

# MOSCOW AND JERUSALEM: A TROUBLED 75 YEAR RELATIONSHIP

By

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, it has had, at best, a mixed relationship with the Soviet Union and, since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, with the Russian Federation. Initially, under Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, the relationship was good as the Soviet Union provided diplomatic support and arms (via Czechoslovakia) to help Israel win its war of independence. Soon afterwards, however, an increasingly paranoid Stalin cracked down on the USSR's Jewish community and Soviet-Israeli relations were seriously damaged. Stalin's successors, Khrushchev and Brezhnev chose to back the Arabs in their conflict with Israel and, consequently, Israel's relations with the USSR were strained, with Brezhnev breaking diplomatic relations with Israel during the June 1967 Six Day War, and Soviet and Israeli pilots clashed over Egypt in 1970. When Gorbachev took power in 1985, however, there was a marked improvement in Soviet-Israeli relations. Diplomatic relations were restored, first at the Consular level in 1988 and then fully in 1991. Perhaps even more important, as far as Israel's security was concerned, Gorbachev allowed hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel, and also

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cautioned both the PLO and Israel that they had to settle their conflict with Israel politically, and not by war.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, there was a brief honeymoon between the Russian Federation (hereafter Russia) and Israel in the first few years of Yeltsin's rule as Russia's President. However, as Yeltsin began to take a harder line with the United States over such issues as Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, and appointed Yevgeny Primakov as Russia's Foreign Minister in 1995, Moscow again took a pro-Arab position in the Arab-Israeli Conflict. Nonetheless a strong bilateral relationship began to develop between Russia and Israel, with trade, cultural ties, and even military production agreements. This pattern of regional differences but strong bilateral ties would continue under Vladimir Putin.

The advent of Putin to Russia's Presidency in 2000 marked another phase of Russian-Israeli relations. Bilateral ties between Israel and Russia were perhaps the best ever, with trade growing to over \$3 billion dollars, extensive cultural ties, and the continued permission for Russian Jews to emigrate to Israel. On the other hand, Russia increasingly backed Israel's regional enemies, particularly Syria and Iran with diplomatic support and sophisticated arms. Then, when Russia

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intervened militarily in Syria in 2015 to save the Assad regime, Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu worked out a modus vivendi under which Israel remained free to bomb Iranian and Hizbollah positions in Syria as it had been doing since Iran had tried to establish bases there after the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, in return for Israel not siding with the enemies of Bashar Assad who were trying to overthrow his regime. Israel's freedom of action in Syria, along with Jerusalem's desire to continue the free flow of Jewish emigration from Russia to Israel, helps explain the relatively neutral position taken by Israel following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

## II. HOW THE INTERPLAY OF ISRAELI SECURITY CONCERNS AND THE FATE OF THE JEWS OF THE SOVIET UNION/RUSSIA HELPED DETERMINE THE COURSE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN MOSCOW AND JERUSALEM FROM 1948 TO 2023

In looking at the thrust of relations between Moscow and Jerusalem since 1948, there are two dominant themes. The first is security as Israel, since the death of Stalin in 1953 has been concerned about Moscow's aid, both diplomatic and military, to Israel's regional enemies. The second major issue has been the emigration first of Soviet and then Russian Jews to Israel. Given the fact that the ethos of Israel

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is to gather Jews from around the world and bring them to Israel, the Russian Jewish community has always been important to Israeli leaders as a key source of immigrants. Consequently, getting the Jews out of first the Soviet Union and then Russia has been an important priority for Israeli leaders even if such advocacy contributed to the worsening of relations between Moscow and Jerusalem as Soviet leaders—at least until Gorbachev--- saw the Jews who wanted to leave the USSR as traitors to the “workers paradise”. (1)

#### A. THE STALINIST ERA 1948-1953

It came as a surprise to many in the world community when, in the UN debates on Palestine in 1947, the Soviet Union, hitherto a major opponent of Zionism, came out in support of partitioning the British Mandate over Palestine, into Jewish and Arab states, thereby recognizing Zionism and Jewish nationalism. Indeed, Soviet UN Representative Andrei Gromyko’s UN speech in favor of partition, was in the words of David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister, “One of the very best Zionist speeches he had ever heard”. ( 2 ) Since the days of Lenin, the Bolsheviks (later the Communists) had been opposed to Zionism because they saw it as a nationalist policy to divert Russian Jewish workers from the “class struggle” (3 ) What then caused the

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change in Soviet policy? During World War Two, the Yishuv (Jewish Community in Palestine) through its leaders, the Jewish Agency, had made numerous attempts to win over the Soviet Union as both the USSR and world Jewry were fighting fascism, and the Yishuv donated both shiploads of oranges and an ambulance to the USSR(4 ) From Stalin's point of view, however, the USSR was more concerned with the evolution of British policy in the Middle East which was seeking to build a bloc of pro-British Arab states near the southern periphery of the USSR. Given the advances of military technology during World War Two, especially the development of long-range bombers like the US B-29, Stalin reasoned that the Arab states could provide Britain or the US bases for an attack on the USSR, and particularly its Azerbaijani oilfields. In the immediate post World War Two period, the only group actively fighting the British were the Jews of Palestine and this naturally drew Stalin's interest. In a meeting between a representative of the Jewish Agency and a Soviet diplomat in the newly opened Soviet embassy in Syria in 1947, the Jewish Agency representative was reportedly told (as noted in the memorandum for the record which he wrote after the meeting) that Moscow would support the Jews of Palestine in establishing a state if they refused to provide military bases for the US and Britain. ( 5 )This, apparently, was the deal that precipitated Soviet support for the nascent State of Israel in the 1947-48 period. For its part, despite its need for monetary aid from the US, Israel sought to maintain a policy of neutrality in the Cold war between the US and USSR until North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950, when Israel took a more pro-Western position. Israel's policy of neutrality during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 thus has a precedent.

