations with Ankara, in light of the developments in Syria, lies in the direct impact it has on the issue of avoiding confrontation between the Israeli and Turkish air forces during carried Israeli airstrikes on Iranian positions and on arms shipments to Hezbollah. On the other hand, it can be said that the Turkish side wanted to resume relations with the Israeli side so that it devotes itself for the Syrian dossier in general and the Kurdish issue in particular. So, although some coordination with Turkey took place, yet Israel's influence on opposition forces in northern Syria was limited in both military and humanitarian assistance. For instance, following a chemical weapon attack in the town of Khan Kheikhoun in 2017, Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz put forth a proposal to bring Syrian children for treatment in Israel. But Avigdor Liberman and the security establishment refused the proposal due to the difficulty of having to coordinate it with Turkey.²⁷¹

Similarly, Russia needed peace to achieve its interests in Syria and thus engaging with Turkey was important. Yet, the Russian intervention was perceived with criticism by the Turkish

²⁶⁸ Oded granot, "An unofficial Alliance", *Israel Hayom*, November 17, 2017.

²⁶⁹ Ron ben-Yishai, "The strategic interests behind Eisenkot's Saudi interview", *Yediot Aharonot*, November 19, 2017.

²⁷⁰ Ofir Haivry, "A Saudi house of cards' ", *Israel Hayom*, November 23, 2017.

²⁷¹ "Israel weighs treating Syrian kids hurt in gas attack", *The times of Israel*, April 9, 2017

President, as Ankara considered it an attempt to weaken its influence in the Syrian dossier through supporting PYD's ambitions and increase the security and humanitarian threats on Turkey's behalf. Following the downing of the Russia plane in November 2015, the pendulum of Russian-Turkish relations swung back. However, a boost in relations was witnessed after the coup attempt, which put Turkey at risk of regional and international isolation and thus forced Turkey to start normalization process with Russia. Russia welcomed the new Turkish policy as it too needs Turkey to achieve political gains on ground as any intervention by Turkey in the Kurdish regions of Syria can delay the pacification process which is not in the Russian interest. Moreover, Moscow wants to balance Iran's expansion in Syria through Turkey. In so, Russia engaged Turkey as a main guarantor in the Astana Talks and in the set up of "de-escalation" zones. Hence, it can be said that the convergence of Israeli-Russian interest in establishing strong ties and not hostilities with the regional actors involved in Syria; have a profound impact on the rapprochement between them.

Second, having different stances from regime change in Syria, Russia and Israel shared certain fears about democratic transition in Syria as they agreed on the vision that maintaining stability in the region would be through the existence of authoritarian and undemocratic regimes. For Russia, a democratic transition in Syria held the possibility of the Islamic movement to be transmitted to Central Asian republics, while Israeli concerns were due to the possibility of dealing with an "Islamic" hostile regime close to the borders. So the area of "countering terrorism" represented one of the primary areas of bilateral rapprochement, Putin indicated in joint conference that "Israel knows only too well what it means and it is fighting against terrorism. In this sense, we are unconditional allies."²⁷² Netanyahu also praised the Russian contribution of fighting the radical Sunni Islamist movements led by ISIS and Al Qaeda.²⁷³

Beside being alarmed by the security implications of the rising Islamism, the "Iranian expansion" in Syria constitutes another common threat. Russia's Alliance with Iran and Hezbollah in Syria might have positioned it at the opposite corner from Israel. But that seems not to be the case, considering the fact that Russia does not perceive having good relations with Iran and Israel as

²⁷² "Russia-Israel unconditional allies in the war against terror: Russian President Vladimir Putin", *Newscast-Pratyaksha*, June 19, 2016.

²⁷³ David Rosenberg, "Russia and Israel are partners in war on Islamic terror", *Arutzsheva*, March 9, 2017.

antithetical and given the Russian policy of viewing all actors as crucial interlocutors. Russian close coordination and primary goals alignment with Iran in Syria does not imply that their interests really cohere.²⁷⁴ This Incoherence of interests between Russia and its allies, has paved the way for Israel to navigate through opportunities of cooperation with Russia that would serve Israel's long-term interests. But Again, cooperation with Israel does not imply that their interests in Syria are identical but are synchronic.²⁷⁵

So, contrary to Israeli concerns regarding the Iranian threat to Israeli national security, Russian concerns from Iranian expansionist policies are related to their effect on the Russian central role in Syria. Yet, Russia shares with Israel the fear of Syria turning into Iranian vassal which Mark Galeotti considers one of the main drivers behind the Russian intervention²⁷⁶. Although, Iran has played an influential role in rescuing the Assad government and in curbing radical Islamism which are shared interests with the Russians. However, this formula of “zero-sum interest “has engaged Moscow and Tehran in competition over the degree of influence in the decision-making process of the Syrian policy.²⁷⁷

Third objective is related to their own common regional policies rather than their common regional threats. Israel and Russia found the outbreak of hostilities in Syria an opportunity to turn attention from failures of their own regional policies. The Israeli leadership saw the prolonged Syrian conflict a useful tool to divert the attention of Arab, Islamic and international public opinion away from the Palestinian issue especially with the international solidarity the Palestinian case got during the Israeli war on Gaza in 2008 -2009. Therefore, the Syrian conflict dwarfed the Palestinian issue, as before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict the Palestinian issue was of central importance to world public opinion, and with the outbreak of the conflict and the intertwining of regional and international positions, the Syrian conflict emerged as a central issue with world public opinion. Thus, Israel was keen to continue its aggression, its violations of Al-Aqsa Mosque, settlement building and internal political division. Yet, this time the interest in the

²⁷⁴ Eran Lerman, “Russian Ambitions, and Israeli Opportunities, in the Partition of Syria”, *BESA Center*, October 22, 2015

²⁷⁵ Krasna, Joshua. “Moscow on the Mediterranean: Russia and Israel’s Relationship.” *Russian Foreign Policy Papers*. 2018.

²⁷⁶ Mark Galeotti, “Putin is Playing a Dangerous Game in Syria,” *The Atlantic*, February 15, 2018

²⁷⁷ Michel Duclos, “Russia and Iran in Syria—a Random Partnership or an Enduring Alliance?”, *The Atlantic Council’s Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East*. June, 2019, p.1-8, p.2

Palestinian-Israeli conflict has witnessed a significant decline at the expense of the growing fears of the Iranian expansion in the region. In fact, Israel sought to end the idea of the Arab-Israeli conflict and turn it into an Arab-Iranian or Sunni-Shiite conflict, and so far Israel has managed to do successfully.

