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**CAUGHT IN THE BEAR TRAP: LIBERAL THEORETICAL APPLICATIONS TO THE
RUSSO-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP**

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Introduction

Walking down Allenby Street in central Tel Aviv – Israel’s largest city and commercial capital – the extent of Russian influence is plain to see. The street is packed with small shops advertising books, souvenirs, and religious relics in Russian with only the occasional English or Hebrew for non-Russian speakers. Further south, in the suburb of Bat Yam, the Russian-speaking community flourishes with restaurants, community centers, and schools all geared towards serving former Soviet immigrants. Indeed, Israel boasts a Russian-speaking population between 700,000 and 1 million people,¹ and in 2016 about 260,000 Russian tourists visited Israel² – the second largest number of tourists by nationality to visit Israel after the United States.³ Many of Israel’s founders emigrated from Russian-governed Poland (David Ben Gurion, for example), and many of Israel’s leading politicians boast Russian or Soviet heritage. Recently retired Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman was born in Soviet Moldova, and former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was born of Russian immigrants. In fact, Sharon would speak Russian in his meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Since its inception, Russian immigrants have had a profound influence on Israel, and that current will continue as more and more Russian-speakers immigrate there.

To the North, the relationship between Israelis and Russians takes on a different tenor, especially since Russia entered the Syrian military theatre in 2015. Russia and Israel have worked together to secure the Syrian-Israeli border (called the Golan border), but whereas Russia’s priority in Syria appears to be bolstering Bashar Al-Assad’s regime and ensuring that his army prevails over the myriad of opposition forces within the country, Israel is focused on ensuring that Iran and its affiliates do not secure a permanent position in Southern Syria and use that position to attack Israel from the North. The two countries have made significant efforts to deconflict their respective objectives in Syria and cooperate directly to defeat shared targets.

At the same time, as Russia and Israel work alongside one another on security objectives in Syria, their political and economic relationships appear to be blossoming as well. Benjamin Netanyahu met with Putin over a dozen times since Russia entered the Syria theatre in 2015.⁴ Trade between Russia and Israel increased more than 25% between 2016 and 2017,⁵ and oil exports from Russia to Israel skyrocketed starting in 2015. There are certainly limits to these ‘soft power’ relationships – rhetoric on both sides about the closeness of the relationship is often overshadowed by Russia’s partnership with Iran in the Syrian theatre. However, as a Western-aligned nation, Israel’s tolerant political, economic, and social relationships with Russia are noteworthy, especially in light of their growing security cooperation in Syria.

Russia and Israel’s interactions in the security and political/economic realms are somewhat perplexing on face value. Why would Israel choose to cooperate so closely with a state that supports Iran, Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad, and other enemies of Israel? If Israel is so

¹ The last population census was conducted in Israel in 2008 and estimated about 1 million Russian speakers in Israel. The numbers have likely changed, and the next population will not occur until 2020.

² “Russian Tourism to Israel Up 54%.” *The Jewish Press*, 17 Mar. 2017, www.jewishpress.com/news/israel/russian-tourism-to-israel-up-54/2017/03/17/.

³ Schindler, Max. “More Tourists Visit Israel in 2017 than Ever Before.” *The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com*, 3 Jan. 2018, www.jpost.com/Israel-News/More-tourists-visit-Israel-in-2017-thaa-ever-before-522665.

⁴ Krasna, Joshua. “Moscow on the Mediterranean: Russia and Israel’s Relationship.” *Russia Foreign Policy Papers*, June 2018, www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/krasna2018.pdf.

⁵ “Israel’s Trade with Russia Leaps by 25%.” *The Times of Israel*, 30 Sept. 2017, www.timesofisrael.com/israels-trade-with-russia-leaps-by-25/.

firmly allied with the United States, why would it cultivate a friendly relationship with Russia, a competitor to the United States? Why is rhetoric concerning interactions in Syria largely negative whereas rhetoric concerning bilateral relationships warm and friendly? These are complex questions requiring complex answers, but in approaching the Russo-Israeli relationship as it exists today, it is useful to turn to the theoretical body of literature that explains interactions between states.

Classic theories of international relations – broadly falling into the three camps of realism, liberalism, and constructivism – offer competing and complementary explanations for why Israel may choose to cooperate with Russia. Liberalism and realism are the most widely applied bodies of theory, as they stand as “rationalist,” whereas constructivism is “non-rational” as it is primarily concerned with shared histories and ideas rather than ongoing interactions and events. Realism, as a body of theories that are concerned with balances of power and security relationships, would be most concerned with the logic behind Russia and Israel’s interactions in Syria. A realist would argue that Israel chooses to cooperate with Russia because they have no other choice for a security partner in Syria – while this is mostly true, it does not tell the whole story. A realist would also understand that power balances that manifest into military interactions are of primary concern in understanding the relationship, as military interactions reflect a state’s respective power on the world stage. In this understanding, political and economic relationships between states are of secondary importance to military relationships and exist either separately or to support military interactions.

Much of the prominent literature analyzing the contemporary Russo-Israeli relationship and several of the interviews conducted for this study reflect the realist perspective. However, this perspective overlooks Russia’s long game in the Middle East and ignores Israel’s long-standing relationship with Russia. It reflects how most Israelis (and arguably, many Americans) wish the Israel-Russia relationship would be – distant, fleeting, and temporary. Instead, we argue that the relationship is better explained through the lens of liberal theory. The body of literature on liberal theories of international relations argues that globalization encourages interstate cooperation economically, socially, politically, and in security. It further posits that cooperation mitigates violent confrontations between states and that states have an interest in growing their ‘soft’ relationships in order to stave off conflict. Though liberal theory shares many analytical frameworks with realism, it is primarily concerned with state preferences and bilateral ties as drivers of state interactions.

In this study, we conclude that the liberal lens is more appropriate for analyzing the Russo-Israeli relationship than the popular realist lens. Our conclusion is based on Russia’s observed aims in the Middle East and the correlation between rising bilateral and rising security ties. In using this theoretical framework as opposed to the realist framework, it becomes clear that Israel is getting ‘caught in the bear trap’ and becoming part of Russia’s long-term plans to establish itself as a world power and become a permanent source of in the Middle East.

Methodology

This study is based on an extensive literature review of classic and contemporary theoretical frameworks and applications (see literature review below). It is also based on analyses of publicly available economic data, analysis of open source collection from sources in English, Hebrew, and Arabic, and on nine interviews with American and Israeli experts on

Russian involvement in the Middle East and relations with Israel. These experts include prominent academics, former Israeli government officials, and former Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) generals and officers. The authors performed field research in Israel, including traveling to the Israeli-Syrian border to observe current and former IDF targets on the Syrian side of the border.

The study will begin with an overview of liberal and realist theories and how they would apply to the Russo-Israeli relationship. The next section will overview Russia's long-term goals for its involvement in the Middle East, how it goes about achieving these goals, and how – using the liberal lens – Israel fits into Russia's plan. The final two sections will overview the nature of the political/economic interactions between Russia and Israel and their security relationship. These sections will also outline how political/economic relationships grow alongside and at a similar pace with growing security cooperation, and how their corresponding growth serves as further evidence of a liberal theoretical lens. Finally, this study will conclude by predicting the future of the Russo-Israeli relationship using the liberal theoretical framework and what it might mean for the United States.

Literature Review

Our study relied heavily on a literature review surrounding themes of liberal and realist bodies of theory, Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, and hard/soft power cooperation between Russia and Israel. Our studies of Russian involvement in the Middle East and on hard/soft power cooperation relied on academic journals, news sources, think-tank studies, and some theoretical works.

