

# Russia and Israel: A Romance Aborted?

*Alek D. Epstein*

Fifteen years have elapsed since the resumption of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union/Russia and Israel, which were terminated in 1967. At this time, we can state with certainty that many hopes have failed to materialize. The period of the ambassadorship of Alexander Bovin, the first post-Soviet Russian ambassador to Israel, was perhaps the golden age in bilateral relations, although Bovin himself estimated the situation far more critically. “Over my five and a half years in Israel, I didn’t implement a single large Israeli-Russian project,” he said.

Bovin’s diplomatic mission in Israel ended in May 1997. Since then, economic cooperation has become more diverse, but the political sphere is dominated by rather disturbing tendencies.

From 1967 through 1991, Israeli-Russian relations hinged on two external factors. First, the Soviet Union felt strong pressure from Arab countries that were de facto Soviet allies — despite the fact that Moscow never set up military-political unions with any of them — and opposed a restoration of diplomatic relations with the Zionist state. At the same time, there was an influential factor of Russian Jews who left for Israel. From Jerusalem’s point of

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view, an opportunity for Soviet Jews to emigrate from the Soviet Union in absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries (1967-1980) was more preferable than having these relations together with a ban on the Jews' emigration to Israel (in 1948-1952 and 1954-1967). Israel demanded that Soviet Jews have the opportunity to emigrate, and over time – especially after the adoption of the still effective and very notorious Jackson-Vanik amendment – this demand became a convenient tool for the Americans in their anti-Soviet policies. The Soviet Jews were thus placed in the epicenter of the U.S.S.R.-U.S. standoff.

Representation of the interests of all Jews regardless of the country of their residence has always been a kind of *raison d'être* for Israel. At the same time, the Soviet Union viewed itself as the state for the workers of the world and a center for the global fight against capitalism and imperialism. Moscow regarded Israel as an ally of the forces that it was fighting. The Soviet expansionist ideology could not sit back and watch an expansionist Israeli ideology. While the Soviet Union sought to rescue Palestine and the entire Middle East from the “international Zionism's nationalistic madness” (since Zionism was viewed as “blue-star racism at the service of anti-Communism”), Israeli leaders set themselves the task of saving Soviet Jews from “the bondage of the Red Pharaoh.”

Restrictions on Jewish emigration were lifted in the late 1980s, and it was expected that bilateral relations would be heading for an idyllic future. But this did not happen. Moreover, the current state of the Russian-Israeli relationship looks even more discouraging than in the previous years.

The set of existing controversies can be reduced to six major problems, three of which have importance for Israel, another two for Russia, while the last is of concern for both countries.

#### PROBLEM 1:

##### ON THE SAME SIDE OF THE BARRICADES?

The Israelis cannot understand or accept the fact that Russia did not list Hizbollah and Hamas as terrorist organizations, and even gave high-level receptions to delegations of Hamas leaders in

March 2006 and early March 2007. Both delegations were led by Khaled Mashal [the head of Hamas Political Bureau – Ed.], who has a reputation as a bitter foe of Israel.

The Israelis reacted to those visits quite strongly. The Israelis reasoned that if Russia claims it doesn't speak to terrorists but destroys them instead, why should it invite the leadership of one of the most odious and bloody terrorist organizations in the world for talks?

It is highly improbable that Russian diplomats, to say nothing of the secret services, do not know about the true nature of Hamas and its connections with Chechen militants. Of course, one may speculate about Moscow's policy of double standards in its fight against terrorism (purporting, for example, that it eliminated Djokhar Dudayev and Aslan Maskhadov, but invites Khaled Mashal and Ismail Haniyeh as if they were respectable statesmen). Unfortunately, however, all countries, including the U.S. and Israel itself, espouse policies of this sort. Suffice it to recall that in spite of numerous terrorist attacks committed by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, the Fatah party, which controls those brigades, has not been added to the list of terrorist organizations to date.

More importantly, the Israelis, together with the Americans, had been counting on Fatah to win the Palestinian election. A Fatah victory was viewed as a favorable option, although facts prove that these militants have been responsible for many large-scale terrorist attacks of the past few years: the death of 11 people in the Jerusalem district of Beit Israel on March 2, 2002; 22 people killed at Tel-Aviv's Central Bus Station on January 5, 2003; and 11 people killed when bus No. 19 was bombed in Jerusalem on January 29, 2004. And what about Fatah leaders' popularity in the Palestinian territories? Number one on the list of candidates for the Palestinian Legislative Council is Marwan Barghouti, a man serving five life terms in an Israeli jail on charges of organizing several terrorist attacks. However, no one demands to boycott Fatah. On the contrary, Israeli leaders support political dialog and commercial relations with the organization.