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Soviet aid to Israel came in two parts. The first was diplomatic as it backed Israel in the United Nations following the invasion of the newly-born Jewish State by surrounding Arab countries. The second was military assistance. Prior to the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, Ben-Gurion had made a deal to acquire arms from Czechoslovakia. Following the coup, the Czech Communist leader, Klement Gottwald asked Stalin if he should go ahead with the arms deal to Israel, and Stalin said it was OK. The arms that flowed to Israel from Czechoslovakia, especially warplanes and machine guns (6 ), helped tip the balance and enabled Israel to defeat the invading Arab armies.

Alas for Israel, this era of good relations with the USSR did not last . The visit of Israel's foreign Minister, Golda Meir, to Moscow for the Rosh Hashanah holiday in the Fall of 1948 brought forth a crowd of an estimated 50,000 enthusiastic Soviet Jews to greet her at the central Moscow synagogue. The increasingly paranoid Stalin began to worry about the loyalty of Russian Jews who, after all, like Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev, had been his biggest opponents as he was trying to consolidate power in the 1920's. (7 ) Before long, a major wave of anti-Semitism was underway in the USSR, with the murder of Jewish intellectuals and the so-called "Doctors Plot" where a group of Jewish doctors were accused of plotting to kill Soviet Government officials.(8 ) The growth of anti-Semitism in Russia had a highly negative effect on Soviet-Israeli relations and diplomatic relations were broken in

February 1953 after an explosion at the Soviet Embassy in Tel Aviv . This would not be the last time that the issue of Soviet/ Russian Jews was to affect the relations between Moscow and Jerusalem.

### THE KHRUSHCHEV ERA: 1955-1964

Following the death of Stalin in March 1953, there was a general thaw in Soviet Foreign Policy and diplomatic relations were restored with Israel. Unfortunately for Israel, once Khrushchev had consolidated power in 1955, he moved to back the Arab states in their ongoing conflict with Israel. A major aspect of this policy was a September 1955 arms deal with Egypt (there was a subsequent arms deal with Syria) in which Egypt received bombers and tanks, among other weapons which posed a direct threat to Israel.(9) That was one of the reasons that Israel joined with Britain and France in a tripartite attack on Egypt in October 1956 that became known as the Suez war . While Khrushchev was busy suppressing the Hungarian Revolution at the time of the Suez war, he nonetheless issued threats against Israel as well as against Britain and France in an obvious attempt to curry favor in the Arab world. Following the war Khrushchev continued to back the Arab states, both diplomatically and militarily, against Israel, until he was overthrown in 1964. Interestingly enough, however, while security issues were the main problem in Soviet-Israeli relations under Khrushchev, the issue of the exodus of Soviet Jews was also an issue in the relationship as Israeli diplomats kept pressing the Soviet leadership to allow Soviet Jews, who wanted to do so, to emigrate to Israel. (10 )

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### C. THE BREZHNEV ERA: 1964-1982

When Brezhnev came to power in 1964, he not only continued the pro-Arab policy and anti-Israel policy of his predecessor but intensified it. Still, like Khrushchev, he never joined the Arab states in calling for Israel's destruction even though he was instrumental in advocating the anti-Zionism declaration at the United Nations in 1975. Unlike Khrushchev, however, he had to deal with a growing international movement in support of Soviet Jewry. At the same time he sought to benefit from the fact that the US, by 1966, was bogged down in Vietnam and Moscow's other chief Rival, China, was bogged down in its Cultural Revolution. Consequently, Brezhnev saw an opportunity to increase Soviet influence in the Middle East by calling for "Anti-Imperialist Arab Unity" (Shorthand for unity on an anti-Israel, anti-US basis). When a left wing Ba'athist regime seized power in Syria in 1966, Moscow embraced it with both economic and military aid, but the Syrian regime had a very thin base of support and seemed in danger of collapsing. This was especially the case because it was supporting a guerrilla war against Israel resulting in increasingly severe Israeli retaliation, and the Ba'athist regime faced the humiliation of the buzzing of Damascus by Israeli aircraft. At this point Moscow falsely

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told Egyptian President Gamal Nasser, whose country was linked to Syria by a defensive treaty that had been hailed by Moscow as an example of the “anti-Imperialist Arab unity” that it had been seeking, that Israel was planning a major attack on Syria. Nasser then mobilized his forces, kicked the UNEF out of its positions along the Israeli-Egyptian border and at the Straits of Tiran, and formed a tripartite alliance of Egypt-Syria and Jordan---three Arab countries bordering Israel. The end result was a preemptive Israeli attack on Egypt, followed by attacks on Jordan and Syria in what became known as the Six Day War. While Moscow fulminated against Israel during the war, it did nothing substantive to help its Arab clients, Egypt and Syria, other than breaking diplomatic relations with Israel. Israel’s victory in the Six Day War reinvigorated the Soviet Jewry movement as more Soviet Jews expressed the desire to emigrate to Israel. The movement accelerated the following year with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia which convinced my Soviet Jews there was no hope for reform in the USSR. Thus a “push-pull” situation was created as Soviet Jews were attracted to Israel by its victory in the Six Day War and repelled by the Soviet government which after the 1967 war had undertaken a major anti-Zionist (and anti-Semitic) campaign, equating Zionism with West German “revanchism” and US ‘imperialism” (11 ). Meanwhile, as the Egyptian-Israeli war of attrition along the Suez Canal heated up between 1968 and 1970, Moscow was pulled into the conflict. A desperate Nasser, who was losing the war, called in the USSR for military support in the form of fighter pilots and advanced surface to air missiles. Brezhnev agreed, but demanded in return control over five