In reviewing relevant works of realist and liberal literature, we turned primarily to the works of Stephen Walt, Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer, John Keohane, Joseph Nye, John Ikenberry, and Andrew Moravcsik. As a fundamental work of realist thought, Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, posits that as actors in an anarchic environment, states seek to balance one another's military might on the international stage. Power, Waltz argues, is what all states want, and they will maintain coalitions with other states and invest in their militaries to ensure that they have more power than their enemies.⁶ Mearsheimer introduces the concept of offensive realism in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, which posits that states desire hegemony, and will act offensively on the world stage in order to achieve influence and power over their rivals.⁷ Though Walt discusses the importance of alliances - which is often considered to be a matter of discussion for liberals - he paints alliances as a tool of power-balancing; that is, states will ally with each other in order to match or outpace the power of an adversary.⁸

Liberal theories of international relations were refined and defined by theorists such as Robert Keohane, John Ikenberry, and Andrew Moravcsik. Keohane theorizes in *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* that there can exist non-hegemonic cooperation - that is, in the absence of a powerful hegemon, non-hegemonic states can cooperate based on complementary interests.⁹ Keohane expands upon this theory in his book

⁶ Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Waveland Press, 2010.

⁷ Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.

⁸ Walt, Stephen M. *Origins of Alliance*. Cornell University Press, 1986.

⁹ Keohane, Robert O. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press, 2005.

co-authored with Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Nye and Keohane explore interdependence between states, and the costs and benefits of states relying on one another.¹⁰ They describe complex interdependence as consisting of multiple channels of connection (including between individuals or between formal offices), consisting of multiple issues that exist without hierarchy, and avoiding military confrontations when interdependence prevails. Ultimately they paint a picture of an increasingly globalized world that relies on mutually beneficial relationships and turns less frequently to conventional conflict.

Our research on Russian goals in the Middle East borrows heavily from the scholarship of Alexandre Sergunin and his work *Explaining Russian Policy and Behavior* where he discusses the tendency for U.S. policymakers to take a realist viewpoint when examining Russian foreign policy. Sergunin hypothesizes alternative methods of studying Russian foreign policy, including taking into consideration the importance of liberal theory and the idea that Russia is attempting to *coexist* with numerous actors and build relationships with countries that, especially in the context of the Middle East, are adversarial with one another. We discuss Sergunin's theories on the coexistence concept and his applications of liberal theory to Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. In order to understand the methods in which Russia builds partnerships in the Middle East, we also utilized research from Giulio Gallarotti and Joseph Nye, who provided the sources for our research on the importance of liberalism and soft power as a tenet of liberalism.

Our primary resource for our study of bilateral/soft power connections between Russia and Israel was Joshua Krasna's *Moscow on the Mediterranean: Russia and Israel's Relationship*. Krasna examines the extent of Israel and Russia's hard and soft power cooperation,¹¹ and instances of conflict between Russia and Israel. While not explicitly examining correlations between rising security and bilateral/soft power ties, Krasna's piece provides a foundational framework for drawing these conclusions. We used several news sources in order to identify specific incidents of political/economic cooperation between Russia and Israel. Malka Aharonson's *Relations between Israel and the USSR/Russia* - a think tank piece published by The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security - details the history of Russia and the USSR's relationship with Israel. Aharonson's piece sets forth proof of the longevity and depth of the Russo-Israeli relationship, and serves as evidence against frameworks that treat the relationship as issue-based and temporary.

Resources used when discussing hard power come from Andrew Moravcsik's *Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics* which discusses the concept of ideational liberalism. This section also borrows from scholars on soft power mentioned in the previous paragraph, sources which we use in conjunction with reliable media sources reporting on Russo-Israeli collaboration in Syria. Since the conflict in Syria is ongoing, we have relied on certified accounts on Twitter and media sources in both English and Arabic who report on the conflict in Syria in real time. By capturing day-to-day events on the ground in Syria we were able to collect the numerous instances of collaboration between Russia and Israel. Arab media sources include Enab Baladi, Syria Direct, Step News Agency, Muraselon News, and the Twitter accounts of Hadi al-Abdallah, Nasser Atta, and a former Brigadier General of the Syrian Arab Army who defected shortly after the beginning of the revolution in Syria - Ahmed Rahal. English

¹⁰ Keohane, Robert Owen., and Joseph S. Nye. *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Harper, 1989.

¹¹ Some of the examples given for hard/soft power cooperation were out of date given the paper's June 2018 publication date, so we also turned to more up-to-date news sources.

media sources include Reuters, The Guardian, al-Monitor, al-Jazeera, the British Broadcasting Corporation, Haaretz, Jerusalem Post, and the Times of Israel.

Liberal and Realist Applications

It is tempting to study Russia and Israel's respective security ties and bilateral ties as separate phenomena. After all, the security relationship takes on a different tone than the bilateral relationships with the official rhetoric around bilateral ties taking on a warm and friendly tone, whereas the rhetoric on security relations is more tense. Even Russian officials insist on discussing the relationships separately when speaking with Israeli officials.¹² Moreover, treating the two as separate phenomena allows both Russia and Israel more flexibility in both spheres – what happens in one won't affect the other.

However, for a myriad of reasons, these relationships should not be separated. Their relationship is strong, deep, and will continue long into the future. The realist approach is insufficient in this case, as it ignores Russia's intents in the Middle East, the history of Russo-Israeli relations, and the effects security cooperation has on economic and political cooperation as evidenced by the correlating rise between them. Ultimately, the most appropriate approach is one steeped in liberal theory of international relations, which takes into consideration the regional context and the mutual benefit that both countries reap from fostering a long and strong bilateral and security relationship with one another. For this reason, we believe that the liberal theory of international relations is the most appropriate lens by which to consider the contemporary Russo-Israeli relationship.

The Liberal Theory vs. the Realist Theory

In comparing liberal and realist theory in a general sense, it is important to realize that both theoretical bodies share many of the same assumptions. For instance, both theories see the state as the principal actor and understand that states pursue their interests on the international stage. Though this study uses international relations theory as a framework, we do not intend to provide a comprehensive overview of realist or liberal theories. However, it is worthwhile to provide a brief review of distinguishing features of both bodies of theory in order to understand how they may inform our understanding of the Russo-Israeli relationship.¹³

Realism stands as an incredibly diverse and ever-changing body of theoretical literature. Generally, realism posits that states pursue their national interests, and given the anarchy of the international arena,¹⁴ states will act in their self-interests in whatever way they see fit. Acting in self-interest is not exclusively tied to military means, though realists do understand that states often gain and manipulate power through military means. Alliances and domestic considerations are usually tied to power considerations, ie. whether the alliances or domestic decisions contribute to a given state's power.

¹² According to Vera Michlin-Shapir, Russian diplomats in the UN will often insist to Israeli diplomats that they change rooms when changing the conversation from security to political or economic issues. Michlin-Shapir, a Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University, was interviewed by the authors on March 13, 2019 at INSS.

¹³ This study will not be analyzing the constructivist theories, as these theories are somewhat less developed than realism and liberalism, nor do we believe that they are a compelling lens through which to view Russia's interactions with Israel.

¹⁴ That is, that there is no one state-actor that claims leadership over the rest.

Liberal theoretical literature, like realism, is varied and nuanced. Liberalism doesn't reject power competition between states, but rather adds that cooperation and interdependence are important to investigate in assessing a state-to-state relationship. In general, the body of theories emphasizes mutually beneficial prosperity, freedom, individualism, and equality. As applied to the global arena, liberalism emphasizes states as actors who desire cooperation towards mutual benefit. It highlights the importance of domestic considerations as a motivator of action on the international stage and the agency of civilian leadership.