Correspondingly, Russia's direct military involvement in Syria was seen as a way to divert attention away from Ukraine and to gain western flexibility and concessions on the crisis in Ukraine.²⁷⁸ Russia sought to ease the international isolation imposed on it by the west, "by trading displeasure with its East European policies for its Middle East accomplishments".²⁷⁹ Indeed, the Russian intervention in Syria did not alter the Western powers policies from Russian interventionism elsewhere, as the Trump administration has extended some sanctions that were due to expire on March 6, 2019.²⁸⁰ Neither did the western sanctions deter the Russian actions in Ukraine, as Russia stays active there. Yet, it could be said that Russian intervention in Syria has pushed it to make concessions in other areas, as is the case of Russia's compromise to make concessions on the issue of the Iranian nuclear deal.

The Israeli and Russian success in turning attention away from their existing regional issues differed in range, yet the two parties refrained from criticizing the other in their internationally condemned regional policies. This point will be elaborated further in this chapter under the section of "National Gains and International Support".

6.2.2 Overlapping Strategies

Israel and Russia share some overlapping strategies in achieving their "end" goals in Syria. They both employed hard power, soft power and the art of engaging with the multiple state and non-state actors there. Hard power tools consist of aerial power and carrying intense airstrikes on their targets in Syria. Soft power consists of applying diplomatic means. The possession of those powers engaged them differently, when understanding and military diplomacy is applied it

²⁷⁸ Zvi Magen, "Russia: Internal and External Challenge", *INSS*, January, 2017.p.(63-70), pp.66

²⁷⁹ Z. Magen, S. Fainberg, and V. Michlin-Shapir, "Russia in Conflict: From the Homefront to the Global Front", *INSS Strategic Assessment*, vol. 19, no. 3, October 2016.

²⁸⁰ "Trump Extends U.S. Sanctions Against Russia Over Crimea", *The Moscow Times*, March 5, 2019.

results in convergence of interests. While some misunderstandings have resulted in divergence of interests which did not evolve into "serious crisis". Though, it could be argued that Russia's strategy is broader than the Israeli, yet Israel's strategy is important in light of proceeding the broader Russian strategy.

Military Diplomacy

Since the Russian military upgrade in Syria, Israel did neither strongly oppose nor support the Russian intervention. But it can even be argued that Israel has taken advantage of the Russian intervention in order to build military and political understandings with Russia. Since Israel's main concern was to continue its airstrikes on Iran, and to prevent the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah. Prior to the intervention, the former Israeli Minister of Defense "Bogie" has pointed out "we don't interfere with them and they don't interfere with us".²⁸¹ Bogie considered Russia the leading power in the developments of the Syrian scene, especially with the "voluntary" absence of the United States, starting with Russia's arming of the Syrian government, through its dismantling of Syrian chemical weapons and the holding of the Geneva II conference.²⁸² So Israel perceived Russia as an important actor with rising regional interests, and that cultivating understanding with Russia is important in light of Israel's continuity of operations in Syria.

Back to Bogie's words of "non interference", military diplomacy between the two parties became more functional even after the Russian intervention, with the establishment of what Netanyahu called a "mechanism to prevent misunderstandings". In October 2015, a deconfliction hotline, between the Russian aviation command center at the Hmeimim air base and a command post of the Israeli Air Force, was established to prevent aerial clashes in the Syrian airspace. The hotline consists of the two sides notifying each other of the actions of their aircrafts prior to any carried airstrikes and turning blind eye to the actions they carry against their targets in Syria. The arrangement has been in place after Netanyahu's immediate visit following the Russian military

²⁸¹ Dan Williams, "Israel quiet over 'hotline' with Russia on Syria", *Reuters*, 22 October 2014, [reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-israel-analysis/israel-quiet-over-hotline-with-russia-on-syria-idUSKCN0SG1G320151022](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-israel-analysis/israel-quiet-over-hotline-with-russia-on-syria-idUSKCN0SG1G320151022)

²⁸² The full speech of the Israeli Minister of Defense Titled "Iran is the number one threat to world stability", *INSS*, Jan 28, 2014 :<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQT0S5QTDD0> –(In hebrew)

intervention, in which he accompanied with him the chief of armed forces and the general in charge of Israeli military intelligence, Herzi Halevi.

Beside the military diplomacy between them, both Israel and Russia have respectively developed a strategy of cultivating relations with all parties. On the one hand, Israel announces the strengthening of its alliance and its relations with the "moderate Sunni" states, which urged to overthrow President Assad, and on the other hand, Israel strengthens its understanding with Russia which works to maintain the survival of the Syrian government. This indicates that for Israel, the removal or survival of Assad became a marginal issue in regard to its security interests on the short run and its strategic interests on the long run. Likewise, Russia has so far avoided full-fledged military alliance with Tehran in Syria in order not to undermine Moscow's diplomatic efforts with Sunni States. Also, on some occasions Russia has played the role of "third party" by flirting with the legal opposition and distancing itself from the Assad government. Yet, Russia has done so cautiously in order not to irritate the Syrian state.^{283 284}

Fighting terrorism

Although, Moscow and Tel-Aviv announced "fighting terrorism" as a primary goal for their cooperation and intervention in Syria, in practice Israel and Russia's air campaign was not mainly directed towards Daesh. Following the Russian strategy, helping the Syrian government in its operation against Daesh was the veneer of a legal foundation for the Russian intervention.²⁸⁵ Yet in reality, more than 90% of Russia's airstrikes targeted non-jihadist rebels and Daesh was losing territory only in areas where Russia was not militarily active.²⁸⁶ Russia's main targets were Syrian armed opposition groups fighting against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad rather than IS or al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front. As the war progressed, the Kremlin and the Russian media outlets started to blur the distinction between the opposition and ISIS, by defining the entire Syrian opposition as "terrorists". This narrative has in the first place bolstered

²⁸³ Kozhanov, Nikolay. "Russian-Iranian Relations through the Prism of the Syrian Crisis." *Insight Turkey*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2017, P. 108, pp. 105–124. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26300560. Accessed 15 Mar. 2020.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p.120

²⁸⁵ Hugo Spaulding, "Russia's False Narrative in Syria", Institute for the Study of War, December 1, 2015.

²⁸⁶ "More than 90%' of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted Isis, US says", *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015. Florence Gaub, "Russia's non-war on Daesh," *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, PAPER No 146 — July, 2018. P,57, pp.57-64

its strategy against the armed opposition and its policy of ensuring the survival of Al-Assad. In addition, it has halted anti-Assad international efforts regarding the negotiated transition in Syria, yet western powers did not change their entire policies towards Syria.²⁸⁷ After all, the Kurdish forces supported by the United States were proved to do all the job in wresting Syrian and Iraqi territories from ISIS which disclaims Putin's announcement of defeating ISIS.

