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Russia-Israel: Syria, a new structural challenge of Israeli-Russian relations

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Russia-Israel: Syria, a new structural issue in the Israeli-Russian relations*

INTRODUCTION

Israeli-Russian relations have deepened since Russia's military intervention in Syria. Moscow and Tel Aviv have built a special relationship since 1991 that is based on unique achievements. One of these achievements is the presence of nearly 1.5 million Russian-speaking Israelis in Israel, who have established themselves as arbitrators of the political life of the Hebrew state. Another is their attachment to a form of "sacredness" in the role played by the Red Army during the Second World War and the categorical rejection of any form of re-reading this conflict. The quality and the closeness of this relationship became apparent when Israel refrained from condemning Russia for the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and from taking part in Euro-Atlantic sanctions either.

Russia's successful military intervention in Syria has enriched the Israeli-Russian partnership with a new dimension. Moscow and Tel Aviv have been "neighbours" to the Levant since 2015, and the Kremlin is increasingly acting as a security actor for the Hebrew state. Russia also intends to play a role in the Israeli-Palestinian issue but has so far failed to convince Tel Aviv of its centrality, despite its military successes in Syria. Finally, their bilateral relationship also has a significant trade section, since Israel is one of the few Western sources of technology for Russia after the imposition of sanctions related to the Ukrainian crisis in 2014.

I – Russia, a player in Israel's security

Since Moscow's military integration into the Syrian conflict at the end of September 2015, Israel has pragmatically acknowledged that Russia has resettled permanently in its immediate vicinity. A few days before the Russian operation in Syria was launched,

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went to Moscow to agree on so-called "de-confliction" mechanisms to prevent an incident between Tsahal and Russian aircraft, which were then deployed, to general surprise, in Syria¹.

1.1 – The weight of representations

Two perceptions shared by Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu help to explain in part the common language they quickly adopted in Syria. Both have an instinctive distrust concerning the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, which are known as the "Arab Springs". The two statesmen consider it to be more of an "Islamist spring"². In Syria, Benjamin Netanyahu fears that these events will primarily benefit Tehran. For Vladimir Putin, who is quick to draw a parallel with the "colour revolutions" that affected the post-Soviet space in the first half of the 2000s, the "Syrian revolution" is a similar *modus operandi* aimed at achieving a new regime change in the Middle East. The second common perception is that they mutually consider themselves as *free riders*. Rightly or wrongly, Russia is still perceived on the Israeli side as one of the few actors capable of disrupting the regional balance of power in the vicinity of the Jewish State, through the delivery of arms, that Israel considers irrational, to countries such as Iran or Syria, and which may ultimately end up in the hands of Lebanese Hezbollah. On the Russian side, Tel Aviv is seen as one of the last remaining regional actors that still has the capacity to ruin Moscow's efforts to maintain the Damascus regime. Thus, the dialogue and mechanisms established at the highest level at an early stage between Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin, as well as the Russian and Israeli General Staffs³, aim both to avoid accidents between the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and the Russian armed forces and to channel the intentions of the other in the Syrian context.

1.2 – The Iranian factor in Russian-Israeli relations

Today, when Bashar al-Assad's regime is no longer on the verge of collapsing, Israel has seen one of the worst scenarios it feared materialize: a Syria, saved from collapse by Moscow, but on the way towards reunification under Tehran's influence⁴. Although the Hebrew state has adopted a withdrawn stance since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the increase in Iran's footprint in Syria is perceived in Tel Aviv as an existen-

¹ « Israel, Russia to Coordinate Military Action on Syria: Netanyahu », Reuters, 21 September 2015.

² « Netanyahu Outfoxed Russia, Iran and ISIS with his Cynical, Ruthless Syria Policy », *Haaretz*, 17 March 2019.

³ As early as 2015, Russians and Israelis established a communication line between the Russian base at Hmeimim and the Israeli command centre in Kiriya, located in Tel Aviv.

⁴ Chuck Freilich, "Syria's Assad Regime Won the Civil War", *Haaretz*, 10 March 2019.

tial threat that is likely to justify an Israeli military intervention. Israel has established two "red lines" against the backdrop of a growing Iranian presence in the Arab Republic: the Golan and Hezbollah. While the former must not become a base for attacks on Israeli territory, the Lebanese militia must not seek to establish itself there, nor must it receive sophisticated equipment that challenge, even locally, Israel's superiority. Iran, which has drained, trained, paid and armed tens of thousands of Shia militiamen who went to fight in Syria, has also deployed Revolutionary Guard units, and is now reportedly expanding its military infrastructure on Syrian territory and building weapon manufacture factories, particularly for Hezbollah⁵. However, a Syria under Tehran's control is neither in Israel's nor Russia's interest, while Bashar al-Assad does not want to be the puppet of either the Russians or the Iranians.