Realism, Liberalism, and the Russo-Israeli Relationship

In general, it is wise not to dedicate oneself wholly to a single theoretical lens, given that there are occasions where one theory is more appropriate than the other. In the case of Russia and Israel, it is prudent to consider both perspectives in explaining why these states may choose to cooperate with one another in Syria. A realist lens focuses primarily on Russia and Israel's respective desire for power in the region. Russia wants to establish itself firmly in the region in order to project its own military might and gain power and influence on the world stage. Russia is inserting itself militarily into the instability of the Syrian Civil War in order to keep its ally in power and potentially influence the war's outcome as well as the future of Syria. Israel, as a major player in Syria, is at best a tool for Russia to further its goal of projecting power into Syria and at worst, a spoiler for Russian ambitions. Perhaps Russia is wielding its cooperative relationship with Israel in Syria in order to pressure the U.S. and Europe to relieve Russian sanctions.

Thus, the realist predicts that the Russo-Israeli relationship will degrade over time as clashes between the two sides continue to occur. The realist lens arrives at the conclusion that Russia's cooperation with Israel is based on Russia's immediate interests in Syria—if Israel were to become more of a harm than a help, Russia would end cooperation with Israel. Given that realism is concerned with power dynamics and states desire for power accumulation, the realist focuses on the power plays and interactions between states and how those shift in according to the situation.

Looking through the liberal lens, the whole relationship comes into focus. Keohane and Nye's theories of interdependence paint a picture where Russian military cooperation with Israel in Syria cannot be isolated from Russo-Israeli political or economic cooperation. Though Russia may be seeking influence with Assad and Khamenei by operating in Syria, it also seeks influence with Netanyahu. Russia has no obvious interests in fostering a combative relationship with Israel—indeed, both Israel and Russia have definitive interests in maintaining good and peaceful relations with one another. Israel desires influence over its enemies (Hezbollah, Iran, Hamas, etc.) by way of Russia, and Russia desires greater influence in the Middle East (and perhaps an "in" with the United States and Europe) by way of Israel.

Russia and Israel understand that some of their interests in Syria clash - for instance, Russia supports Iran, whom Israel is directly targeting in Syria. These clashing interests are a disaster waiting to happen; if, for example, Israel were to discover that Russia helped IRGC insurgents build tunnels into Israel, or if Israel accidentally kills Russian soldiers when going after IRGC units, the relationship will undoubtedly suffer. Therefore, it is critical for both parties to put as much buffer around the relationship as possible by fostering good relations outside of the Syrian conflict. Thus, a liberal says, these countries will make every effort to cooperate as much as possible. In that light, political and economic relations are very relevant to security

cooperation in Syria, as all these relational interactions are relevant components of the larger Russo-Israeli relationship.

Focusing on the relationship as a whole, it becomes clear that realism is insufficient as an explanatory framework. Though there certainly is power competition at-play between Russia, Israel, Syria, and Iran, the relationship is more appropriately characterized by a framework that emphasizes intersections of mutual benefit. Russia and Israel are both benefiting from working together - inside and outside of Syria. Moreover, in examining the domestic and doctrinal preferences of both states, it becomes clear that both states are interested in creating strong ties with one another.

A correlation between rising security relations and rising political and economic relations suggests that there is a connection between these aspects of the relationship as a whole. This gives credence to the liberal-based idea that Russia and Israel are creating 'buffer' relationships around their tenuous security relationships. If this correlation were present, then it would serve as evidence that the liberal body of theories is an appropriate lens through which to view the relationship. Sections 4 and 5 will detail evidence of this correlation.

Moreover, Russia time and again demonstrates willingness to establish complex interdependent ties with a variety of Middle Eastern states. Realism understands this strategy as a desire to increase power broadly and ensure that while Middle Eastern states fight, Russia remains in control. However, liberalism understands the mutually beneficial nature of these relationships, and how they help entrench Russia in the Middle East for the long term. The fact that Russia chooses to create systems of mutual benefit with a wide variety of regional actors and encourages stability in the Middle East is evidence that Russia is leaning towards a liberal foreign policy. If Russia were pursuing a more realist-style foreign policy, we would see Russia playing actors off one another and inserting itself into the fray as a chaos-manager, and thus become more powerful in the region. As the next section will explain, we see Russia performing more of the former than the latter.

Russia in the Middle East: Looking Beyond Israel

The nature of Russia's long-term goals in the Middle East provides substantial support in favor of prioritizing the liberal theoretical lens when examining the Russia-Israel relationship. In other words, Russia's observed relationships with other Middle Eastern countries, Russian rhetoric behind their agenda in the Middle East, in combination with the analyses of numerous experts on Russia, reveal that the Kremlin is attempting to establish a long-term presence in the Middle East by creating partnerships. In this section, we will examine Russian soft power in the Middle East through the lens of liberal theory and analyze how Russia has employed similar methods of attracting countries in the Middle East into its sphere of influence.

While most Western scholars prefer to view Russia through the realist lens, important work is being done to bring to light the problems with applying only realism to Russian foreign policy. In Alexander Sergunin's *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior*, he posits that Russia is truly an exceptional case study for international relations theory because individual theories applied to Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet era "work poorly or not at all."¹⁵ Sergunin states that, "the realist/neo-realist *power transition theory* developed by A.F.K

¹⁵ Sergunin, Alexander. *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior: Theory and Practice*. Ibidem-Verlag, 2016.

Organski and his followers is the most popular IR theory among the Western experts on Russia's foreign policy." Sergunin bases this assertion on the work produced by Western institutions who uphold the realist view and often state that Russia "maintains a zero-sum view of the world."¹⁶ Indeed, from RAND¹⁷ to NATO StratCom, this view of Russian foreign policy did well to explain international relations during the Cold War and has therefore dominated the academic landscape in the post-Soviet era. While there are many important components of Russian foreign policy that fit into the realist lens which hold credence, it is incomplete without a theoretical reflection on liberalism.

Russian Soft Power in the Middle East

Soft power is discussed by realists and liberal theorists and fits into both narratives on how and why countries use "intangible soft sources of power" which, according to G.M. Gallarotti, "Carries no such guarantee that an act of aggression can either be confronted or be perpetuated to eliminate a menacing actor."¹⁸ Gallarotti applies the work of Nye in discussing soft power as a tenet of liberalism, stating that, "The process of soft power itself represents a subset of neoliberal logic that more emphatically embraces the idea that nations can ascertain their objective interests and that there are abundant possibilities of harmony among those interests." This line of thinking applies to Sergunin's examination of Russian foreign policy where he asserts that Russian soft power could be a part of a "coexistence concept" where Russia seeks to coexist with other nations but still denies the dominance of a country or group of countries and prefers a multipolar world where Russia, along with other BRIC countries, have the freedom to maneuver its foreign policy goals as it sees fit without chastisement from the West. Russia and other emerging economies believe that "Russia is discontent with the global economic and financial systems which they believe was established to benefit the 'club' of highly developed countries. On the one hand Russia is dissatisfied with the West's geopolitical and economic dominance but on the other - Russia does not want to destroy the rules of the game but seeks to change global political and economic systems peacefully, within the international law framework."¹⁹

Sergunin cites strategies based in soft power as an important tenet of Russian foreign policy. Evidence of its use by the Kremlin date back as early as 2008 when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated, "Nowadays, the growing role is played by the so-called 'soft power'—an ability to affect the environment through civilizational, humanitarian, cultural, foreign policy and other forms of attractiveness."²⁰ This policy manifests most commonly in Russia's interactions with its 'near-abroad.'²¹ The soft power methods employed by Russia in

¹⁶ "Niklas Granholm, Johannes Malminen, Gudrun Persson (Eds). 'A Rude Awakening. Ramifications of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine.'" *StratCom*, Swedish Defense Ministry, June 2014, www.stratcomcoe.org/niklas-granholm-johannes-malminen-gudrun-persson-eds-rude-awakening-ramifications-russian-aggression.