Similarly, ISIS was not Israel's top security priority, yet Israel has articulated red lines to ISIS.²⁸⁸ Although Israel was not part of the international coalition to defeat ISIS, Tel-Aviv tried to play an influential role by providing intelligence and valuable information for NATO on the positions, capabilities and movements of the organization in Syria and Iraq. It also cooperated with Jordan and Egypt that were threatened directly by ISIS.²⁸⁹ In fact, Israel was not ISIS target as the two ISIS affiliates, Israel faces on its borders, Wilayat Sinai and the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade have not conducted a single attack on Israel.²⁹⁰ ISIS did not distract Israel's attention from its main security threat, Iran and its proxies. At the time when ISIS was highly active in Syria Israel continued its airstrikes on Iran and carried assassination of several figures of Hezbollah and Iranian officers who were active in Syria. One of Hezbollah leaders, Samir Kuntar, was killed by Israeli airstrike in December 2015 near Damascus.

In light of debilitating ISIS, Israel decided to deal with the Russian goals of keeping the Assad government and was open to the Syrian government reconquest of territory bordering the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights in 2018. Israel publicly expressed its acceptance of Assad maintaining the head of the regime in Syria, where the Israeli Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz indicated on 5/9/2018 that "Israel did not see a better alternative to Assad among Syrian rebel groups". He further asserted "of course his (Assad's) actions are terrible actions, and something that we abhor and condemn. Those opposing him, ISIS and others, are not a side that we think are better. We took care to preserve our interests."²⁹¹ As for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he

²⁸⁷ Florence Gaub, "Russia's non-war on Daesh," *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, PAPER No 146 — July, 2018. P,63, pp.57-64

²⁸⁸ Nicole Cordaro, "Israel's Strategy Against Isis", *Patrick Henry College*, May 17, 2017
<https://www.phc.edu/intelligencer/israels-strategy-against-isis>

²⁸⁹ Conor Gaffey. "Israel Helps Arab Neighbors in Fight Against ISIS." *Newsweek*. April 21, 2016.
<http://www.newsweek.com/israel-helps-arab-neighbors-fight-against-isis-450567>

²⁹⁰ Graham Allison. "Why ISIS Fears Israel." *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*. August 8, 2016.

²⁹¹ "Israeli minister: no knowledge of Trump ordering Assad killed", *Reuters*, September 4, 2018.

announced before leaving the Russian capital on 12/7/2018, “I have set a clear policy that we do not intervene, and we have not intervened. This has not changed. What has troubled us is ISIS and Hezbollah and this has not changed.”²⁹²

Mediating between Actors

Mediation attempts by state actors in high intensity conflicts are important foreign policy tools but are also a way of exerting further interests within the conflict. In Syria, Russia and Israel have played common roles, specifically in establishing alliances and mediating between the various actors. Although most mediation efforts ended up with no full settlement for the conflict, a temporary ceasefire was the outcome of such efforts.²⁹³ Russia has capitalized much more on its mediator role than Israel that is in the first place due to Moscow’s firm resistance to any shift in the fate of Assad.

In Syria, Russia proved that it does not direct its attention to the nature of the political system with which it is allied with as much as it benefits by the outputs of this alliance.²⁹⁴ Moscow has mediated between the Syrian government and the opposition forces, also between the different state actors, Israel and Iran, Israel and Syria, Syria and the United States, Iran and Turkey. For instance, Russia finds Israel a stable actor and a military power in the region that takes the “Russian security” into account as the Russian security in Syria has implications on the “Israeli security” as well as the whole region’s security. Russia also has strong relations with Iran in Syria and cooperates with Hezbollah in Lebanon and cooperates with Turkey and Qatar, on the opposite side it has solid relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Russia has also initiated talks with the United States to reach a deal for the disposal of Assad’s chemical weapons arsenal that was used in the Ghouta attack in August 2013. Although, some

²⁹² “Netanyahu: Israel Has No Problem With Assad, but Cease-fire Agreements Must Be Upheld”, *haaretz*, Jul 12, 2018

²⁹³ Pınar Akpınar, “The limits of mediation in the Arab Spring: the case of Syria”, *Third World Quarterly*, 2016, p.1-16, p.p.10.

²⁹⁴ البنداري، العلاقات الروسية الإسرائيلية في ضوء الربيع العربي والأزمة السورية، المركز العربي للبحوث والدراسات، مايو ٢٠١٩، Al-Bandari, “Russian-Israeli relations in light of the Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis”, *Arab Center for Research and Studies*, May, 2019. accessed on: <http://www.acrseg.org/41197>

of these relations provoke anger amongst Moscow's allies but those relations are to some extent driven by continuity rather than threatened by crisis.

On the other hand, Israel's navigation skills between regional actors with conflicting interests in Syria is way limited in comparison to Russia's skills, that stems from the limited leverage it had over involved parties if compared to Russian directive strategy of using leverage over the main parties in the conflict. Moreover, the Israeli rationale of not approaching any actor that might provoke the anger of its ultimate ally-the United States. But still Israel has played the role of important mediator between superpowers, bridging the understandings between Moscow and Washington illustrated by leading the recent trilateral meeting of the Israeli, Russian, and US National Security Advisors in Jerusalem in June 2019 concerning the Syrian issue and the Iranian intervention there.

6.3. National Gains and International Support

Russia and Israel understood the pragmatic weight each party yields in the national security interests of the other party. Israel's understanding of the major Russian role in Syria and of the Russian interests in the region was crucial in strengthening the relationship between them, not only in Syria but in other national and international issues. First, Israel demonstrated independence from its Western allies regarding its Russian policy.²⁹⁵ In early 2014, Israel remained neutral regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war, refusing to support American and European efforts to denounce Russia's annexation of Crimea or join the Western sanctions regime against Moscow. Amid the Russian feeling of economic and diplomatic Isolation, the Israeli position was crucial to Moscow as it eases the pressure on the Kremlin and makes it easier for Russia to realize its potential as a regional player. Moreover, Israel did not criticize Russia's cyber attacks and disinformation campaigns when it stood accused of interference in the 2016 United States elections. Some reports even revealed more interference by Israelgate in the U.S 2016 elections

²⁹⁵ O. Raanan and V. Michlin, "Israel-Russia Relations: Mutual Esteem or Cold-Eyed Utilitarianism?" *The Arena, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya*, 14 October 2018.

than the Russians, but the former definitely went uninvestigated.²⁹⁶ In another incident of its type, Israeli Foreign Ministry issued a vague statement condemning the poison attack of an ex-Russian spy Skripal who acted as double agent for the UK's intelligence services during the 1990s and early 2000s. Israel did not mention Russia in the statement unlike UK allies who accused Russia of the Novichok attack.²⁹⁷