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Egyptian air force bases which greatly improved the Soviet Union's military position in the Middle East. However, Brezhnev's intervention came with dangers for the USSR as Israeli pilots shot down five Soviet-piloted planes and the escalating conflict only ended when the US worked out a cease-fire agreement in August 1970. (12 )

Despite the ceasefire, which enabled The USSR and Egypt to move its surface to air missile system close to the canal unimpeded by Israeli attacks, a clear strategic gain both for Moscow and Egypt; by 1971 the geopolitical situation was not moving in Moscow's favor. China and the United States, which had been near mortal enemies, began to come together against the USSR. That became increasingly evident with US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's visit to China in 1971 and US President Nixon's visit there the following year. Under these circumstances, and because he wanted trade benefits and a strategic arms agreement with the United States, Brezhnev evidently felt compelled to make a gesture to the United States and that involved letting thousands of Soviet Jews emigrate to Israel. This however, had a negative effect on the Arab world, and especially Egypt, which complained that the emigrating Jews, many with scientific and technical backgrounds, would help Israel's military-industrial complex.(13)

Meanwhile, in July 1972, Brezhnev suffered a major blow to Moscow's Middle East position when Nasser's successor as Egypt's President, Anwar Sadat, expelled 15,000 Soviet advisors and reimposed

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Egyptian control on the five Egyptian airbases which Nasser had given over to the USSR in 1970. As a response to these events Brezhnev imposed a “head tax” on emigrating Soviet Jews, only to face a whirlwind of opposition in the US Congress which, through the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Soviet-US trade agreement, tied the trade benefits which Moscow wanted to the exodus of Soviet Jews. The trade bill ultimately collapsed when the Stevenson Amendment was added to it, limiting US investments in Russia. (14)

Meanwhile, Sadat was planning to regain the Sinai Peninsula lost to Israel in the Six Day War, and he forged an alliance with the new Syrian leader, Hafiz Assad, who sought to regain the Golan Heights, also lost to Israel in the Six Day War. Sadat and Assad launched their attack in October 1973, in what became known as the Yom Kippur War, and both Egypt and Syria were quickly resupplied by Brezhnev who hoped to regain the Middle East position the USSR had lost when Sadat had expelled the Soviet advisers in 1972. After suffering initial losses, Israel took the offensive both on the Golan Heights and in the Sinai, crossed the Suez Canal and threatened Cairo. Brezhnev warned Kissinger that it would intervene in the war if Israel was not stopped.(15) Kissinger had his own reasons for stopping the Israelis, who were highly dependent on US military supplies, so he pressured the Israelis to stop their offensive and, in so doing, endeared himself to Sadat. The end result was that the US replaced the USSR as Egypt’s main diplomatic supporter and military supplier, and a peace agreement was negotiated between Egypt and Israel in 1979 under the auspices of US President Jimmy Carter, after two partial agreements were mediated by Kissinger in 1974 and 1975 (Sinai I and Sinai II).The peace with Egypt, which

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Moscow strongly opposed, had major geopolitical benefits for Israel as it protected Israel's western border. Also highly beneficial to Israel was the fact that the US replaced the Soviet Union as the main backer of Egypt, Israel's most formidable foe.

After a hiatus of a few years when Nixon resigned and was replaced by Gerald Ford who in turn was defeated by Jimmy Carter in the US Presidential election of 1976, Brezhnev once again pursued a trade agreement and a strategic arms accord with Jimmy Carter who seemed equally desirous of reaching the agreements ( 16 ). Once again Brezhnev proved willing to facilitate the deal by allowing Soviet Jews to emigrate, and the number of emigrating Soviet Jews reached a record 51,000 in 1979, the year the agreements were signed. Unfortunately for the Soviet Jews, however, the subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 ended the Soviet-American rapprochement and Soviet Jewish emigration plummeted over the next few years.

Meanwhile the Soviet economy was stagnating and Brezhnev was aging and looking weaker and weaker. Consequently, when Israel invaded Southern Lebanon in June 1982 to eliminate the "state within a state" which the PLO had established there, Moscow looked impotent and Brezhnev died a few months later. (17)

#### D. THE GORBACHEV ERA: 1985-1991

After a brief interlude when first Yuri Andropov and then Konstantin Chernenko ran the USSR, the young and vigorous Mikhail Gorbachev took power in March 1985 as Communist Party leader. He faced daunting challenges. First, the USSR was bogged down in Afghanistan with no end in sight. Second, the Soviet economy was stagnating, and the USSR was hard put to keep up with US President Ronald Reagan's major increases in US defense spending. Consequently, after a year of assessing the situation Gorbachev decided that major changes were necessary in both Russia's domestic and foreign policy. At the same time Reagan was making it clear that if the Soviet Union wanted trade and strategic arms agreements, it had to change its behavior on human rights and in the Third World where Moscow was supporting insurgencies in Angola and Mozambique, aiding the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, and supporting the PLO and Syria against Israel. (18)