¹⁷ Kofman, Michael, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva, and Jenny Oberholtzer, *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1498.html.

¹⁸ Gallarotti, Giulio M. "Soft Power: What It Is, Why It's Important, and the Conditions for Its Effective Use." *Journal of Political Power*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2011, pp. 25–47., doi:10.1080/2158379x.2011.557886..

¹⁹ Sergunin 2016

²⁰ Nye, Joseph S. "Soft Power and American Foreign Policy." *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 119, no. 2, 2004, pp. 255–270., doi:10.2307/20202345.

²¹ The term "near abroad" was used by Russia in the early 1990's to refer to the former Soviet states. Shevel, Oxana. "Russia and the Near Abroad." *Great Decisions*, 2015, pp. 5–16.

attempting to attract states in its near-abroad have been met with limited success, but Russia continues to attempt to make itself appealing to nations like Turkey and Israel by creating free-trade and promoting travel with visa-free travel.

The liberal theory can explain how Russia is able to maintain positive relations with such a diverse set of actors who see one another as adversarial. For instance, Russia currently maintains positive relations with Turkey, despite active Turkish opposition to the Assad regime in Syria. Aside from Netanyahu, Putin most frequently meets and speaks with Turkish President Recep Erdogan.²² Before Russian intervention in Syria, “Russia had emerged as Turkey’s number-one trading partner, and by 2014 bilateral trade reached approximately \$33 billion dollars with Turkey also becoming a top destination for Russian tourists.”²³ Much like the Russo-Israeli relationship, the Russo-Turkish partnership was complicated by Russia’s entry into the Syrian War. Turkey accidentally shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter jet in 2015 which damaged relations between the two nations, but similar to the Il-20 incident in September of 2018, relations have normalized since then. In 2016, Erdogan formally apologized to Putin for the downing of the Russian Su-24 and Russia ended the travel restrictions it had placed on Turkey as a result of the accident.²⁴ Since 2016, their relationship has moved primarily in a positive direction. In March of 2019 Russia and Turkey announced that they were holding talks to allow establish visa-free travel. In 2018 more Russians visited Turkey than any other nationality and made up 15.1% of all foreign visitors to Turkey.²⁵ This example shows how applying the liberal theory to Russia regarding its relationship with other nations can be useful as well.

International Coalitions

Turning to the liberal theory as a means of understanding Russia’s goals abroad, we find that Russia also uses international and economic coalitions to undermine the world order led by the U.S. and create a more favorable atmosphere for their diplomatic relations and trade. For example, Russia created an alternate version of the Geneva Process in their attempts to negotiate an end to the war in Syria. The Astana Process includes a series of meetings that have taken place between Russia, Iran, Syria, Syrian rebel groups and Turkey since 2015. The Astana Process has led to many decisions that have translated into on the ground developments in Syria including the establishment of de-escalation zones, ceasefire agreements, and newly reconciled areas of Syria under regime control.²⁶ While Realism does not discount international coalitions, realists state that such institutions are irrelevant and ineffective. Realists believe that self-interest fuels state motivations, which creates a large amount of distrust within international institutions. In realist literature there are many examples of the United Nations failing to prevent conflict.²⁷ According to liberal theory, international organizations lead to a more a peaceful environment.

²² Interview with Joshua Krasna by the authors, March 11, 2019

²³ Borshchevskaya, Anna. “Russia in the Middle East.” *Policy Focus*, vol. 142, Feb. 2016.

²⁴ “Russia Closes ‘Crisis Chapter’ with Turkey.” *News | Al Jazeera*, 29 June 2016, www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/russia-closes-crisis-chapter-turkey-160629131937917.html.

²⁵ Alakent, Betul. “Passport-Free Travel to Turkey Adds 600,000 Visitors from Russia.” *DailySabah*, 26 Mar. 2019, www.dailysabah.com/tourism/2019/03/27/passport-free-travel-to-turkey-adds-600000-visitors-from-russia.

²⁶ Wintour, Patrick. “Syria Safe Zones on Hold amid Concern over How Deal Will Be Enforced.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 9 May 2017, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/09/syria-safe-zones-on-hold-amid-concern-over-how-deal-enforced-russia-sergei-lavrov.

²⁷ Newman, Edward. *A Crisis of Global Institutions?: Multilateralism and International Security*. Routledge, 2009.

Adherents of the liberal theory state that institutions create strong incentives for cooperation while also implementing disincentives for exiting an institution.²⁸ It is yet to be seen as to whether the Astana process will lead to a long-term negotiation of the Syrian conflict, but it must be stated that Russian management of the Syrian Civil War has been largely successful – despite numerous actors and the vastly complicated nature of the conflict.

Though attracting members to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has been met with less success, this is also an example of how Russia has also sought to create an international coalition to foment free-trade cooperation. As Russia’s economy faltered after sanctions were imposed in 2014, Russia created the EAEU as a way for Russia to find other avenues of establishing trade with countries in order to counter the effect of Western-backed sanctions. The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union promotes methods of diplomacy and deconfliction between Russia and member-countries. Member countries include: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan; and Free-Trade Zone Members: Vietnam, China, and Iran. Other potential members currently involved in talks with Russia on joining the Eurasian Economic Union include Israel, Syria, and Lebanon²⁹

These examples provide evidence where Russia has been successful in building relationships utilizing soft power in the Middle East. Whereas realists are quick to point to the growing Russian military presence in the region, Russia’s focus on fostering dynamic and friendly bilateral relationships with a diverse set of actors points to the applicability of the liberal theory. The remainder of this study will examine the details of Russo-Israeli bilateral cooperation, security cooperation and the interconnections between these phenomena.

Bilateral Cooperation - ‘Soft Power’

In June 2016, Haaretz journalist Barak Ravid noted in an analytical piece following one of Netanyahu’s trips to Moscow, “It wouldn’t be exaggerating to say that the ties between Israel and Russia have never been better. It’s a fact. The volume of trade and tourism, as well as security and diplomatic cooperation, are at their peak.”³⁰ In observing the extent of the political, economic, social, and cultural ties between Russia and Israel, it is easy to see the truth in that statement. Indeed, the relationship between these countries (outside of the complicated nature of their security relationship) has improved steadily since 2009 but began a quick and substantial rise starting in late 2014 and growing rapidly since.

The liberal theoretical framework predicts that bilateral relations will grow as Russia and Israel deepen their security ties and Russia enmeshes itself as a major player in the Middle East. This section will present evidence that Israel and Russia are indeed improving their political and economic ties alongside their deepening security cooperation.

²⁸ Navari, Cornelia. “Liberalism.” In *Security Studies: An Introduction*, by Paul D. Williams, 29-43. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.

²⁹ Ahren, Raphael. “Israel and Iran Both Set to Join Russia-Led Free Trade Zone.” *The Times of Israel*, 12 Feb. 2019, www.timesofisrael.com/israel-and-iran-both-set-to-join-russia-led-free-trade-zone/.

³⁰ Ravid, Barak. “Netanyahu, Usually Outspoken, Dares Not Criticize Putin.” *Haaretz.com*, 10 Apr. 2018, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-netanyahu-usually-outspoken-dares-not-criticize-putin-1.5392543.