Thus, what Israel scores in Moscow is supposed to serve its own security interests in Syria. That was most evident when on May 9, 2018 Netanyahu attended with his Serbian counterpart Aleksandar Vučić Victory Day Parade in Red square in Moscow, commemorating the history of Soviet victory over Nazi Germany during WWII. The visit has a tremendous importance for the Israeli-Russian national historical narrative and cultural dynamics. However, it carried greater geopolitical implication as Netanyahu was seeking clarification for the rules of engagement in an increasingly confusing situation of what Israel identified as “abnormal movements of Iranian forces in Syria”.²⁹⁸ Seemingly, Netanyahu has got what he desired, a greenlight from Putin. Few hours after his departure, Syrian Observatory reported an intensive large -scale Israeli missile strike on Iranian missile warehouses and platforms near Damascus, 15 were killed and 8 Iranians among them.²⁹⁹

Despite the Israeli sympathy with Russia over Ukraine, Russia has maintained a low profile towards Israel in its launched military activity in Gaza Strip “Operation protective Edge” on the background of murdering three Israeli teenagers by Palestinians. Yet, Putin has sent his condolences to Prime Minister Netanyahu before the operation saying “*We resolutely condemn this barbaric act of terrorism*”.³⁰⁰ However, during the conflict, Hamas appealed to Russia to integrate it in the ceasefire negotiations, which in return lowered the Israeli profile in the negotiations. Thus, for Israel this Russian “unbiased mediator” position was part of the dual

²⁹⁶ “Why Not a Probe of ‘Israel-gate’?”, *Consortium News*, April 20, 2017 <https://consortiumnews.com/2017/04/20/why-not-a-probe-of-israel-gate/>, “Israel’s interference in 2016 US election to be probed by Senators”, *Middle East Monitor*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190606-israels-interference-in-2016-us-election-to-be-probed-by-senators/>

²⁹⁷ “UK indicates displeasure with Israeli condemnation of poison attack”, *The Times of Israel*, 20 March 2018.

²⁹⁸ “Netanyahu sets off to Moscow as tensions skyrocket over Iran, Syria”, *Times of Israel*, May 9, 2018

²⁹⁹ “Intensive Israeli Missile strikes Hit Sites of The Regime Forces, Hezbollah, And the Iranians In Many Syrian Areas”, *The Syrian Observatory*, May 10, 2018. <http://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=91696>

³⁰⁰ “Condolences to Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu”, *Kremlin Website*, July 1, 2014. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/48913>

Russian foreign policy of approaching all actors and competing as a significant regional player against the West in the Middle East.³⁰¹

In 2017, Moscow recognized West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, while stating that East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state.³⁰² The timing of such an announcement came two days after Bashar Al-Assad chemical attack on the town of Khan Shaykhun, so such a move by Russia was to distract the international condemnation of the Russian support to the Syrian Regime and thus to serve Israel's agenda.³⁰³ Again, in August 2018, Israel and Russia reached an agreement to keep Iranian troops 85 km from the Golan heights.³⁰⁴ A move that would have not been achieved without Russia's consideration of Israel's national security issues beside the Jerusalem-Washington channel of dealing with Iran.³⁰⁵

Putin has boosted Netanyahu's election campaign in April last year, when Syria handed over the remains of an Israeli soldier Zachary Bamuel, who went missing during the Battle of Sultan Yacoub in the 1982 Lebanon War, in exchange for the release of two Syrian prisoners. Although, the state-owned Syrian Arab News Agency released a statement that Syria had "no information on the entire matter."³⁰⁶ Yet, the delivery of the body had an emotional weight within Israel and therefore more credits were granted to Bibi that caused his reelection.³⁰⁷

³⁰¹ Magen, Moldavsky, "Ukraine and Operation Protective Edge: Two Sides to Russia's Foreign Policy Coin", *INSS*, Insight No. 589, August 14, 2014

³⁰² The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. <http://www.mid.ru>

³⁰³ Anna Borshchevskaya, "Putin's Self-Serving Israel Agenda," *Foreign Affairs*, April 13, 2017.

³⁰⁴ "Russia: Iran troops to be kept 85km from Golan Heights", *Middle East Monitor*, August 1, 2018.

³⁰⁵ U. Dekel and C. Valensi, "Russia and Iran: Is the Syrian Honeymoon Over?", *INSS Insight*, no. 1171, 27 May 2019.

³⁰⁶ Patrick Hilsman, "How Israeli-Designed Drones Became Russia's Eyes in the Sky for Defending Bashar al-Assad", *The Intercept*, July, 2019. "Damascus: We have no information on the subject of the remains of the Israeli soldier", *Al-Mayadeen*, April 3, 2019.

³⁰⁷ "Putin plays Syria card in Israeli, Turkish elections.", *Al-monitor*, April 5, 2019.: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/putin-syria-card-israel-turkey-elections-netanyahu-erodgan.html#ixzz5nMawgAN1>

6.4. Divergence of Strategies and Potential Escalations

6.4.1. Duality of Positions

Despite the military and political Understandings between Israel and Russia in Syria and their ability to put their differences aside, the two countries treat each other with skepticism by applying the old Hebrew saying of "respect him and suspect him". From an Israeli point of view, Russian intervention in Syria has some positive aspects, as reaching a future settlement in the country and displaying Israel as a reliable and stable entity in the region. At the same time, Israel has rising concern from the Russian military reinforcements for the Syrian government as Israel has limited ability to profoundly influence the Russian policies. Although Israel has repeatedly succeeded in preventing the provision of advanced anti-aircraft missiles to Syria, Yet, some experts point out that there is a fear that Russia will leave its advanced weapons for the Syrian army after its withdrawal, and that Russia's activity intervention is strengthening the "shiite axis" over the "Sunni" as Russia completed a delivery of the S-300 Aerial Defense Systems to Iran in late 2016.³⁰⁸ Overall, strengthening the presence of Iran and Hezbollah in the Golan Heights is a negative strategic development for Israel.

Furthermore, Russia constitutes a complicating factor to Israel given its intelligence -gathering capability and its disregard for the operating practices and policies regulating the scope of its air force, demonstrated by some Russian infringements of Israeli airspace.³⁰⁹ Also Israel suspects "the room of maneuvering" given to it by Russia, since Iranians, too, are granted freedom of action under Russian umbrella. Nevertheless, Russia's mounting role had made its presence a matter of necessity and compelled Israel to deal with it as "force of nature", illustrated by Netanyahu's concerns about Putin's announcement to withdraw from Syria in 2016.³¹⁰ (Although it did not take place-indeed Russia's presence has only grown ever since.³¹¹).

³⁰⁸ Magen, Dekel, "Delivery of the S-300 Aerial Defense Systems to Iran: Signaling a Change in Russia's Middle East Policy", INSS, Insight No. 688, April 26, 2015.