Interestingly enough, during his first year in office when all other policy initiatives were on hold,, Gorbachev did make a gesture to Israel. Soviet-Israeli talks were held in Helsinki, but foundered after ninety minutes as the Israeli delegation pushed the issue of Soviet Jewish

emigration which had dropped to a little over a thousand in 1985.(19) By 1986, however, Gorbachev perhaps spurred by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the drop in oil prices to \$10 a barrel(The Soviet economy then, as the Russian economy is today, was heavily dependent on oil exports), had made his fundamental decision. He realized that to invigorate the Soviet economy and make other domestic policy changes, he needed an unthreatening foreign policy environment, and to achieve this he had to improve relations with the United States. Consequently, he announced that the USSR was withdrawing from Afghanistan, reducing the size of its army in Eastern Europe(including tanks, aircraft and artillery) and reducing the size of the Soviet army on China's border. As far as the Middle East was concerned, he changed Soviet policy and bluntly told Syria and the PLO that they had to settle their differences with Israel politically, and not by war, a development not favored by Assad or PLO leader Yasser Arafat. Gorbachev also established Consular relations with Israel in 1988(Relations on the ambassadorial level were restored in 1991) and the Soviet press thanked Israel for its assistance in rescuing survivors of the Armenian earthquake in 1988.(20)As far as Soviet Jewry was concerned, after a major demonstration in Washington calling for the exodus of Soviet Jews while Gorbachev was visiting the United States in December 1987, Gorbachev turned on the emigration spigot and by 1989 hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews were allowed to emigrate.

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By the time the Soviet Union had collapsed in 1991, Israel's geopolitical position had been enhanced. Not only did its peace treaty with Egypt protect its western border, it had been augmented by hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews which helped its high tech and military- industrial base. In addition, Gorbachev's decision to limit arms sales to Syria helped weaken the threat to Israel from that country and his advice to the PLO to settle its dispute with Israel politically and not by force, may have been one of the factors (along with Arafat's isolation in the Arab world after backing Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990) convincing Arafat to negotiate the 1993 OSLO accord with Israel.

#### E. THE YELTSIN ERA: 1991-1991

When Boris Yeltsin became the leader of the Russian Federation, the main successor state of the Soviet Union, the Middle East was not central to his concerns. He had a very ambitious, if ultimately unsuccessful, domestic reform policy, and his main concern in foreign policy, besides relations with the United States, was how to manage relations with the newly independent states of the Former Soviet Union, which the Russian leader called the "near abroad". As far as the Middle East was concerned, Russia's primary interests were Turkey and

Iran , countries which now bordered the “near abroad” and not, initially, the Arab-Israeli Conflict. Consequently, Moscow supported both the Oslo Accords and the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement of 1994( in sharp contrast to Brezhnev’s opposition to the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement). Unfortunately, what was described to me by a Russian diplomat as a “honeymoon period” in Russian-Israeli relations was not to last ( 21 ) as Yeltsin moved to the right politically and away from the United States.

As this process went on, Moscow became increasingly critical of Israeli policy, especially after the anti-Western Yevgeny Primakov became Russia’s foreign minister in 1995. Consequently, Moscow condemned Israel for its actions against Hizbollah in Lebanon in 1996. Nonetheless, the emigration of Russian Jews to Israel continued freely, albeit in smaller numbers than in the Gorbachev era.

Meanwhile, unlike in Soviet times, bilateral relations developed rapidly . Cultural ties between the two countries blossomed as actors and writers went back and forth between Russia and Israel, and a Russian satellite broadcast an Israeli commercial from outer space. In addition, Russian tourists began to flock to Israel where they found a welcoming atmosphere of Russian language newspapers, a Russian language TV station and numerous Russian Orthodox holy sites. In addition trade increased , reaching \$500 million by 1995, at the time making Israel Russia’s second leading Middle East trade partner after Turkey. (22)

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On the diplomatic front, there appeared to be some hope for an improved Russian-Israeli relationship when Benjamin Netanyahu became Israel's Prime Minister after defeating Shimon Peres in the Israel's May 1996 election. In 1997, Netanyahu visited Moscow and gave Russia a \$50 million agricultural credit, and also discussed purchasing natural gas from Moscow. The two countries also agreed to jointly produce an AWACS aircraft, with Russia providing the airframe and Israel the avionics. However, relations cooled by the end of 1997 as Netanyahu cancelled further discussion of the natural gas deal because of the Russian supply of missile technology to Iran which, by the mid-1990's, had emerged as Israel's primary security problem.(23) This, on top of a Russian agreement in 1995 to supply a nuclear reactor to Iran, appeared to pave the way for Iran not only to develop nuclear weapons but also the missile delivery system that would pose a mortal danger to Israel.

However, relations were to improve toward the end of Yeltsin's time in office when Netanyahu's foreign minister, Ariel Sharon, supported the Russian position opposing the US intervention in Kosovo. Perhaps as a matter of reciprocation, then Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov advised Arafat against proclaiming a Palestinian State on May 4, 1999, a major concern of Israel at the time. (24)

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By the end of 1999, Yeltsin had resigned as Russia's president. He was replaced by Vladimir Putin who would have a very mixed relationship with Israel.