Putin and Netanyahu

Russia and Israel have maintained a close relationship since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, beginning with Yeltsin and continuing onto Putin, Medvedev, and Putin again. Given Putin's long reign, Israeli leaders have made great efforts to maintain friendly terms with the Russian leader. For his part, Putin has frequently expressed his admiration for Israel and for the Jewish people, despite a long and virulent history of antisemitism in Russia.³¹ However, even in light of ongoing 30-year friendly relations between Russia and Israel, Netanyahu's relationship with Putin has outmatched any previous relationships between Israeli leaders and Putin in manner of intensity and warmth.

Russian officials claim that Netanyahu visits Moscow more often than he visits Washington, and that Netanyahu's relationship with Putin is stronger than his relationship was with Barack Obama.³² In a later interview with Krasna, he notes that Russian officials have told him that Putin's most frequent phone calls to foreign leaders are to Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and to Netanyahu.³³ He also notes that both Putin and Netanyahu are drawn to strong and decisive leaders, which may explain their personal affinity for one another.

In April 2019, Netanyahu invited Putin to attend Israel's unveiling of a monument honoring the defenders of Leningrad in World War II. The fact that such a monument even exists in Israel serves as a testament to how highly Israel values Russian friendship. This April meeting was the third time Netanyahu had visited Moscow in three months,³⁴ and the fact that it came just days before Israeli parliamentary elections likely indicates that Netanyahu feels that his relationship with Putin is beneficial to his standing as Prime Minister of Israel.

Political and Economic Favor

In 2014, the United States and Europe broadly and unequivocally condemned Russia's military intervention in Crimea and initiated sanctions. Israel, however, failed to condemn Russia and declined participation in the resulting sanctions.³⁵ The same year, Russia vocally supported Israel's Operation Protective Edge in Gaza, standing as one of the few world leaders to do so.³⁶ The next year, Russian military operations kicked off in Syria and the relationship between Russia and Israel reached a new level. Between 2015 and 2016, Russia voted against Israel nine separate times in the UN³⁷ (including voting for an Egyptian resolution supporting inspections of Israeli nuclear sites, a Palestinian resolution that called for erasing Jewish ties to the Temple Mount, among other sensitive topics), and yet Netanyahu failed to publicly criticize Russia's votes despite criticizing other Western countries for votes on the same resolutions. In 2017, Russia affirmed West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (though maintaining that East Jerusalem

³¹ Interview with Mark Katz by the authors, February 5, 2019

³² Krasna, 2018

³³ Krasna interview

³⁴ Suchkov, Maxim. "Putin, Netanyahu Break Ground on Deeper Russia-Israel Engagement." *Al-Monitor*, 4 Apr. 2019, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/russia-israel-syria-putin-netanyahu.html.

³⁵ UN General Assembly Resolution, 68/262, *Draft Resolution on the Territorial Integrity of Ukraine*, March 27, 2014

³⁶ Cohen, Josh. "Putin Is the Closest Thing to a Friend Israel Has Ever Had in Moscow." *Ynetnews*, Ynetnews, 14 Jan. 2016, www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4752828,00.html.

³⁷ Ravid, Barak. "Netanyahu, Usually Outspoken, Dares Not Criticize Putin." *Haaretz.com*, 10 Apr. 2018, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-netanyahu-usually-outspoken-dares-not-criticize-putin-1.5392543.

should be the capital of a future Palestinian state), months before American president Donald Trump moved the US embassy to Jerusalem.³⁸

As operations in Syria escalated, relations between Russia and Israel rose in kind. A very clear way to observe this is through trade statistics. Since 2015, trade between Russia and Israel has spiked significantly (see figure A). Between 2016 and 2017, trade increased between the two countries by 25%.³⁹

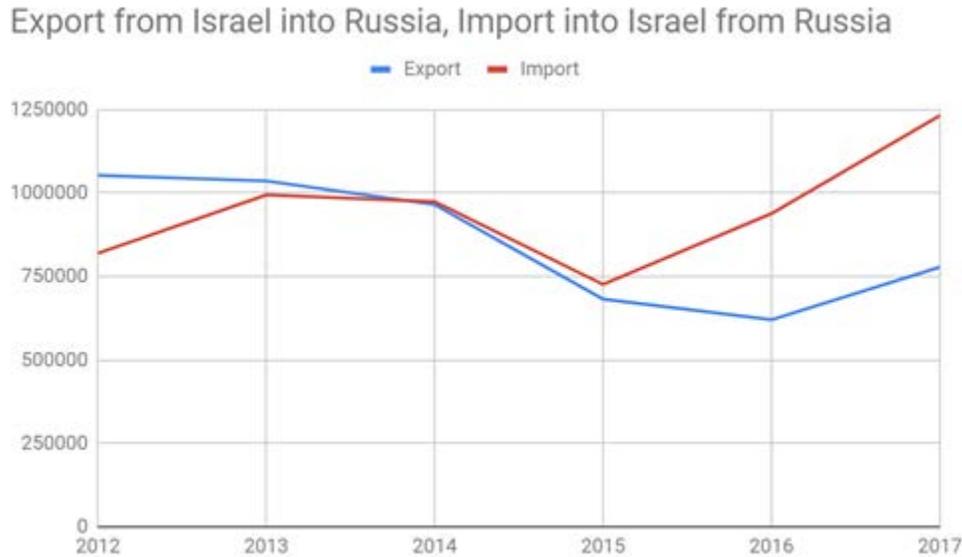


Figure A: Total import/export for Israel and Russia. Data collected from World Bank.

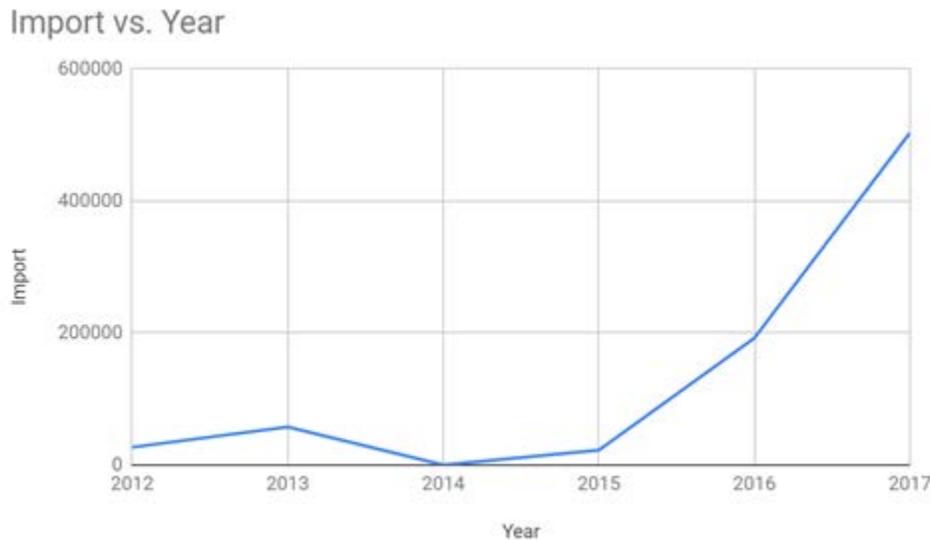


Figure B: Fuel imports into Israel. Data collected from World Bank.

³⁸ Borshchevskaya, Anna. "Putin's Self-Serving Israel Agenda." *Foreign Affairs*, Foreign Affairs Magazine, 13 Apr. 2017, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2017-04-13/putins-self-serving-israel-agenda.

³⁹ "Israel's Trade with Russia Leaps by 25%." *The Times of Israel*, 30 Sept. 2017, www.timesofisrael.com/israels-trade-with-russia-leaps-by-25/.