³⁰⁹ Eran Etzion, "Israeli-Russian Relations: Respect and Suspect", Middle East Institute, August 3, 2016

³¹⁰ Ruth Eglash and William Booth, "Israel Fears Russia's Pullout from Syria Will Leave Dangerous Void," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2016.

³¹¹ Op.cit, Joshua Krasna, 2018

Moreover, Israel perceives Russia's broad military operations in Syria, through the installation of Anti-Access Area-Denial (A2AD) systems and the embeddedness of Russian advisors within the Syrian units, as a restriction for its movement. The A2/AD capability gives Russia leverage over Israel's own strategies in the Syrian airspace, since the system allows Russia to restrict the movement or even bring an end to Israel's air campaign at any time of "possible" confrontation.

From the Russian point, Israel can pose a challenging factor to Moscow through its close communication with Washington, by disrupting Moscow's planned project in Syria.³¹² Also, the hyperactivity of Israeli military activities, can cause damage not only to Russian allies but to Russia itself. Moreover, and as pointed out earlier, Russia benefits from the Israeli airstrikes on Iran due to the competitive nature among them in Syria, at the same time Russia is aware that Israeli airstrikes on Hezbollah targets in Lebanon could spark a conflagration in the Middle East that jeopardizes Russian interests there.³¹³ However, skepticism among them does not imply an end to their "marriage of convenience" as the two parties keep renewing their commitment to act within the rules of engagement.

6.4.2 Few Engagements not directed specifically against Israel

Before the Russian military intervention, some tension emerged between the two countries in the wake of the Israeli position on the Syrian crisis, especially on the Syrian chemical weapon. After a framework agreement was reached on September 14, 2013 between Russia and the United States, that called for the elimination of all Syrian chemical weapons material and equipment, Putin in Valdai International Discussion Club dragged the Israeli nuclear issue on the table of discussion, he said that Syria's chemical stockpile was built in response to the Israeli ones and that "Israel's nuclear weapons "only make her into a target". To Israel's ears, Putin's statements were seen as a way to play the Israeli card against the American "subjective" stance from the

³¹² Coping with the Russian Challenge in the Middle East: U.S.-Israeli Perspectives and Opportunities for Cooperation", *Wilson center*, Jun 3,2019

³¹³ Oded Granot, "Russia is the primary address", *Israelhayom*, January 20, 2018.

proliferation of chemical weapons since Israel has always been acting in violation of international law.³¹⁴

6.4.3. Iranian Presence

There is no doubt that Iranian presence in Syria has been a critical element in displaying divergence of interests between Russia and Israel. From the outset of the crisis, Israel voiced concerns from Iranian presence and its strategy towards Iran's growing influence in Syria was by employing hard power components. Tracing the Israeli strategy, the frequency of Israel's airstrikes against Iranian targets witnessed a swift rise after the Russian intervention. Although Russia has interfered in support of the Syrian government and Iran, Russia has turned blind eye to Israel's airstrikes against Iran. This was considered an advantage within the Israeli establishment, but at the same time Russia's policy posed a challenge to Israel's security regarding its cooperation with Iran and making conflicting promises to both Israel and Iran.³¹⁵

Contrary to Israel's concerns, Russian interests have seen Iranian involvement in Syria entirely legitimate, as Iran's efforts in restoring the Syrian government have made it an asset for Russia. Russia saw Iran an important element in deciding the future arrangement in Syria. At the Astana talks, dictated by Russia, Iran and Turkey have been engaged as key players in shaping Syria after the end of the civil war. So, in the short run, Russia did not want to end the Iranian influence completely as Russia needs the Iranian forces to balance the opposition forces. Nor was Russia ready to use force, upon Israel's demands, against Iran's objectives for establishing itself in Syria.³¹⁶ Even regarding the removal of Iranian forces and Tehran's allies from Syria, Israel was not satisfied when in July 2017 the US- Russia's deal failed to keep Iranian militias 60 kilometers far from borders. Therefore, Israel's conduct against Iran became more aggressive.

While as the Syrian war approaches an end, Russia began to shift its policy towards Iran. Especially after Russian-Iranian strategic alliance neared its end, with the declining Russian need

³¹⁴ Asaf Ronel, "In the Poker Game with Obama on Syria, Putin Playing the Israel Card," *Haaretz*, September 20, 2013.

³¹⁵ Zvi Magen, Udi Dekel, Sima Shine, "Russia in Syria: Between Iran and Israel", INSS Insight, No. 970, September 3, 2017

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

for Iranian militias on the ground and the rising gap between Iran and Russia regarding their interests in Syria.³¹⁷ However, Moscow has not made concessions to Israel's demands on using force against Iranian objectives, yet it has applied diplomatic means to challenge Iranian presence. Moscow sought to invest in the process of weakening Iran and removing it from Syria in a bargaining process with the opponents of Iran: the United States, Arab countries and Israel. Furthermore, Russia has recently applied a model of challenging Iranian leverage in Damascus by convincing Arab state to revive their diplomatic relations with the Assad regime.³¹⁸ These circumstances were in Israel's favour, although they were applied in the first place to grant Russia a central role in shaping the future political arrangement in the war-torn state, while stripping Iran from its economic and political share.

6.4.4 Acting out of the Hotline

While with the Russian military intervention, Israeli Russian Relations were vulnerable for escalation due to breakouts in their main coordination strategy: carrying actions without prior warning to each other; meaning if any maneuvers by one party endanger the personnel of the other party. The prolonged Syrian war has put the rules of engagement between Israel and Russia to test. But all experts have argued that the strategic Israeli-Russian partnership in Syria is unlikely to break down although some incidents over Syria could have provoked their differences. The first was on April 7, 2018 when an Israeli attack was carried on T-4 airbase, a Syrian air force installation in Homs province. Following the incident, ties became strained as Russia followed its policy of "political intimidation" threatening to supply Syria with an anti missile system, yet no definitive decision was issued by Moscow. Other incidents included Diplomatic stand-offs as the time when Russian diplomats scolded the Israeli Ambassador Gary Koren following Israel's airstrike on target near the city of Palmyra in March, 2017. Russia perceived the attack with much disappointment not because Israel carried out an attack on a Syrian position but due to its proximity from the Russians forces.³¹⁹ Apart from this, both

³¹⁷ Udi Dekel, Carmit Valensi, "Russia and Iran: Is the Syrian Honeymoon Over?", *INSS Insight*, No. 1171, May 27, 2019.

³¹⁸ Samuel Ramani, "UAE and Russia Find Common Ground on Syria," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, March 11, 2019, <https://agsiw.org/uae-and-russia-find-common-ground-on-syria/>.