The anti-Russian campaign that erupted in the Israeli and U.S. mass media in February and March 2006 was unjustified in many

ways. For instance, Zeev Schiff, an influential political and defense commentator, wrote in the leading newspaper *Ha'aretz* (published in Hebrew) on February 12, 2006, that by inviting Hamas leaders to Moscow Russia buried the Road Map peace plan. Is this not a graphic manifestation of the Orwellian mentality?

Schiff is obviously right in arguing that the Road Map, first published on April 30, 2003, spells out that peaceful coexistence between the two neighboring states, Israel and Palestine, will provide a solution to the Middle East problem. The solution can be reached only if terror and violence come to a complete stop (and this, in turn, can only result from energetic antiterrorist measures on the part of the Palestinian National Authority). He also correctly claims that Russia knows perfectly well about Hamas' vehement objections to this turn of events. Hamas has no good feelings about the Road Map, and has no plans to act under its provisions.

This, however, should not lead to the conclusion that by holding meetings with Hamas leaders the Russians decided to contradict the Road Map.

It is not Russian diplomacy that should take the blame for the problems of the Road Map, which incidentally was valid only from 2003 through to 2005. This document itself abounds in controversies. It states, in particular: "As early as possible [...] and in the context of open debate and transparent candidate selection/electoral campaign based on a free, multi-party process, Palestinians hold free, open, and fair elections." Well, the elections held in Palestine meet these requirements, so should Russia shoulder the blame for Hamas' victory?

Earlier, in spring 2004, the author of this article wrote in a book published by the Moscow-based Institute of Middle East Studies: "Can one at all be sure that Hizbollah or Islamic Jihad will not win a free Palestinian election? [...] The authors of the Road Map proceed from the assumption that liberals necessarily win where free elections are held. But someone with knowledge about the sentiments in the Palestinian territories can claim with confidence that liberal parties and movements seeking a peace settlement will not have success at the present time. Any effort to

impose the Western mentality on a society with a totally different political culture... is a dramatic mistake.”

Alas, the mistake was made and now a parliament, the majority of which has always been calling for the destruction of the State of Israel, is situated just 45 minutes’ drive from Jerusalem. It was not Russia that brought Hamas to power. The party’s victory became possible thanks to the very same Road Map, the commitment to which Israeli and the U.S. officials try to reaffirm by any means, fair or foul (the latter is much likelier). Today, it is important to determine how to make the Hamas leadership realize that Israel is here to stay.

Had the Russian leaders, who maintain a rather intensive political dialog with the Israeli government, succeeded at transforming the mentality of Hamas leaders – similar to the transformation of the Fatah movement under the rule of Yasser Arafat, it would have been the greatest contribution to the Road Map rehabilitation. Unfortunately, the Russians failed to do that.

What seemed really blasphemous – even from the point of view of a secular man – is that Patriarch Alexii II received the militants in March 2006, thus legitimizing them not only in the political realm, but in the spiritual and religious ones as well.

As for the motives underlying the second trip by the Hamas delegation to Moscow, even Russia’s best friends among the Israelis could not understand it. While in the first trip it was still possible to hope that Russian diplomacy was capable of tempering the Islamic radicals’ unappeasable stance on Israel, nobody entertained such hopes in March 2007. Diplomats in Moscow explained President Putin’s consent to meet with Hamas officials with the public declaration that Hamas was prepared to recognize the agreements with Israel first signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization and then by the Palestinian National Authority. Khaled Mashal and his associates preferred to excuse themselves from a meeting with Putin. Eventually, both visits not only did nothing to push the Middle East talks forward but simply worsened Russian-Israeli relations.

Moscow hoped to gain some dividends by befriending all parties involved in the Middle East conflict. For example, immedi-

ately following talks with Khaled Mashal, Russian leaders received Avigdor Lieberman, one of the most irreconcilable Israeli politicians. This move triggered a new wave of criticism in Israel, however, and Lieberman was targeted, too (for his ostensible role of a fig leaf for Russian diplomacy). As Israeli observer Mark Galesnik wrote, “Lieberman traveled to Moscow and announced to the whole world from there that Russia and Israel are standing on the same side of the barricades. This, most obviously, is the minister’s main strategic achievement, since not even a trace of any other achievements exists. His triumph, though, was slightly spoiled by the fact that the chair he was sitting on while publicly announcing his accomplishments had just been warmed by the behind of Hamas’s head... Khaled Mashal, who declared almost the same things from Moscow just a day before. Remarkably, the day after Lieberman’s speech, reports came from the barricades that some ultra-advanced Russian weaponry was being sold to Syria... Lieberman’s visit to Moscow legitimized connections between the Kremlin and Hamas and, additionally, optimized Russian-Syrian ties. As for Israel, the trip gloriously crowned a one-hundred-day-old discomfiture named the ‘new national strategy’.”