Fuel imports skyrocketed starting in 2015 (see figure B). Prior to 2015, Israel sourced much of its crude oil imports from Iraqi Kurdistan, Kazakhstan, Egypt, Russia and several others.⁴⁰ Starting in 2015, however, Russia climbed as a major energy provider to Israel, reaching around \$1 billion in total value. Around the same time, Israel began developing its newly discovered natural gas fields--both offshore and in the Golan Heights.⁴¹ In January 2019, Israel announced that it would be partnering with Egypt and Cyprus to develop their natural gas fields in the Mediterranean, which would eventually lend Europe an alternative energy market, and would decrease reliance on gas and oil from Russia. Though this project is in its nascent stages, it marks an Israeli intent to become energy independent and to expand trade with Europe.⁴² However, as it stands now, Israel continues to rely on Russia to meet its energy needs. Ultimately, trade between Israel and Russia is negligible in comparison to each country's other trading partners. However, in the face of sweeping Western sanctions on Russia, Israel stands as an important 'no strings attached' trading partner.⁴³ Moreover the spikes starting in 2015 are noteworthy given that 2015 marked the start of European and American sanctions on Russia in response to the Crimea crisis, in addition to marking the start of Russian operations in Syria.

Bilateral interactions

Of note are some of the smaller scale political and economic interactions between Russia and Israel. As mentioned previously, Russia signals interest in the affairs of Russian and former Soviet immigrants to Israel (though whether or not the Russian Federation truly cares about their wellbeing is up for debate).⁴⁴ Russia considers these individuals to still be tied to the Russian Federation, even if they have not lived in or visited Russia in decades.⁴⁵ Russia frequently expresses that it takes the Russo-Israeli population into direct consideration when considering threats to the region, such as the conflict with the Palestinians and the Iran nuclear program.⁴⁶ Notably, though Russia has been paying pensions to veterans who fought for the USSR in WWII and have since immigrated to Israel, Russia announced in 2017 that it would begin paying pensions to all immigrants from Russia who arrived in Israel before 1993.⁴⁷ Notably, Russia does not pay domestic pensioners due to an apparent lack of funds, though has made it a priority to pay pensioners living abroad and are no longer directly tied to Russia.⁴⁸ Moreover, Russia announced this pensioner policy in the midst of a major economic downturn. Though the amount of monthly cash from these pensions comes out to less than \$20 per person, Russia's deliberate decision to extend pensions to former Russian and Soviet immigrants speaks volumes given the circumstances.

⁴⁰ "Israel Importing 77% of Its Oil Supply from Iraqi Kurdistan, Financial Times Says." *The Jerusalem Post* / *JPost.com*, 24 Aug. 2015, www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Israel-importing-77-percent-of-its-oil-supply-from-Iraqi-Kurdistan-Financial-Times-says-413055.

⁴¹ "U.S. Energy Information Administration - EIA - Independent Statistics and Analysis." *Israel - International - Analysis - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)*, www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.php?iso=ISR.

⁴² Interview with Joshua Krasna

⁴³ Krasna 2018

⁴⁴ Interview with Isabella Ginor by the authors, March 13, 2019

⁴⁵ Interview with Vera Michlin-Shapir

⁴⁶ Aharonson, Malka. "Relations between Israel and the USSR/Russia." *JISS*, 9 May 2018, jiss.org.il/en/aharonson-relations-israel-ussr-russia/.

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Krasna 2018

Israel is the only state outside of the former USSR that celebrates May 9 as Victory Day, which commemorates the USSR's victory in World War II. The Russian Federation also maintains a Cultural Center in Tel Aviv, and a robust Israel-Russia Business Council to encourage cultural and business connections between the two states. Culturally, Israel stands as an important religious site for Russian Orthodox pilgrims, which drives both tourism to Israel and Russian sentimentality for the state.

Of course, these instances of friendship pale in comparison to Israel's relationship with the United States. The U.S. remains Israel's first and foremost partner in trade, military collaboration, political interaction, and tourism, among many other things. Though Russia seeks military technology trade with Israel, Israel refuses to do so at the request of the United States, which has expressed concerns that technologies given to Russia cannot be easily tracked and may end up in the possession of adversaries to the United States.⁴⁹ However, despite cautioning from the United States, Israel went through with a \$300 million drone deal with Russia in 2015—drones which were likely used in operations in Ukraine.⁵⁰ Israel has not sold significant military technology to Russia since then, and limited its training for Russian military forces to medical training.

Even so, the levels of positive political, economic, and cultural interaction between Russia and Israel are of note, even if they are more infrequent and to a lesser extent than Israel's interactions with the United States. For Israel and its leaders to so frequently and so positively interact with the state that has historically persecuted the Jewish people, supports Iran and Hezbollah, and stands counter to many American and European values and interests, makes their relationship exceptional. Russia's economic downturn in 2014 and its further fiscal limitations have not stopped Russian investment into Israel, and the friendship appeared to bounce back within months of the Russian Il-20 spy plane being shot down in September 2018.

Though its economic investment is comparatively small compared to investments by China, the United States, India and others, Russia comes bearing gifts of political legitimacy rather than gifts of wealth.⁵¹ We can see evidence of this across the Middle East, where Russia paints itself as politically generous and consistent (see section on Russia in the Middle East).⁵² It does the same with Israel, as Putin and Netanyahu grow their friendship, trade steadily increases, cultural ties blossom, and Russia reaches out to accommodate Russian and Soviet origin immigrants in Israel. Moreover, the fact that their relationship has expanded alongside expanding Russo-Israeli security interaction in Syria is noteworthy and serves as further evidence for the liberal-theoretical perspective.

Security/Hard Power Cooperation

Hard power is often considered to be the crux of realist analysis. As mentioned, realists understand military activity to be the mode by which states gain power in an anarchic international system. However, hard power does not belong to the realists. Security relations play

⁴⁹ Interview with Joshua Krasna

⁵⁰ Вестомости. "Российская Армия Продолжит Закупать Беспилотники Израильской Разработки." – *ВЕДОМОСТИ*, 3 Sept. 2015, www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2015/09/04/607459-rossiiskaya-armiya-prodolzhit-zakupat-bespilotniki-izraillskoi-razrabotki.

⁵¹ Interview with Joshua Krasna

⁵² Interview with Mark Katz

a pivotal role in liberal theory, as they serve as a mode by which cooperation and interdependence can take place. Both theorists understand that hard power is a vital partner to soft power, but in the liberal theoretical context, interdependence between states includes security-related interdependence.

In this section, we will explain the nature of the hard power interactions between Russia and Israel. We argue that the rhetoric being promoted by Israeli and Russian leaders drives a narrative that differs significantly from what is happening on the ground in Syria and how what is occurring fits into the lens of liberal international relations theory. We will highlight other instances of Russian consideration of Israeli interests in the Syrian theatre of war, and how this shows the ways Russia uses smart power to achieve its foreign policy goals in the Middle East. Though their interests may diverge in several areas, Russia and Israel are actively choosing to deconflict and often cooperate in Syria. This hard power interdependence, taken in conjunction with their simultaneously growing soft power interdependence, points to the applicability of the liberal theoretic lens and the importance of considering both types of power in assessing the relationship.

Russo-Israeli Cooperation since 2015

As noted in the prior section, leading up to 2015 Russia and Israel experienced a growth in economic and bilateral political ties. In the liberal theoretical framework, this fits into the variants mentioned previously--economic interdependence and what Moravcsik calls 'ideational liberalism', that is, Russia and Israel's state preference for one another based on domestic social values and identities.⁵³ Liberalism posits that improved political and economic ties will lead to peace, which has been the case for Russia and Israel. Their preference for one another based on values, political, and economic ties have created a solid foundation and ideal circumstance for cooperation to take place between Israel and Russia. In order to better understand this cooperation, this section will evaluate the ways in which the nations have cooperated in the Syrian theatre of war.