³¹⁹ Tovah Lazaroff. "Russia summons Israeli envoy over Syria air strike", *Jerusalem Post*, March 17, 2017.

countries managed to sustain their military coordination in Syria and to prevent any potential escalation.³²⁰

6.4.5 Encounters between Fighter Aircrafts: The S-300 crisis and the downing of the Russian plane

Avoiding confrontation in Syrian airspace between Russian and Israeli aircrafts has been a demonstration of burgeoning cooperation. Up Until September 18, 2018 when Russia accused Israel of “premeditated action” after an Israeli airstrike on Syrian territory which caused the downing of a Russian (Ilyushin Il-20) surveillance aircraft killing 15 Russian soldiers 35 kilometers far from the Syrian coast, off the Hmeimim air base. Israel denied its responsibility over the incident and released a statement accusing the Assad government as “fully responsible”.³²¹ In response to the September incident Russia decided to supply the S-300 surface-to-air missile to Syria aiming above all to avoid any potential threat to the lives of Russian servicemen.³²² But the Russian “retaliation act” was met with Israeli anger branding the act as “irresponsible”, Israel also pledged to destroy the system if it was handed over to Syria. Resigned Israeli Defense Minister Lieberman said that Israel could not abandon military operations in Syria after supplying the Russian S-300 missile systems to Damascus.³²³

Following the delivery of S-300, IAF was reported to have trained against the S-300 system in Greece³²⁴ and Israel continued its utterances and freedom of operation in preventing Iran from entrenching itself despite the Russian efforts to establish communication channels between Israel and Iran.³²⁵ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asked Putin to hold a meeting soon after the backdrop of recent developments between the two countries, but no dates were specified by the

³²⁰ Patrick Hilsman, “Russian and Israeli Military Relations Remain Durable Despite Strain,” *News Deeply*, April 27, 2018

³²¹ Halfinger, Higgins, “Putin Calls Downing of Russian Plane in Syria ‘Tragic’ and Absolves Israel. *NewYork Times*, September 18, 2018.

³²² Russia to Provide Assad With Up to Eight S-300 Systems to Defend All of Syria, *Haaretz*, September 26, 2018.

³²³ Binoy Kampark, “Limiting Israel: Russia Deploys the S-300 to Syria”, *Counterpunch*, October 4, 2018.

Accessed :<https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/10/04/limiting-israel-russia-deploys-the-s-300-to-syria/>

³²⁴ “Israel, Greece drill air forces as Syria builds up arms”, *The Jerusalem Post*, November 6, 2018.

³²⁵ “Moscow hopes to 'open channels of communication' between Israel and Iran: report”. *i24NEWS*, October 06, 2018. <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/185719-181006-moscow-hopes-to-open-channels-of-communication-between-israel-and-iran-report>

Russian embassy.^{326 327} Meanwhile, both parties announced their desire to keep the inner-security coordination channel under operation.

Unlike Russia's reaction to the downing of the Russian SU-24 bomber by Turkey in late November 2015, when Russia imposed its own no-fly-zone over northern Syria.³²⁸ Not only had Putin drawn a distinction between the two incidents but he also showed partial understanding to Israel by blaming the incident on a "chain of tragic accidental circumstances". Yet, Russia could not publicize a quick normalisation in relations neither could overcome the political offense that happened to Russia. It can be said that Moscow decided to make the most of the incident, and in so it followed two paths: strengthening the Syrian army's defensive capabilities and restricting the margin of Russian own actual maneuvering capabilities in the Syrian arena through military measures and restrictions that dwarf Israel's capabilities. In a week after Russia's decision to supply Damascus with S-300, Sergey Shoygu confirmed that 49 pieces of equipment had arrived in Syria, including four launchers, locators and control vehicles.³²⁹ For Israel, upgrading Syria's military capabilities poses a serious challenge to its military options there, it also signals that the status quo ante has come to an end.³³⁰

Not only the incident has political implications on the Russian-Israeli relations, but also diplomatic ones. In early December, Russia voted against a US resolution condemning Hamas for firing rockets at Israel.³³¹ In the same month, Israel voted against Russia in a resolution

³²⁶ Netanyahu, Putin agree to meet after downing of Russian plane over Syria, *i24NEWS*, October 07, 2018, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/185794-181007-netanyahu-putin-agree-to-meet-after-downing-of-russian-plane-over-syria>

³²⁷ "Putin says no planned meeting with Netanyahu as tensions persist", *i24NEWS*, November 15, 2018 <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/188756-181115-putin-says-no-planned-meeting-with-netanyahu-as-tensions-persist>

³²⁸ Gencer Ozcan, "If the Crisis is What We Make of It: Turkey and the Uprisings in Syria", *TÜBİTAK*, March 28, 2019.

³²⁹ S-300 missile system: Russia upgrades Syrian air defences, *BBC news*, 2 October 2018

³³⁰ Amos Harel, Putin's Interests in Syria and Lebanon Are Limiting Israel's Military Options, *Haaretz*, November 18, 2018.

³³¹ Raphael Ahren, "Resolution condemning Hamas fails at UN, despite majority, unprecedented support", *Times of Israel*, December 7, 2018. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-resolution-condemning-hamas-fails-to-pass-despite-unprecedented-support/>

condemning Russia's aggressive Ukraine policies.³³² Furthermore, Russia invited Hamas leader Ismail Hanieh in late November to be expected in Moscow in late December.³³³

6.4.6 Supplying S-300: Real Crisis or Interim Escalation

However, relations seemed to revitalize their former *modus vivendi* after Netanyahu met Putin in late February 2019. The meeting was the first formal talk after September's incident; the twelfth meeting since September 2015. In the talks, Russia has offered Israel a new framework for cooperation in establishing an arrangement in Syria that requires the removal of foreign forces - especially Iran. In the words of a former Israeli Ambassador, Zvi Magen "this move could aim to help advance understanding between Moscow and Washington. It is also reasonable that Israel may have played a real role in promoting Russia's interest of closer communication with the United States and that Israel enjoys Russia's gratitude for that."³³⁴

The deployment of S-300 was supposed to make Israeli aircrafts more vulnerable in future operations since they have enjoyed freedom over the Syrian airspace for the past three years. But Syrian possession of S-300 turned not to be a game-changer as it was assumed to be, but as symbolic and a way by Russian Defense Ministry to "save face and flex muscle" -described by a military expert in the Russian journal Eksport Vooruzheny (Arms Export).³³⁵ Israeli airstrikes on Iranian positions in Syria continued to take place with brazen impunity. In January 2019, Israeli aircrafts entering the Syrian airspace carried out airstrikes against Quds Force targets but without being intercepted by the Russian S-300 but by Syrian defence Systems.^{336 337} So, there were some diplomatic and political steps between Israeli and Russian sides, by which Moscow gave Israel guarantees that S-300 would not be directed towards Israel, because any serious targeting by the system to the Israeli aircrafts will mean that it was carried by Russian hand (Russian

³³² Herb Keinon, "In rare move, Israel casts vote against Russia at U.N.," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 18, 2018.