#### F. THE PUTIN ERA: 2000 --?

Putin's foreign policy toward Israel can be divided into four periods. In the first (2000-2004), as Putin consolidated power domestically, there was, initially, a harmonization of Russian bilateral relations with Israel and Moscow's regional policy in the Middle East. During the second period (2004-2008), there was a sharp divergence of Russia's bilateral ties with Israel and its regional policy as Putin began to embrace major enemies of Israel such as Syria, Hamas, Hizbollah and Iran. There was some moderation of Russia's regional policy in the period 2008-2012 when Putin and his Prime Minister, Dmitri Medvedev, switched positions and Russia postponed the sale of SAM-300 air defense missiles to Iran and Israel proved willing to sell drones to Russia after the poor performance of Russian drones in Russia's brief 2008 war with Georgia. From 2012-2023, however, while Putin returned as Russia's President, he adopted an increasingly anti-Western policy, annexed the Crimea and intervened militarily in the Donbass in 2014; intervened militarily in Syria in 2015; interfered with the US, German and French elections in the 2016-2017 period; and, most seriously, mounted a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, during this period, even as Putin embraced such Israeli enemies as Syria and Iran, he was careful to maintain good relations with Israel although problems emerged because of conflicting Russian and Israeli goals in Syria and also over the Israeli reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

From 2000-2004 ,as Putin consolidated power, he initially followed a regional policy that was favorable toward Israel, a position welcomed by Israel which made a series of gestures to Putin including backing the Russian position on the rebellion in Chechnya which was becoming increasingly Islamist, and by sending medical supplies to the victims of the Moscow apartment house bombings which Putin blamed on the Chechens. Moscow reciprocated Israeli help when the Al-Aksa Intifada broke out in September 2000 when Sergei Lavrov, then head of Russia's security council and later Russia's Foreign Minister, likened the violence in the West Bank and Gaza to extremist activity in Chechnya, and Moscow abstained on a UN Security Council vote in December 2000 to deploy a UN observer force on the West Bank and Gaza.(25) By 2001, however, Russia's regional policy had begun to swing against Israel as Putin unilaterally cancelled the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement under which Russia would cease supplying Iran with military equipment once existing agreements had run out. Then, in 2003, despite a visit by then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to Moscow, Russia supported a UN General Assembly resolution that condemned Israel for building a security fence on the West Bank and Putin continued to back Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat as still politically relevant despite Israel's efforts to isolate him because of his support for the Intifada. Russia further distanced itself from Israel in 2004 when Moscow supported a UN Security Council resolution that condemned Israel for an anti-terrorist attack in Gaza. (26)

By 2005, with his domestic position now secured, Putin began a policy of cultivating radical forces in the Middle East---Syria, Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah, all four of which were major enemies of Israel. At the same time, in a clear bifurcation of policy that was to last through early 2023, Putin also sought to strengthen bilateral ties with Israel.

Putin's first order of business was to rebuild ties with Syria which had been badly damaged under Gorbachev. Thus he waved 75% of Syria's \$13.4 billion debt to Russia(that had accumulated in Soviet times), and just before Putin's visit to Israel in April , 2005---the first visit by a Russian leader to the Jewish State--- Russia and Syria signed an agreement under which Russia would supply Syria with short-range anti-aircraft missiles. Then, in November 2005, Russia agreed to provide Iran with short-range surface to air missiles that could help protect Iran's nuclear reactor against an Israeli attack.(27)

Despite Putin's visit to Israel, which was primarily symbolic in nature, Putin then moved to help yet another enemy of Israel---Hamas. In January 2006, Hamas, which by its covenant is sworn to Israel's destruction, won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections. The so-called "Diplomatic Quartet" (The US, Russia, the UN and the European Union) which was then sponsoring the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, immediately pledged that it would not deal with Hamas until it recognized Israel and all previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements. Three weeks later Putin broke the Diplomatic Quartet agreement by inviting a

Hamas delegation to Moscow without requiring it to conform to the Quartet's requirements, thereby bestowing a modicum of legitimacy on the terrorist organization. In addition, in what could be termed a zero-sum approach to Russian-American competition in the Middle East, Putin called the Hamas election victory, "a very serious blow" to US policy in the Middle East. (28)

Moscow continued its regional anti-Israel policy in 2006 when it both condemned Israel for its actions during the Israeli-Hizbollah war and looked the other way when Syria transferred Russian anti-tank weapons to Hizbollah. Then, in 2007, Russia agreed to sell long-range SAM-300 air defense missiles to Iran, which would make any Israeli air attack on Iran's nuclear reactor considerably more difficult.

Israeli sought to change Russia's anti-Israeli regional policy in 2008 when war broke out between Russia and Georgia. Not only did Israel stop sending Georgia weapons, but once the war was over Israel agreed to sell Russia drones---something Moscow needed given the poor performance of Russian drones during the war. In an apparent quid pro quo, Russia then agreed not to sell the SAM-300 air defense system to Syria (29)

With Dmitri Medvedev now as Russia's President, Russian-Israeli relations at the regional level continued to improve. The most

important Russian action in this regard was Medvedev's decision (reversed by Putin in 2015) to postpone the delivery of the SAM-300 system to Iran. Also helping Israel was Russia's vote to sanction Iran because of its suspected nuclear weapons program.

Meanwhile, bilateral relations between Israel and Russia continued to develop at a rapid pace. Mention has already been made of Putin's visit to Israel in 2005, and he was to make another visit in 2012 where he unveiled a monument to the Red Army soldiers who died in World War Two fighting the Nazis. In addition, by 2010 trade had risen to \$2.5 billion annually, the two countries signed an agreement on nanotechnology (Israel had become a world leader in nanotechnology); a Russian cultural center was established in Tel-Aviv; a visa waiver agreement was signed to facilitate tourism, and Czarist church property in Jerusalem was returned to Russia, something beneficial to Putin as he sought to bolster his domestic position (as had the Czars) by establishing close relations with the Russian Orthodox Church.(30)

The outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010 in Tunisia and its spread to Syria in 2011 helped Israel strategically as it both removed Syria as being an active opponent of Israel and forced the Assad regime to give up some of its chemical weapons arsenal under a Russian-American agreement ( 31). However, the problem for Israel was that, as initially Russia was just aiding Syria diplomatically and with arms to fight the Syrian rebels in what turned out to be a civil war; Iran was helping Syria

as well and was trying to establish bases in Syria from which it could attack Israel. Israel responded to the Iranian threat by regularly bombing Iranian and Hizbollah positions and convoys in Syria. The situation changed, however, when Russia intervened militarily in Syria in 2015 and established air bases and SAM 300 and 400 positions that could hamper Israeli air strikes. This necessitated a new strategy on Israel's part. Consequently, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made numerous trips to Russia to coordinate the two countries' military activities in Syria, and a "hot line" was established to avoid a Russian-Israeli conflict as Israel agreed to give Russia advanced notice of its plans to attack Iranian or Hizbollah targets in Syria. Putin acquiesced in the continuing Israeli attacks in part because he wanted to weaken Iran which was both an ally fighting anti-Assad forces and a competitor for influence in Syria, and in part because Israel agreed not to aid the anti-Assad forces in Syria ( 32)

This agreement appeared to work well with only one major glitch In the early fall of 2018 when a Syrian anti-aircraft team ,supervised by Russian advisors , (33 ) shot down a Russian plane, mistaking it for an Israeli warplane . The Syrian anti-aircraft team did not admit its mistake (or its incompetence), instead blaming the incident on Israel as did the Russian Defense Ministry (Putin was more even-handed in his comments on the incident). While Russia responded by giving Syria the SAM-300 air defense system, the diplomatic repercussions of the

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incident quickly blew over and Russian-Israeli coordination in Syria continued, as did Israeli bombing of Iranian and Hizbollah positions in Syria.

Meanwhile, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which had been effectively frozen since 2014, was shaken up by the advent of Donald J. Trump to the American Presidency in 2017. Trump was far more friendly to Israel than Barack Obama had been, pulling the US out of the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran as Netanyahu had long advocated; recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights; turning a blind eye to Israeli settlement expansion and perhaps most important, moving the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. All these actions of Trump were opposed by Putin, although Russia did recognize West Jerusalem as Israel's capital in line with Putin's continued call for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Trump also brought forth a Palestinian-Israeli peace plan that awarded Israel 30% of the West Bank. The plan was denounced not only by Russia, the Arab World and the Israeli Left, but also by then US Democratic Party Presidential candidate Joe Biden. Moscow was less critical of the Trump-negotiated Abraham Accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrein and Morocco, in part because Putin was cultivating good relations with the United Arab Emirates, which had played a major role in the Accords, something that would pay off for him after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 when the UAE

adopted a neutral position in the war. Finally, in a blow to Israel, Putin supported the Palestinian position on a UNESCO resolution that only the Palestinians, and not Israel, had a claim to Jerusalem.(34)

Still, on the bilateral level, Russian-Israeli relations remained close. Cultural relations flourished, trade reached \$3.5 billion annually, and Russian Jews continued to move freely to Israel. Putin appeared to see the Russian-speaking community in Israel as something that benefitted Russia which he portrayed as the center of the Russian-speaking world. In addition, Jews from the Former Soviet Union like Avigdor Lieberman attained high positions in the Israeli government such as foreign minister and defense minister and this was seen as a net plus for Moscow since Lieberman proved to be one of the most pro-Russian voices in the Israeli cabinet although, as noted below, even he was taken aback by the anti-Semitic comments of Russian foreign Minister Sergi Lavrov in May 2022 which Lieberman sharply criticized.

It should also be noted that Putin sought to help Netanyahu in the multiple Israeli elections held between 2019 and 2021 as just before the April 2019 Israeli election, Putin secured the return to Israel of the remains of an Israeli soldier killed in Lebanon in 1982.(35) In addition , in 2018, Moscow signed an agreement with Israel to pay \$83 million in pensions to former Soviet citizens now living in Israel.(36)

This, then, was the Russian-Israeli relationship when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022—very good bilateral relations, a modus vivendi on Syria, but Russia siding with the enemies of Israel within the Middle East

#### G. THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE AND ITS IMPACT ON RUSSIAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many observers were surprised when Israel, a close ally of the United States, did not follow the US lead in sanctioning Russia for the invasion, but stayed relatively neutral during the first year of the invasion although it did provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine. This was not the first time that Israel had remained neutral during a conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In 2014 when Russia seized the Crimea and sent forces into the Donbass, Israel was de facto neutral on a UN vote to condemn the Russian action---much to the displeasure of the Obama Administration---and did not impose sanctions on Russia as the US did (37) . Significantly, two weeks before the 2022 invasion, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett who had come into office at the head of an eight party coalition government in June 2022 made the following comments about the US-Israeli relationship :

“The US was and will remain our best friend, but Washington has its own constellation of interests which do not always overlap with ours. Its interest in the region at the moment is declining.” (38)

The eight-party coalition, however, was not unified in its attitude toward the Russian invasion. Yair Lapid, Israel’s foreign minister and head of the Yesh Atid Party, was the most critical of the Russian action and his comments were regularly criticized by Moscow. Still, while Israel did provide Ukraine with a field hospital, flack jackets and helmets and other humanitarian aid, it did not provide Ukraine with the kind of defensive weaponry which it needed, despite the pleas of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Nor did it enact sanctions on Russia despite the admonitions of senior Biden Administration officials like Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Viktoria Nuland who told Israel’s Channel 12 news two weeks after the invasion that Israel’s joining the sanctions was the most important thing Israel could do for the United States even more than giving military aid to Ukraine or mediating between Putin and Zelensky which Israel, unsuccessfully, had tried to do.(39) Security considerations were uppermost in Bennett’s mind as he told CNN’s Christine Amanpour on April 20,2022.