## PROBLEM 2:

### WHO SHOULD RUSSIA SELL WEAPONS TO?

Jerusalem has a highly derogatory view of Russia’s cooperation with Iran and Syria, the two most anti-Israeli countries, in the field of defense technologies. The Israelis do not trust Russia when it says it is pursuing exclusively financial considerations by selling advanced antiaircraft defenses, jets and other armaments. Suffice it to recall Russia’s recent military supply contract with Syria – worth \$1 billion – signed about the same time that Moscow declared it was writing off Syria’s debt of \$9 billion. If Russia were really interested in just money, it would not seem to be a prudent venture to promise new supplies to a country that had not yet paid for the previous ones.

Israel regards Russia’s cooperation with Syria and Iran as an indicator of the Kremlin’s willingness to regain the previously lost status of a great power in the Middle East. It hopes to achieve this,

Israel believes, by replaying a system of relationships that existed before Gorbachev's perestroika. "And what do you want from them? All of them grew out of Primakov's greatcoat," say the Israelis as they allude to a book that Primakov entitled, *Confidential. Middle East in the Limelight and Behind the Scenes* and published in August 2006. Primakov wrote that the Israeli operation against Hezbollah (in the same month) was "a bloody war that Israeli war-mongers led in Lebanon."

Meanwhile, Russia's assistance to Iran's unfolding nuclear program, and its efforts to block U.S. attempts to drive Teheran into international isolation, is interpreted by many as a bold testimony to the Russian leadership's anti-Israeli policies.

In the meantime, Russia is not the only country supplying weaponry to ill-willed regimes. Such actions are typical of Israel itself (to say nothing of its best friend, the U.S.), and this makes it difficult to understand why others demand that Russia be "a greater Christian than the Pope."

### PROBLEM 3:

#### DISILLUSIONMENT AND EMBARRASSMENT

It is hard to say what irritated the Israeli government and society more during the war against Lebanon: Hezbollah delivering strikes at Israeli territory with Russian-made armaments, or Russian officials turning a blind eye to this obvious fact. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's visit to Moscow two months after the end of combat operations did not eliminate the contradictions.

Fifteen years ago, many people in Israel felt sincere joy as relations were restored with Russia, a country whose historical territory is a birthplace of the majority of Israel's founding fathers. Yet during the second Lebanese war, the pendulum of public sentiment swung to the opposite side, as disillusionment and embarrassment took the place of happiness. Remarkably, such sentiments clearly contrast with the admiration that the majority of Israelis feel toward the U.S.

The problem is that Russia had nothing to do with Hezbollah's provocation against Israel – an attack against an Israeli outpost on

July 12, 2006, which was responsible for the death of eight soldiers of Israeli Defense Forces. Another two soldiers were taken captive, and virtually nothing is known about their fate even now. The incident spilled over into the Israeli-Lebanese war. Nor can anyone blame Russia for Israel's eventual inability to win the war, contrary to all expectations. Nor does Moscow have any guilt for the Israeli political leadership's decision to end the hostilities at a time when none of the goals declared by Prime Minister Olmert were reached. The captured soldiers remained in captivity, Hezbollah was not disarmed, and the threat to Israel's northern borders continued unabated.

It is true that Hezbollah fought with the aid of Russian weaponry, but what should we make of this? The Arab armies were equipped with Soviet weapons both during the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973 – yet were defeated all the same.

#### PROBLEM 4:

##### ALL THE EGGS IN ONE BASKET

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister (1948-1953) and Defense Minister (1955-1963), and Moshe Sharett, the first Foreign Minister (1948-1956) and the second Prime Minister (1954-1955), understood perfectly well how important it was for a small country surrounded by enemies to maneuver between superpowers while keeping the eggs in different baskets at the same time. In September 1952, Israel and Germany, which was guilty of the deaths of millions of Jews, signed an agreement on reparations for looted and confiscated Jewish property. Even though Britain actively blocked the rise of an independent Jewish state in Palestine, and impeded the immigration of Jews there during the Holocaust, it was with London (and Paris) that Israel signed a pact on joint combat operations against Egypt during the Suez crisis of 1956. Although Ben-Gurion never sided with supporters of the Stalinist model of 'barrack-room socialism,' the Soviet Union became the first country to recognize the State of Israel in 1948. Meanwhile, Soviet weaponry (which the



Israelis received via Czechoslovakia) helped the country win the Independence War of 1948 and 1949.