³³³ Dania Alghoul, "Israel 'furious' after Hamas leader Haniyeh invited to Russia", *Alaraby*, December 18, 2019 <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/12/19/israel-furious-after-hamas-leader-haniyeh-invited-to-russia>

³³⁴ Zvi Magen, "The Trilateral Israel-US-Russia Meeting: Motives and Ramifications", INSS, Insight No. 1178, June 23, 2019.

³³⁵ Maxim Suckhov, "Is Russia's S-300 delivery to Syria a game-changer?", *Al-Monitor*, October 10, 2018. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/10/russia-syria-israel-s300.html>

³³⁶ Raf Sanchez, "11 killed in Israeli airstrikes against Iranian bases in Syria", *The telegraph*, January 21, 2019.

³³⁷Frantzman, "Why hasn't Syria used the S-300?", *The Jerusalem Post*, January 21, 2019.

soldiers are presumably manning these batteries) and this is not acceptable to the nature and the requirements of coordination between the two parties.³³⁸

Regarding the trade exchange between Russia and Israel following the incident, Jerusalem Affairs Minister participating in the Russian-Israeli business dialogue for Economic Trade Cooperation, Ze'ev Elkin, said that Russia and Israel are working to raise the volume of trade exchange to a level "before the crisis; the downing of the Russian plane". Noting that "the value of goods and services traded between the two countries exceeded \$5 billion in both 2018 and 2019, taking the figure to above pre-crisis levels".³³⁹ From here, we conclude that the economic relations have a significant role in the development of relations between them, but what drives Russia to continue that relationship is the plight of Western sanctions against it, as it finds in relations with Israel a breathing towards the sanctions imposed on them by Washington and the European Union.

³³⁸ Bassem El-kassem, "The Israeli Strategy Towards the Syrian Crisis 2011–2018", *Al-Zaytouna centre for Studies and Consultations*. November, 2019.p.(6-92), p,71

³³⁹ "Russia-Israel Trade Exceeds \$5bn Again in 2019: Minister", *Russia business today*, January 29, 2020 <https://russiabusinesstoday.com/economy/russia-israel-trade-exceeds-5bn-again-in-2019-minister/>

Conclusion and Outlook

Before the Syrian crisis, Russian-Israeli relations witnessed prosperity and tensions alike. With the eruption of the war in Syria Russia's cooperation with Israel has reached its highest level since the restoration of their relations in 1991. Their cooperation has been facilitated by their common threat perceptions and overlapping interests and strategies.

The Syrian theatre has become a meeting point for Russian-Israeli interests. As the war progressed, the two parties seemed to agree on the importance of the Syrian government maintaining power, despite the fact that Israel had initially declared to stay neutral. They also finally agreed on the necessity of limiting Iranian influence in Syria, assuming that the Iranian military, economic, and security presence has become a threat to Russia's planned overall victory in Syria and to Israel's own security concerns.

For Russia and Israel, there is a lot at stake in Syria but to achieve their respective goals, both employed similar means. Conducting unconventional warfare and supporting various proxy groups with financial, political and military aid. At the same time, both tried to play the role of a "third side" in the conflict, not the role of a loyal ally. Russia has occasionally distanced itself from the Syrian government and kept open channels with the opposition groups. Israel too, has left the opposition groups it once supported and then portrayed the Syrian government as the only rational force in the conflict. In addition, Russia and Israel took advantage of the evolving nature of the Syrian war to push their end goals. With the rise of ISIS, "fighting terrorism" was employed by both states as legal foundation for their respective intervention; although ISIS was not their main target neither were they ISIS primary goal. Moreover, both sides mediated between forces with diverse and opposing interests. Therefore, they ended up making more friends than enemies in the region.

Although, the Russian policy in Syria came as a challenge to the West, yet Moscow adopted a totally different policy with Israel, although it is considered a country of the western bloc. Simultaneously, Israel has adopted a different policy in dealing with the Russian agendas in Syria and in the region, contradicting its own allies' policies towards Russia. So in Syria, Russia did not neglect the Israeli interests, just as the latter did not neglect that Russia is a major country

that insists on having its own influence and presence on global and regional level, so their interest-based relationship developed gradually to include other areas of interests rather than just in Syria.

Israel has been extremely cautious in its stance concerning Moscow's policies on the international stage. Promoting Russian narratives, issuing vague statements or openly siding with Russia among massive international condemnation have become crystal clear in the Israeli policy in recent years. This has added a sort of international legitimacy for Russia; at the time when it needed it the most. Netanyahu's government did not criticize Russia's annexation of Crimea. In addition, it did not condemn the Russian military intervention in Syria, instead it helped Russia to uphold its narrative that the military intervention aimed at fighting terrorism. Also, Israel did not criticize Putin's cyber-attacks and repressive domestic policies and has promoted the Russian world war II narrative. In all, this has been illustrated by Netanyahu's numerous visits to his Russian counterpart which exceeded those with the United States.

Russia reciprocated not only by granting Israel freedom of maneuverability over Syrian airspace, but by softening its tone of criticism to Israel's policies in the Palestinian territories and not allowing the delivered Russian S-300 to Syria to operate against Israel. Moreover, Putin offered Netanyahu, who is embroiled in a bitter fight for his political survival, a boost in his election campaign in April 2019 by returning the body of an Israeli soldier who has been missing since the 1982 Lebanon war. In so, Russia has ensured that Israel remained a neutral party towards what is going on in Syria and Russia became Israel's key partner for cooperation in Syria apart from the US-EU orbit, especially with the increasing Iranian-Syrian cooperation, the increasing number of fronts close to Israeli borders and United States initial unwillingness to intervene in Syria.

However, their interest-based relationship has not always been rosy as it got interrupted by some diplomatic standoffs and "tragic accidents". Yet, they both were obliged to make concessions to contain any potential serious crisis. The old Hebrew saying "respect him but suspect him" seems to formulate the basis of their relations and will continue to guide Israel's policy in the future. A former source of tension was Israel's consistent suspicion of the ambitious Russia's arms sales

policy with some states in the region, particularly Iran and Syria and it remains to constitute a source of tension at the present time. Recent deals between Iran and Russia and the provision of S-300 to Syria have demonstrated this clearly. Furthermore, Russia maintains close relations with armed organizations that Israel perceives as primary security threats like Hamas and Hezbollah. It also tries to balance its relations with Arab countries and Israel alike, as it has interests with both sides. As a manifestation of this policy of equal distance, the volume of trade between Russia and Arab countries grew by 8 percent in 2018, reaching \$22 billion, said Lavrov, at the opening ceremony of "Arabia Expo 2019".³⁴⁰

At the end of the study three listed factors would be of paramount importance in asserting that the future of Russian-Israeli relations tend to witness more coordination and understanding that would in turn facilitate more tactical rapprochement and alignment between the two parties.