“ Iran is always trying to surround us and to build up more and more rockets that will threaten Israel’s population centers, We are not going to let that happen anywhere, including Syria” ( 40 )

Nonetheless, despite Bennett’s efforts to remain neutral, Russian-Israeli relations sharply deteriorated in early May when Lavrov, in

response to a media query as to how Moscow could claim to be fighting Nazis in Ukraine when Ukraine's president was Jewish, asserted that he thought Hitler had Jewish blood and that "for a long time we've been hearing the nice Jewish people say that the biggest anti-Semites are the Jews themselves" (41 ) These comments were too much, even for Bennett and Lieberman who condemned them, with Lieberman demanding an apology for Lavrov's "absurd comments" (42). As might be expected Lapid offered the strongest criticism of Lavrov's statement:

" This is an unforgiveable and scandalous comment, a terrible historical error and we expect an apology. Hitler was not of Jewish origin and the Jews did not murder themselves in the Holocaust. ..We are making every effort to maintain good relations with Russia, but there is a line, and this time the line has been crossed. The Russian Government must apologize to us and to the Jewish people. " (43)

The situation eased somewhat when Bennett and Putin had a telephone conversation and Bennett later said that Putin had apologized, but no such apology was reported in the Russian press.(44) In any case, one month later the Israeli Government fell and new elections were scheduled for November 2022. In the interim, Lapid, who had been the most anti-Russian leader of the outgoing government and had been regularly criticized by Moscow, became interim Prime Minister. Perhaps fearing a stronger Israeli tilt to Ukraine, Moscow decided to send Lapid a signal by threatening to close down the Jewish Agency offices in Russia. (45) Given the fact that the main

purpose of the Jewish agency was to facilitate the emigration of Russian Jews to Israel, the message was very clear. Although Moscow has yet to follow through on its threat (as of 22 February 2023, the time of writing) the threat remained and seemed to have worked as Israel, through the rest of Lapid's time in office did not markedly change its position of neutrality in the war. (46)

Benjamin Netanyahu's return as Israeli Prime Minister following the November 2022 Israeli elections appeared to herald the return of improved Russian-Israeli relations, at least at the bilateral level, given the personal tie between Putin and Netanyahu. Yet a new development threatened Russian-Israeli relations. Iran, Israel's mortal enemy, had been sending drones to Russia to augment the rapidly diminishing stock of Russian drones. It is still unclear what Iran got in return for its help but there were reports that Russia would send Iran its advanced Sukhoi 35 bomber, which could directly threaten Israel. Even worse, as far as Israel's security was concerned, in early February, 2023 the WALL STREET JOURNAL reported that Iran and Russia would jointly construct, in Russia, a factory to produce advanced drones. (47) Not only would these drones be a threat to Ukraine whose energy infrastructure had suffered badly from drone attacks, the drones would also be a threat to Israel. Given the circumstances, it was unclear how Israel would react, although a reported Israeli attack against a drone factory in Isfahan, Iran took place in late January 2023 an action which helped both Ukraine and Israel.(48) Indeed, in a CNN interview on 31 January 2023 Netanyahu stated:

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“ We are attacking not only Iran’s nuclear program—trying to thwart it—but also taking action against certain weapons development that Iran has, and Iran invariably exports them” (49)

Whether Israel would go a step further and actually export arms, such as air defense missiles, to Ukraine was unclear, and Netanyahu was equivocal when asked about the possibility of Israeli arms exports to Ukraine in an interview with the French TV channel LCI. In response to a question on this topic Netanyahu stated that his government would consider the question of sending the Iron Dome air defense system to Ukraine, but :

“we have other considerations, especially the operational proximity between the Israeli air force and the Russian air force. Russian planes operating over Syrian air space have so far avoided any confrontation. We do not want a military confrontation with Russia. We have considerations that we need to take into account that other states do not” (50)

In any case, the return of Netanyahu as Israel’s prime Minister provides a useful point of departure for evaluating the relationship between Moscow and Jerusalem since the birth of Israel in 1948.

There are several major conclusions that can be drawn from this study. The first is that two major issues have dominated the relationship between Israel and first the Soviet Union and then the Russian Federation---the role Moscow has played in either aiding or threatening Israeli security, and the fate of Soviet/Russian Jews and their prospects for emigration. Initially, the USSR provided diplomatic and military support to the nascent state of Israel, but Stalin's crackdown on Soviet Jewry soured the relationship. After the death of Stalin in 1953 , and especially after Khrushchev consolidated power in 1955 the USSR switched to the Arab side of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, providing arms and diplomatic support to two of Israel's enemies, Egypt and Syria. Under Brezhnev, Moscow's hostility toward Israel reached a new peak, as it broke diplomatic relations with Israel during the 1967 war, supplied pilots to directly confront Israel during the 1968-70 war of attrition between Egypt and Israel, resupplied both Egypt and Syria during the 1973 Yom Kippur war and threatened to intervene directly if Israel did not stop its offensive late in the war, and embraced the PLO. Ironically, however, Egypt's turn to the US after the war weakened the Soviet position in the Middle East as did its 1979 invasion of Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Jewry movement had moved from an Israeli one to an international effort to free Soviet Jews by the early 1970's and Brezhnev's concerns about a Sino-American alignment as well as his desire to reach strategic arms and trade agreements with the United States led him to release tens of thousands of Soviet Jews ,

irrespective of the “head tax” he had put on educated Jewish emigres in an effort to appease the Arabs. Moscow’s invasion of Afghanistan, however, not only weakened the Soviet position in the Middle East, it also badly hurt Soviet-US relations and the number of Jews allowed to leave the Soviet Union was reduced to a trickle by the time Gorbachev came to power in Moscow in 1985.