After nearly four years of Russian military intervention, Israel perceives Moscow as a major security actor in the Syrian context, and by far the one with the greatest number of levers in Tehran⁶. Rightly or wrongly, the Israelis believe that these levers (Russian-Iranian economic exchanges, military-technical cooperation, project for a new unit at the Bouchehr nuclear power plant, etc.) may prove sufficiently powerful to eventually obtain a withdrawal of Iran and its substitutes from Syria. Russia's diplomatic and military influence on Iran was further reinforced by Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Iranian Nuclear Agreement of 2015 (JCPOA), and by the *neo-containment* that the US administration has since put in place against the Islamic Republic. Therefore, today, Israel expects Russia to take the necessary steps to contribute first to the withdrawal of all Iranian and pro-Iranian forces from the Golan, and then from Syria⁷. This approach is similar to a form of last resort for the Hebrew state which, apart from its one-off strikes against objectives designated as Iranian or assimilated in Syria, doesn't have other options (aside from triggering a large-scale operation). Israel is concerned about the Iranian fusion of Arab and Afghan Shia militias (such as the Fatemiyoun division, made up of Afghan Hazaras) into the Syrian army, and their deployment under Syrian uniform in the immediate vicinity of the border with Israel. More worrying for the long term, the Israelis believe that they are witnessing a process of "Shiasation" of the southern Syrian Arab Republic undertaken by Tehran through the importation of Shia populations to whom Syrian nationality is granted and who are resettled in the areas bordering the Hebrew State. Seen from Tel Aviv, no one can rule out the possibility that, in a few years' time, Iran will highlight the need to protect these populations in order to justify its military presence⁸ *a posteriori*.

⁵ « Iran Wants to Stay in Syria Forever », *Foreign Policy*, June 1st, 2018.

⁶ Interview of the author with an Israeli expert on Israeli security issues, March 2019.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Interview of the author with an Israeli military expert, March 2019.

While the expulsion of Iranians and pro-Iranian Shia militias from Syria seems to be an objective beyond the reach of the Russians, the same cannot be said of the Golan. Although Moscow considers this territory to be Syrian *de jure* and occupied by Israel⁹, *de facto*, Russian aviation never flies over it, suggesting that Russia does not intend to question Israeli control of the heights. At the end of July 2018, the Russian President's Special Envoy for the Middle East, Alexander Lavrentiev, stated that Shia militias and pro-Iranian forces had left the Golan, and had withdrawn up to 85 kilometres from the "Bravo" line, carrying their heavy weapons with them¹⁰. However, it seems doubtful that the Iranians have agreed to withdraw from Damascus as well as from the Sayyida Zeinab mosque – a Shia pilgrimage site – both located less than 50 kilometres from the demilitarized area. This implies that, at a minimum, the line referred to by Alexander Lavrentiev was not located at a uniform distance from the Syrian-Israeli border. During his last visit to Moscow at the end of February 2019, Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly presented maps to Vladimir Putin establishing the Iranian masked presence near the Golan Heights¹¹, thus calling into question the Russians' ability to deny Iranians and their affiliates access to it. While the Israelis therefore seem well aware of Russia's limited results to curb Iran's expansion on the Golan Heights and beyond, in Syria, they still see Moscow as the only actor with adequate leverage over Tehran, and, in the absence of other options, the only valid interlocutor with whom to maintain a close dialogue on this issue.

The Hebrew State, which *de facto* accepted Bashar al-Assad's medium-term presence, would be satisfied with an update of the "gentlemen's agreement" that prevailed with Damascus until 2011, and which guaranteed the relative stability of the Syrian-Israeli border for four decades. This is precisely one of the points on which Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin agreed at their meeting in Helsinki in July 2018: to guarantee security at the border of the Hebrew state, along the 1974 line. The deployment of Russian military police units to the Golan in early August 2018, shortly after the meeting between the two presidents, was a gesture to demonstrate Moscow's commitment to this issue. These units patrol from along the "Bravo" line and have also allowed the return of the UN peacekeeping mission that was evacuated in 2012. In any case, Russia plans to deploy eight observation points along the demilitarized zone.

It should be recalled that the Hebrew State, for a time, envisaged the return of the Golan to Syria in exchange for the signing of a peace agreement¹², according to the

⁹ « Russia rejects Israel's claim to Sovereignty over Golan Heights », *Middle East Monitor*, 12 October 2018.

¹⁰ « Iranian Forces Withdraw 85km from the Demarcation Line at Golan Heights », TASS, 31st July 2018.

¹¹ " Нетаньяху приехал к Путину предупредить о войне." ["Netanyahu has come to Putin to warn him of the war. "], *Московский Комсомолец*, 27 February 2019.

¹² In 2007, under Ehud Olmert, through the intermediary of Turkey, and again under Benjamin Netanyahu, in 2010, without leading to a peace agreement in both cases.

principle of land for peace. This is a scenario that Moscow would see take shape in the longer term. In this sense, President Trump's statement on March 21, 2019 on Israeli sovereignty over the Golan is ruining Russian efforts and has logically been severely criticized by Moscow¹³.