First: The decline in the Russian-Iranian relations

At the outset of the Syrian crisis, curbing Iran was not a common motivation between Moscow and Tel-Aviv, and it could be characterized as one of the main reasons that has positioned Israel in a totally different corner from Russia. But the Syrian war approaching its final phase has made Russian-Iranian differences more prominent and therefore the Russian-Israeli rapprochement more prospective. Moscow and Tehran have managed to uphold their strategic partnership in Syria, even though they have their different interests. Yet, the Iranian-Russian relations in Syria have been witnessing a period of tension. Anton Mardasov, a Russian military affairs expert argues that “the controversy between Moscow and Tehran has always been a part of the Syrian conflict. However, the debates between the two have started to become more political in nature”.³⁴¹ The political tension has been demonstrated by Israel’s heavy attacks on Iranian positions following definite tensions between Israel and Russia after the incident of downing the Russian reconnaissance plane in September 2018. Also, points of friction between Russia and Iran started to become more significant especially with the numerous clashes among divisions of

³⁴⁰ “Moscow: Economic Cooperation With Arab World Is Our Foreign Policy Top Priority”, *Al-sharq Al Awsat*, 9 April, 2019

³⁴¹ “Are Russia, Iran engaged in tug of war over Syria?”, *Al-Monitor*, January 30, 2019

the Syrian military. In early 2019, Russia-backed Tiger Forces and the Iran-backed Fourth Division had clashed on in Syria's Hama province.³⁴² Clashes between the two sides began as a result of the struggle for economic gains and their disagreement on the future of Syria's armed forces. Not only has Russia attempted to constrain Iran's ambitions through Israel's actions, but it has also reassured other regional actors that it was making efforts to constrain Tehran's actions in Syria.³⁴³ In all, the present Iranian-Russian relations has primary effect on further rapprochement between the Russian-Israeli relations especially with Israeli assertion to the Russian side that it is neutral in the conflict and does not support one side against the other and most importantly that it does not see itself as a partner in determining the future of Syria.

Second: The decline in the Palestinian case in regional politics

The relative weight and centrality of the Palestinian problem in the regional politics of the Middle East has been in steady decline. The Arab Uprisings further contributed to this phenomenon, the Syrian uprising that generated regional conflict between Iran and other regional countries who seek to counter Iran's hegemonic ambitions there, resulting in further normalization of relations with Israel. The Palestinian cause has become, at best, a secondary concern for almost all regional and international parties involved in the Syrian conflict in its various dimensions. For the Russian foreign policy, the Palestinian issue is no longer a priority especially in light of the failure of previous solutions and endeavors to the issue. Since Iran's activism in Syria and the United States voluntary retreat from the region regional countries, the Gulf monarchies have lined up with Israel, validating the old saying "The enemy of my enemy is my friend". In result, the new status quo provided a window of opportunity for countries such as Russia to cultivate relations with Israel without this leading to decline in its relations with the Palestinians or with regional actors that had constantly criticized Israeli policies. Moscow has softened its tone in directing criticism to the Israeli policies towards Palestinians.³⁴⁴ Yet, the Russian position does not imply that it supports the Israeli side in the conflict, instead it seeks to apply its mediation skills between both Israelis and Palestinians without risking relations with

³⁴² "Russia, Iran-backed factions clash in Syria's Hama", *Anadolu Agency*, January 30, 2019.

³⁴³ "Russia Assures Arab Capitals of Curbing Iran Influence in Syria Before Normalization", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, January, 2019

³⁴⁴ Lidia Averbukh and Margarete Klein, "Russia-Israel Relationship Transformed by Syria Conflict", *SWP Comment 37*, September, 2018, p.2, pp.1-7

either of them. However, the retreat in the Palestinian cause has been emphasized further with the arrival of Donald Trump to presidency in the United States. The Trump administration transformed the United States policy from a fierce defender of Israel policy into an implementer of this policy.³⁴⁵ Beside it being determined to pursue confrontational policies with Iran (withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), Trump administration took more decisions that raised questions over the regional and international actors ability to balance the conflict; among the decisions were as the United states recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem, the transfer of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, Trump's elimination of US funding for UNRWA, and the withdrawal of the United States from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

Third: Social ties and Putin's Philo-Semitism

Putin has been the most Jewish friendly Russian leader in history. Putin's doctrine of keeping open communication channels with the Israeli leaders has contributed to create a favourable environment within Israel that calls for development of relations with Russia. And thus, adding some credibility to the expectations regarding the establishment of close and deep societal and economic relations between Russia and Israel. In 2012, President Putin with Shimon Peres inaugurated a monument to Red Army soldiers in the city of Netanya. The monument was erected by the money raised by Russian Jewish businessmen. Between 2000 and 2019, Israeli prime ministers visited Moscow frequently. Benjamin Netanyahu's account of visits is 14, the Syrian and Iranian issues were central to his meetings with the Russian counterpart. While the discussions with former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert centered on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iranian nuclear program.

Putin's philosemitism allows him to present himself as the protector of the Jewish minority in Russia and Europe, a friend of the state of Israel,³⁴⁶ and to soften the Russian public stance towards Israel. He further had close relations with the Jewish oligarchs, who have control over

³⁴⁵ Osamah Khalil, Diana Buttu, Mouin Rabban, "Allying Against Iran: Repercussions for Palestine", *Al-Shabaka*, August, 2018.

³⁴⁶ Lidia Averbukh and Margarete Klein, "Russia-Israel Relationship Transformed by Syria Conflict", *SWP Comment 37*, September, 2018, p.2-4, pp.1-7

banking, oil companies, media outlets, and a large portion of aluminum and iron factories. Some of the Russian Jewish tycoons in Israel are Putin's allies like Valery Kogan, Moshe Kantor and many others. In addition to Putin's sympathy with the Jews, the Russian "compatriots" in Israel have contributed to the economic and political life in Israel. But it does not necessarily affect the way Russia formulates its foreign policy, indeed the societal connections and Putin's admiration for the Jews are of strategic interest for Israelis. On the 25th anniversary of Russia and Israel restoring diplomatic ties, Putin said that the one and half million Russian individuals-15 percent of Israel's population- who are living in Israel contribute in making the interstate relations very special.³⁴⁷ Although social references would not be enough to soften crisis in political relations but would definitely contribute in the advance of the rapprochement process between Moscow and Tel-Aviv in general. And as long as Putin is in power in Russia, a favourable scenario of rapprochement, not yet alliance, would be resulted from the Russian-Israeli coordination in the Syrian dossier.

³⁴⁷ "Putin Says He Plans to Meet Israeli Prime Minister Soon," *TASS*, March 16, 2016.

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