Over the last several decades, Israel has been pursuing a one-sided and imbalanced foreign policy. Whatever the actions taken by Washington, the U.S. is perceived as Israel's only genuine partner. Meanwhile, it is Israel's "best friends" that have been keeping Israeli agent Jonathan Pollard in prison for over twenty years. The U.S. never recognized Jerusalem (even its western part) as the capital of Israel, and never agreed to consider the Golan Heights as a part of Israel. The U.S. never made a statement to support Israel's right to refuse to readmit Palestinian refugees or their descendants on its territory. Yet the Israelis continue crying – perhaps louder than anyone else in the world – "God bless America, America and no other country!"

Such an approach toward the U.S. predestines the 'I don't-give-a-damn' attitude toward Russia in the majority of the Israeli establishment. The truth, however, is that Russia remains a nuclear power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, not to mention its status of a guarantor of global energy security. Russia is the home to the world's third largest Jewish community (this factor has always played a special role in bilateral relations).

In the past fifteen years, Israel appointed four ambassadors to Russia who did not speak Russian and had virtually no knowledge of the country's politics and culture. When offers of mediating in various areas of the Arab-Israeli peace settlement come from Russian diplomats, many of whom are versatile and pragmatically thinking experts with sound knowledge of the Middle East, Israeli leaders reject them outright. On some occasions, Russian representatives would be denied invitations to the very events in which they must participate due to the country's status as a co-sponsor of the Middle East peace talks (this was the case with the Sharm al-Sheikh summit in 2005).

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made dozens, if not hundreds, of declarations about allegiance to the Road Map. However, in November 2003 when the UN Security Council acted on Russia's initiative and passed Resolution 1515, which merely guaranteed its

support to the Road Map, Jerusalem took it as an anti-Israeli demarche.

If Israel really wants a foreign policy to meet its own national interests — one that is not pegged to American interests — it should make its own way. It should adopt a course of building multivector relations with various world powers, including Russia, since it will always be a global power. Israel must establish a fruitful dialog with the Kremlin for its own benefit. Only a serious and professional exchange of opinions will help reach a level of mutual understanding that will help consolidate the geopolitical position of the Jewish state.

#### PROBLEM 5:

#### GETTING WHAT IS ONE'S OWN

Russia has a number of complaints against Israel, too. One of them concerns Russian real estate in Jerusalem. While not actually denying the legitimacy of Russia's claims to the St. Sergius Metochion and the building of the Russian church mission, as well as various other facilities in Jerusalem, the Israelis continue to offer vague promises and unbinding pledges to transfer this property to Russia's control. The issue has been on the agenda of almost every meeting between Russian and Israeli leaders, yet it remains right where it was ten years ago. The Russian side is especially irritated by Israel's unwillingness to heed President Putin's personal appeal to expedite the solution of the problem.

Another problem overshadowing Moscow's perception of Israel is that it remains the domicile of particular individuals whose extradition Moscow insists on — mostly businessmen linked to the YUKOS oil corporation. One of these individuals that the Prosecutor General's Office of Russia would like to have back is Leonid Nevzlin, former member of the upper house of Russian parliament, the second president of the Russian Jewish Congress, and the closest ally of YUKOS' former CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

One cannot say that Israel does not extradite its citizens a priori. In 2002, it extradited the leader of Moscow's Baumansky criminal group, Andrei Zhuravlev. A year later, the Israelis

extradited Gennady Yagudayev, a man whom Russia placed on its federal wanted list for a series of crimes. But as for Nevzlin, he not only received citizenship, but also quickly rose to the president on the board of trustees of the Diaspora Museum. Furthermore, he set up a center – which carries his very own name – at the Jerusalem Hebrew University, etc. This situation vexes the Russian leaders; they view Nevzlin's current status as proof of Israel's disdain for demands placed by Russian security agencies, including those via Interpol.

#### PROBLEM 6:

#### HOW TO HEAR EACH OTHER

Mutual mistrust has irrevocably complicated interaction between official agencies of the two countries. Here are just two examples of the multitude of cases of distrust.

Currently, four Israelis who traded in diamonds and received long jail terms are being held in a Russian jail. Two Israeli Justice Ministers asked Moscow to pardon these individuals, but there are no signs at the moment that the issue is proceeding anywhere.

In November 2006, the Israeli side publicly refused to extend accreditation to Dr. Alexander Kryukov, a well-known professor of the Hebrew language and literature, whom the Russians requested to receive as the director of a Russian Cultural Center, which was set up under the auspices of the Foreign Ministry. The Israelis offered no explanations for the rejection. Even though eventually the professor did receive the necessary documents, the scandal that dragged on for several months did no good to bilateral relations.

It would be highly advisable for the numerous Jewish organizations in Russia to set themselves down to the task of helping the Russian Federation and Israel to improve their relationship. The leaders of Russian Jews who live in Russia and regularly visit Israel understand the mentality and considerations of both the Russian and Israeli top government officials. Hence, it is only they who can build the bridges between the two nations.