

Russia, Iran and Israel: A Troubled Triangle

Written by Mark N. Katz

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MARK N. KATZ, MAY 18 2016

It is well known that Russia and Iran cooperate with each other on several issues. Moscow and Tehran are working together to support the Assad regime in Syria against its internal opponents. Russia has completed a nuclear reactor for Iran, and there are plans for it to build more. Moscow has also sold weapons to Tehran, and is in the process now of delivering S-300 air defense missile systems to the Islamic Republic. Underlying everything else is a mutual hostility toward America and the West as well as a fear of the rise of a pro-Western democratic opposition. While there have certainly been important differences between Moscow and Tehran over the years (including over the delimitation of the Caspian, delays on the Bushehr nuclear reactor completion, and Medvedev's cancellation of the S-300 deal in 2010 which Putin only restored in 2015), the strength of their common interests suggests that Moscow and Tehran will seek to continue cooperating with each other for many years to come.

What is less well known is that under Putin in particular, there has been a significant amount of cooperation between Russia and Israel. Not only is there a significant trade relationship between the two countries, but the two cooperate on security issues as well. In addition, Israel has become an important source of military technology for Russia. Russia and Israel also have important cultural ties (there is a large Russian-speaking population in Israel, and Israel is a popular tourist destination for Russians). Further, Putin and Netanyahu seem to share a common antipathy toward the Obama Administration.

Considering the extreme state of hostility existing between the Israeli and Iranian governments, it is remarkable that Russia has managed to get along well with both simultaneously. Indeed, the question that arises is: Can Moscow continue to cooperate with them both if they remain so antagonistic toward each other?

Moscow may have reason to believe that it can. Russian cooperation with Iran and Israel at the same time, after all, is not the only example of an external power cooperating with states inside a region that are hostile toward each other. America has for many years managed to cooperate both with Israel on the one hand and with several Arab states opposing its policies toward the Palestinians on the other. Europe, China, India, and Russia (among others) have too.

Four factors may allow this: 1) regional antagonists and external actors may face a common threat from third parties whom they all fear; 2) despite their antipathy for each other, regional antagonists both want something from an external power that they cannot afford to do without through rupturing relations with it over because of its close ties to the other; 3) some parties may come to place a lesser priority on a dispute than previously (as many Arab governments, even if not Arab public opinion, appear to have done regarding the Palestinian issue); and 4) an external power may actually succeed in ameliorating relations between antagonistic parties, as America did in bringing about Egyptian-Israeli and Jordanian-Israeli peace agreements. The question, then, is whether any of these factors are present, and how strong they are, in underpinning continued Russian cooperation with Iran and Israel simultaneously.

The first of these factors is definitely present in the Russian-Iranian-Israeli triangle. Despite their many differences, there is one common interest that Israel and Iran share with each other as well as with Russia, the West, and many in the Arab world: a common opposition to Sunni jihadism. These forces—which include Al Qaeda, ISIS, and their affiliates—are not only anti-Israeli, anti-Western, and anti-Russian, but they are also anti-Shi'a. Even though Syria

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and Iran together have previously supported Hezbollah (Lebanon's highly anti-Israeli Shi'a radical movement), Israel has valued the Assad regime for keeping the Syrian-Israeli border quiet since the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Israel has acquiesced to Russian and Iranian support for the Assad regime in Syria, then, since if it falls, it is likely to be replaced by Sunni jihadists whom Israel considers worse.

The second factor is also present. As much as Iran may not like how close Russian-Israeli relations have become, Tehran still wants Russian air defense missile systems to blunt the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear and military facilities. Nor does Iran want to reduce Russia's incentive for protecting Iranian interests in the UN Security Council. Similarly, Israel can hardly afford to threaten to reduce cooperating with Russia because of its close ties to Iran since this may result in Russia supporting Tehran (and through it, Hezbollah) far more than it does now. Moscow, of course, is well aware of the leverage that it has over each as a result of its relations with the other.

The third factor is partially present. Even if most Arab governments no longer actively support the Palestinian cause, Iran does. But to the extent that Iran and its Hezbollah allies are so preoccupied with defending the Assad regime in Syria, they are less focused on Israel. Further, the Russian intervention in Syria is apparently seen by the Israelis as serving as a check on Iran and Hezbollah vis-à-vis Israel. The Israeli government's immediate reaction to Putin's (somewhat misleading) March 2016 announcement that he was withdrawing the "main part" of Russian forces from Syria was to seek Moscow's reassurance that Iran and Hezbollah would not attack Israel supports this view. This suggests that so long as Iranian forces and Hezbollah are present in Syria anyway, Israel prefers that Russian forces also be there to serve as a restraint on them.

The fourth factor, though, is definitely not present in the Russian-Iranian-Israeli triangle. The United States expended great effort to successfully negotiate Egyptian-Israeli and Jordanian-Israeli peace treaties, encourage cooperation between Israel and several other Arab governments, and unsuccessfully attempt to bring about an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. America's investment in this effort has played a significant role in ending conflict between Israel and Arab states, and limiting (if not eliminating) conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. This has made America an important partner for Israel, the Arab states, and the Palestinians. Russia, by contrast, has shown no sign of being interested in, much less capable of, improving relations between Iran and Israel.

The fact that both the Israeli and Iranian governments do not appear interested in trying to improve bilateral relations, of course, makes it nearly impossible for any outside actor to coax or cajole them into doing so. But so long as Iranian-Israeli relations remain hostile, Moscow's efforts to retain good relations with both will continue to be resented by each—and each will be wary of becoming too reliant on a Russia that it deems unreliable. Thus, despite its unhappiness with the Obama Administration, Israel is likely to remain firmly reliant on Washington, which clearly prefers it as well as Egypt and the Arab Gulf states (even if some in these mistakenly think otherwise) over Iran. Iran, for its part, does not have an alternative great power it can turn to for the sort of support Israel receives from the U.S., but it really does not need it. With UN Security Council sanctions on it having been lifted, Iran's access to the world (if not American) economy is improving at the same time that Russia's is deteriorating. Further, Iran may be able to purchase weapons from countries other than Russia, including China and possibly even some in Europe, or even produce its own.

In other words, while Putin is undoubtedly pleased with being in a position where Iran and Israel both cooperate with Moscow despite their dislike for each other, there is no guarantee that they will do so indefinitely. Without an improved Iranian-Israeli relationship underpinning close Russian ties to both, Moscow cannot rely on the other factors always remaining strong enough to allow this. The common Sunni jihadist threat, after all, has not yet resulted in Israeli-Iranian cooperation, and may never do so. Similarly, if Russia and Iran succeed in shoring up the Assad regime, Moscow may be unable to prevent Tehran and Hezbollah from turning their attention once again to combating Israel. And so long as Israel and Iran both distrust Moscow because of its relations with the other, both will act to limit, or even reduce, their dependence on Russia.

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