Security cooperation between Russia and Israel began when Russia intervened in Syria in September of 2015, Putin and Netanyahu met for the first time to discuss methods of military deconfliction between the two parties within the Syrian theater.⁵⁴ As Russia entered the Syrian Civil War on Assad's behalf, Putin and Netanyahu sought to make sure Israel and Russia did not find themselves countering one another's goals.

We conducted interviews with Israeli and American policy experts and former members of the Israeli military who spoke of the Russo-Israeli relationship in realist terms, stating that the two countries have different goals in Syria and merely trying not to get in one another's way. Much of what we heard during our interviews fell in line with rhetoric often heard in the mainstream media and portrayed an Israel that has no choice but to cooperate with Russia in order to carry out airstrikes in Syria. However, academic literature shows quantitatively that cooperation was statistically the most likely outcome, and as very little to do with a simple security agreement between states. As explained by Paul in *International Relations Theory and Regional Transformations*, "An alliance has only a weak effect in reducing the likelihood of

⁵³ Moravcsik, Andrew. "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics: Erratum." *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 01, 1998, p. 229., doi:10.1162/002081898550536..

⁵⁴ Tsvetkova, Maria. "Israel, Russia to Coordinate Military Action on Syria: Netanyahu." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 21 Sept. 2015, www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-israel/israel-russia-to-coordinate-military-action-on-syria-netanyahu-idUSKCN0RL10K20150921.

violence. This indicates the importance of liberal, rather than realist, theory: good economic relations provide greater assurance of peace than does an explicit security agreement.”⁵⁵ While the Syrian theater of war should have become the setting for conflict between the two countries due to Russia’s partnership with Iran, Russia and Israel’s strong political relationship and economic interdependence set the stage for cooperation in Syria.

Russo-Israeli cooperation is often taken for granted, and below we demonstrate the extent to which Russia takes into consideration Israeli interests in the Syrian theater of war. Israel decisively began a series of targeted airstrikes against Hezbollah/Iranian military installations and convoys in 2013 and since then have launched hundreds of airstrikes on known Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)/Hezbollah locations throughout Syria. (See Figure C below for a map of Israeli airstrikes in Syria since 2017.)

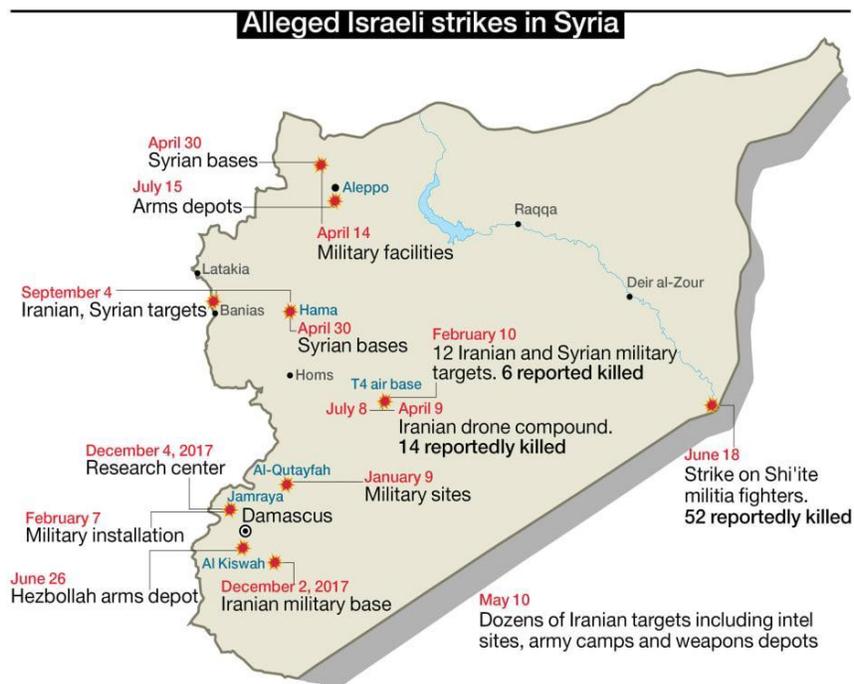


Figure C: Israeli airstrikes in Syria

⁵⁵ Paul, T. V. *International Relations Theory and Regional Transformation*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

The Il-20 Incident

Though it may seem contradictory, there is further evidence of cooperation found in the incident that occurred in September when Syrian forces on the ground accidentally shot down a Russian Ilyushin-20M reconnaissance plane which killed all 15 Russian service members on board. The Russian Defense Ministry blamed Israel for the downing of the plane, stating that an Israeli jet fighter had deliberately used the Russian surveillance plane as cover for its own warplanes. The consequences of this accident led to a dispute between Russian and Israeli leaders.

Russia had full knowledge that Syrian forces on the ground conducted the attack because it was later reported that Russian forces arrested members of the Syrian 44th Air Defense Battalion responsible for the incident.⁵⁸ The ongoing negative rhetoric between Israel and Russia was widely covered in the media, and in the end, Russia decided to provide S-300 surface to air missile (SAM) defense systems into Syria, which Israel vehemently objected to. This may have all been smoke in mirrors on Russia's part considering the S-300's were delivered 6 months ago, and are supposed to have been operational and manned by Syrian forces by now - but it is reported that Russia is refusing to allow Syrians to operate the S-300's. As outlined in a report from *Maariv*, the "question of independent operation of the air defense system is a matter for Russia to decide and not related to the operational capability of the Syrians trained to maintain the system."⁵⁹ Essentially, Russian rhetoric regarding the illegality of Israeli airstrikes and promises to provide protection to Assad's forces do not match what we are seeing actually taking place on the ground. Russia's unwillingness to allow Syrian forces the use of the S-300 defense system is proof of this as a situation where cooperation between Russia and Israel is occurring.

Following the Il-20 incident the number of airstrikes carried out by Israel decreased significantly but do still occur. It will be interesting to see if Israel decides to begin increasing the number of airstrikes as the Il-20 incident falls further into the past. So far this year, Israel struck Iranian targets outside of Damascus on January 21, shelled an observation post in Southern Quneitra Province on February 11,⁶⁰ and on March 27 conducted an airstrike in the Aleppo countryside, which killed 7 members of the IRGC.⁶¹ Moreover, in January of this year, Netanyahu began claiming responsibility for Israeli airstrikes in Syria, ending a decades long policy of maintaining a sense of ambiguity regarding Israeli attacks carried out in the region.

Rhetoric in the media during the time of the Il-20 incident and the Russian response to provide Syria with S-300's questioned the future of the Russia-Israel relationship and predicted that it may become more contentious in the future. A realist looking at their relationship only can see realpolitik and the tension that exist due the anarchic nature of states. But from the perspective of liberal theory, we assert that Russia is refusing to allow Syrians to operate the S-300 systems and the Israel-Russia relationship will continue in the same manner as before the

⁵⁸ <https://twitter.com/hasanalhamada/status/1042798463518429185>; Brigadier General Ahmed Rahal, Twitter, September 18, 2018

⁵⁹ "Syrians Are Practicing with the S-300, Will They Ever Use It? – Report." *The Jerusalem Post* / *JPost.com*, 25 Mar. 2019, www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Syrians-are-practicing-with-the-S-300-will-they-ever-use-it-Report-584563.

⁶⁰ Khoury, Jack. Kubovich, Yaniv. "Syria Reports Israeli Attacks Near Southern Border." *Haaretz*. <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/syria-israel-shells-abandoned-hospital-observation-post-near-border-1.6931677>. 19 Feb. 2019.