Under Gorbachev both Israeli security and the status of Soviet Jewry improved considerably. Not only were diplomatic relations between the USSR and Israel restored , but Gorbachev bluntly told both Syria and the PLO that they had to settle their differences with Israel politically, and not by war. This greatly enhanced Israeli security because thanks to Gorbachev, neither the PLO nor Syria could count on Soviet help in case of war with Israel. In addition, Gorbachev’s decision to allow hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel helped Israel both demographically and militarily as many of the emigrating Soviet Jews had scientific skills that enhanced Israel’s defense capabilities

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a brief honeymoon in Russian-Israeli diplomatic relations under Yeltsin, but subsequently, and especially with the advent of Yevgeny Primakov as Russia’s foreign minister, Moscow’s pro-Arab stance in the Arab-Israeli Conflict returned. Unlike Soviet times, however, bilateral Russian-

Israeli relations flourished in part because of the influx of so many Jews from the Former Soviet Union who soon grew to 20% of the Israeli Jewish population as Jewish immigration from Russia continued. Trade grew to \$1 billion dollars annually, there were extensive cultural relations, Russian tourists began to visit Israel in large numbers and Russia and Israel collaborated on building an AWACS battle command aircraft with Russia providing the air frame and Israel the avionics.

The advent of Putin in 2000 exacerbated the cleavage in Russian-Israeli relations as bilateral ties on the economic, cultural and person-to-person levels flourished, and Russian Jews continued to emigrate to Israel; while at the regional level in the Middle East, especially after 2004, Putin backed Israel's enemies—Syria, Hizbollah, Hamas and especially Iran for which Russia built nuclear reactors and provided anti-aircraft weapons systems. Nonetheless, Russian-Israeli security relations took a new turn in 2015 when Russian forces intervened militarily in Syria to prop up the faltering Assad regime. Israel had been regularly bombing Iranian and Hizbollah positions in Syria to prevent Iran from establishing bases in that country which could directly threaten Israel, and Israel was concerned that the advent of Russian aircraft and anti-aircraft missile systems there could hamper Israel's anti-Iranian actions. Netanyahu and Putin, however, worked out a modus vivendi which allowed Israel to continue to attack Iranian and Hizbollah positions in Syria in return for Israel agreeing not to support the opposition forces fighting Assad. The modus vivendi, despite a

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major glitch in 2018 when Syrian forces shot down a Russian plane but blamed it on Israel , has lasted until the time of writing (February 2023), and was clearly a cause of Israeli neutrality when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. . Whether the advent of increased Russian-Iranian military cooperation and the possible acquisition by Iran of advanced Russian warplanes will make Moscow less willing to tolerate Israeli attacks on Iran in Syria, or, conversely, change Israeli policy on arming Ukraine remains to be seen but so far at least Israel has resisted the pleas of Ukrainian leader Zelensky and the US to provide arms to Ukraine. Moscow has also sent a not too subtle signal to Israel by threatening to close down the Jewish Agency—and Jewish emigration to Israel—if Israel sends weapons to Ukraine.

A second major conclusion to be drawn from this study is that Israel is clearly the junior partner in what appears to be a rather one-sided Russian-Israeli relationship, as it has developed since 2000. There have been numerous attempts by Israel to mollify Putin, but with only limited success. Thus Israel stopped selling arms to Georgia, was neutral in both the partial Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of 2022( angering the US in the process), and allowed Putin to appear to play a large role on the world stage as a leader who could talk to both sides of the Arab-Israeli Conflict. In return Putin has legitimized Hamas, allowed Russian arms to be transshipped from Syria to Hizbollah, consistently voted against Israel at the UN, and armed both Syria and Iran. While Russia has permitted Israel to bomb Iranian and Hizbollah positions in Syria, the

main reason for this appears to be that Russia wants to limit Iranian influence in that country, but this may change as Russian-Iranian relations grow closer. In addition, Putin has gotten a number of benefits from his relations with Israel. These include access to Israeli high-tech, including nanotechnology, the acquisition of Czarist church property in Jerusalem which helps the Russian leader to reinforce his position with the Russian Orthodox Church which is an important part of his domestic legitimacy, and, at least in Putin's view, the existence of a large diaspora of Russian speaking Jews in Israel which he sees an important component of his leadership of the Russian speaking world. The Israeli leadership however, has so far tolerated the rather one-sided relationship perhaps because, as one Israeli diplomat speaking of the Russians told me "they could do worse things". Whether this is the correct policy for Israel in the long run is, however a very open question especially as this policy tends to alienate the United States, Israel's main diplomatic defender and military supplier.

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38. Harel, "What Gulf States Need Urgently Against Iran"

39. Samuels, "US Growing Alarmed Over Israel's Safe Haven For Russian Oligarchs"; Freedman, "Israel's Tightrope Between Russia and Ukraine"

40. Amanpour interview with Naftali Bennett,

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#### ABSTRACT

Relations between Moscow and Jerusalem have had numerous ups and downs since the birth of Israel in 1948. Two main issues have dominated the relationship. The first is security, with first the Soviet Union and then the Russian Federation providing diplomatic support and military aid to Israel's enemies, especially, in recent years, to Iran and Syria. The second issue is the freedom of Jews to emigrate from the USSR and Russia to Israel. Finally, since the advent of Putin, Israel has been very much the junior partner in the relationship giving Russia much more than it has gotten in return.