⁶¹ Al Jazeera. "Syrian Military: Israeli Air Attack Targeted Aleppo." *Syria News* / *Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 28 Mar. 2019, www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/syrian-military-israeli-air-strikes-targeted-aleppo-190328063524439.html.

incident, especially as time passes and the Il-20 incident falls further from memory. This case could be compared to the Su-24 incident between Turkey and Russia in 2015, which created a cold snap in diplomatic relations that was thawed rather quickly due to positive political/economic relations and reinstating cooperation between the two nations.

The Russo-Iranian Coalition in Syria

Taking into consideration Russia's goals in the Middle East as outlined previously in this paper, it is important to note the partnership Russia has been cultivating with Iran. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy describes the recent Russo-Iranian relationship saying, "Tehran has proved itself to be Russia's friend in times of need, by helping promote peace and stability in the Caspian littoral and in Central Asia, and in limiting the presence of third countries in regional affairs."⁶² Using a combination of liberal theory and research on Russian foreign policy, we predict that while Russia seeks to keep Iran from obtaining influence in Syria, they will continue to appease Iran by continuing to build economic interdependence with the country. We will conclude this section by laying out our prediction for the future of Russo-Israeli cooperation in Syria according to liberal theory.

Russia was forced to contend with Iran and Israel's prior conflict with one another in the context of the Syrian War leading up to their military intervention in 2015. Iran, who was asked by Bashar al-Assad in 2011 to send reinforcements to help quell the Syrian Revolution, agreed to send ground troops to help Assad stay in power and has been sending Hezbollah forces to Syria since 2012. Due to circumstances already underway in Syria, Russia was forced to form a coalition with Iran/Hezbollah in order to keep Assad in power. Despite this, Israel continued to take into consideration Russian interests in world affairs. For example, former Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman stated in 2014 after Israel decided not to participate in Western-led sanctions against Russia, "Even when our close partners pressured us, as in the case of sanctions against Russia, we did not join them. We take Russia's interests into account and we hope that Russia will take into account our interests here in the Middle East."⁶³ This incident was indicative of how the situation in Syria has actually pushed Russia and Israel closer together rather than farther apart. Israel not participating in Western-backed sanctions meant that Israel became one of the few countries with a healthy economy that could engage in trade with Russia. As a result, Russia further advanced economic ties between the two countries. As mentioned in the previous section, Russia has been the largest supplier of oil and natural gas to Israel since 2015 (the year after sanctions were enacted) and trade between the two countries grew 25% by 2017. As argued by liberal theorists, the strengthening of economic ties between the two countries will lead to greater cooperation in the security arena. We assess from recent trends in Syria that greater cooperation will come in the form of Russian attempt at securing Southern Syria. This is not to say the Russia is "kicking Iran out of Syria" but rather - attempting to push Iran from the borders with Jordan and Israel in order to maintain positive diplomatic relations with both countries, while still cutting a deal with Iran allowing them to have a presence in Syria as long as it is not in the south.

⁶² Kozhanov, Nikolay. "Russia's Position on Iran's Nuclear Program." *Russia's Position on Iran's Nuclear Program - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 19 Apr. 2012, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-position-on-irans-nuclear-program.

⁶³ "Israel to Russia: We Sat out Western Sanctions, so Help Us in Mideast." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 3 May 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel-russia/israel-to-russia-we-sat-out-western-sanctions-so-help-us-in-mideast-idUSKBN1I41AB.

There is doubt as to how much control Russia maintains over the Iranian presence in Syria, as Russia often notes that Iran was asked by the Assad regime to intervene in 2011 and has been present in the Syrian theatre long before Russia intervened in 2015. Putin stated a number of times that, “Moscow cannot bring about the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria.”⁶⁴

From a realist perspective, Russia’s motivations in Syria are explained by looking at Russia’s own self-interest, cultivating power by forming diplomatic relations with all actors - especially those presently in Syria. While this perspective holds merit and should not be disregarded, we believe that strong bilateral interdependence between Russia and Israel, Turkey, and Iran creates a platform for diplomacy and coexistence to take place. In this view, we do not discount realism and Russia’s attempt to gain power via influence but argue that liberal theory principles regarding bilateral interdependence and liberalism are of special importance in understanding how Russia is able to avoid an escalation of conflict when incidences like the SU-24 and Il-20 occur.

Conclusions

Our research was motivated by what we viewed as a superficial understanding of the Russo-Israeli relationship in the media and among U.S. policymakers. The U.S. relationship with Israel is undeniably strong, and Russia is unlikely to replace the United States as Israel’s most important ally. However, it is important for the United States to be aware of an Israel that is increasingly taking into consideration the interests of Russia, especially as the U.S. continues to disengage from the Middle East.

Moreover, it is important for U.S. and Israeli policymakers to understand the implications of Israel’s increasing cooperation with Russia. In analyzing the situation through the liberal lens, it becomes clear that Israel is becoming ensnared in Russia’s trap. By forging these ties – politically, economically, culturally, and militarily – Israel is supporting Russia’s claim to the Middle East. Israel, as a quasi-Western country in the heart of the Middle East, legitimizes Russia’s involvement throughout the region and will find it difficult to completely remove itself from Russia’s sphere of influence due to the extensive soft-power ties mentioned. It is impossible to predict how this relational entrenchment will affect Israel going forward, but it is critical that both American and Israeli policy makers recognize this trend.

It is tempting to place undue attention on Russo-Israeli cooperation in Syria while ignoring the broader relationships Russia maintains in the Middle East and the growing bilateral relations between these countries. Doing so neatly organizes seemingly conflicting phenomena and allows Israel and Russia a free hand to engage in growing political and economic relations. However, to focus on the security phenomena alone is to risk analytical bias. The relationship needs to be looked at through a wider lens, complications and all. The connections between growing security relations and growing bilateral relations cannot be ignored, nor can evidence of Russia’s goals in the Middle East and its interactions with regional actors. Indeed, the liberal theoretic lens provides the wider context needed to conduct this kind of analysis.

What, then, should the United States do? Given the liberal theoretical lens, there is no reason to believe these trends will reverse or that Russia’s quest for dominance in the Middle

⁶⁴ Tibon, Amir. “Trump Aide Bolton: Putin Told U.S. He Can't Get Iranian Forces out of Syria.” *Haaretz.com*, 22 Aug. 2018, www.haaretz.com/us-news/russia-could-not-bring-about-pull-out-of-iran-from-syria-1.6408383.

East will be unsuccessful. Russia so far has been very successful in achieving their goals, especially as the U.S. pivots its focus away from the region. Can (or should) the U.S. do anything to halt the Russian/Israeli embrace?

For the near term, the U.S. should continue to deter Israel from trading any high-tech or military technologies with Russia. More importantly, U.S. policymakers should be aware of the implications surrounding a closer Israel-Russia relationship when creating policies that affect both countries. Their ever-growing relationship often goes unnoticed because of negative media attention on points of conflict in Syria. However, behind the scenes, they value positive cooperation and continue to pursue it. The U.S. can keep the relationship in check by ensuring that it maintains a strong relationship with Israel and that it keeps a close watch on Russia's activities in the Middle East, especially as they pertain to Israel.

In our increasingly globalized world, perspectives that take interdependence, cooperation, and mutual benefit into consideration are of great value. These perspectives can offer insight into phenomena that might otherwise be missed if we assume that states primarily pursue dominance in the international system. This study offers a timely and relevant example of classic international relations theory as applied to an otherwise perplexing relationship. In critically assessing theoretical application to these phenomena, our study serves as a testament to the relevance of theoretical application as a way to frame a problem and discover solutions.

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