1.3 – **Bashar al-Assad: "The Devil we Know"**

Faced with the difficulties that Russians are experiencing in mitigating Iran's footprint in Syria, the preservation of the Syrian state seems to be emerging as a point of convergence between Moscow and Tel Aviv. Both consider that, in the last resort, only a strong central power will be able to demand the departure of the Iranian ally. In order to promote this outcome, Russians and Israelis have different approaches. Moscow has undertaken to overhaul the Syrian army by creating new units (4th Corps, 5th Corps in particular)¹⁴ built, unlike the pro-Iranian militias, on a multi-ethnic and multi-religious basis¹⁵. In this perspective, Moscow can rely on its historical links with the Syrian military elite, largely trained in Soviet schools, and also on the fact that the Syrian army is familiar with Soviet and Russian military equipment. Russia's common thread is to strengthen the Syrian security apparatus so that it relies less on Iranian resources, ultimately leading to Damascus asking for the Iranians to leave. On the Israeli side, the strikes that the Hebrew State regularly carries out in Syria, and which are now being carried out at the highest level in Tel Aviv¹⁶, are aimed as much at destroying the Iranian system as at sending a signal to Bashar al-Assad that it has nothing to gain by letting Tehran settle in Syria. These strikes carried out with Moscow's discreet approval, which "closes its eyes", are suitable for Russia insofar as they are part of this logic aimed, by attrition, at reducing the Iranian footprint.

This Israeli approach reached its limits in September 2018, when a Russian reconnaissance and intelligence aircraft was accidentally shot down by Syrian anti-aircraft defence, while Israeli F-16s were carrying out new strikes. The reaction of the Russian Ministry of Defence, which hastened to denounce Israel's responsibility in this accident, betrays a form of exasperation towards the repeated Israeli bombings in Syria. The explanations provided by the Israeli military officials who came to Moscow, who claimed to have respected the memorandum on "deconfliction" drawn up in Septem-

¹³ «Комментарий Департамента информации и печати МИД России в связи с намерением США признать суверенитет Израиля над Голанскими высотами» "Comment of the Department of Information and Press of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the intention of the United States to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights.", Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, March 22, 2019.

¹⁴ The creation of the 6th Corps is currently the subject of talks between Russians and Turks.

¹⁵ Igor Delanoë, "What Russia has gained from its military intervention in Syria", *Orient XXI*, 9 October 2018.

¹⁶ « In Rare Acknowledgement, Israel Confirms Strike on Iran Weapons caches in Syria », *The Times of Israel*, 13 January 2019.

ber 2015, did not convince their Russian counterparts. Russia's strong reaction, beyond the accident, reflects existing dissonances among the Russian political-military elite over the content of cooperation with Iran in Syria, and the balance to be maintained with Israel on this issue. Thus, in November 2017, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, recalled that the presence of Iranian forces in Syria was legal insofar as they were there at the call of Damascus¹⁷. However, a few months later, Alexander Lavrentiev explicitly suggested that foreign forces, including Hezbollah and Iranian soldiers, were to leave Syria¹⁸. As for the repeated Israeli strikes, now fully assumed by Benjamin Netanyahu against the advice of part of his staff¹⁹, they deliberately exert increased pressure on Russian-Iranian cooperation and have ended up exasperating the Russian Ministry of Defence, as illustrated in September 2018. The latest Israeli strikes in Syria on January 20th and 21st, 2019, without the S-300 issued by Moscow in Damascus in October 2018 having come into action²⁰, provoked a reaction from the Chairman of the Iranian Parliamentary Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh (moderate conservative). It echoed serious criticism of the "surprising" inactivity of the S-300 batteries during the Israeli raids²¹. However, the Russian military remains fully aware that the support of Russian forces deployed in Syria is based on two main points of entry: the port of Tartous and the Hmeimim air base. While the former is mainly dependent on freedom of navigation through the Turkish straits, the latter depends on free access to Iranian and Iraqi airspace. What would happen if Iran decided to close its sky to Russian aircraft, following, for example, yet another wave of Israeli strikes against its interests in Syria, without Russia reacting²²?

Moscow is therefore carrying out a balancing act that is well understood by the Israelis, who do not hesitate to deliberately place Russia in a position of discomfort in order to remind it of the final objective sought: a complete withdrawal of Iran from Syria²³.

¹⁷ « Russia Did Not Promise to Ensure Withdrawal of Pro-Iranian Troops from Syria », *Ria Novosti*, 14 November 2017.

¹⁸ "Foreign Contingent Must Leave Syria", *Ria Novosti*, 18 May 2018.

¹⁹ « Netanyahu Again Confirms Syria Strike, Contrary to Position of Top Brass », *Haaretz*, 13 February 2019.

²⁰ To date, these systems seem to be under the control of Russian personnel.

²¹ "Russian S-300s not Active during Attack in Syria", *IRNA*, 24 January 2019. However, these remarks do not reflect the official position of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, but a "mood" that crosses certain circles in Tehran.

²² Let us recall the Hamadan base episode, during which Iran decided to close Moscow's access to this air base in August 2016, after the media in Russia revealed the use made of it by Russian aerospace forces. In addition, in August 2018, the Iraqi authorities forced a Russian aircraft bound for Syria to turn back to Iran, before allowing it to cross Iraqi skies at a later stage. "Iraq blocks Russian Warplane from Using its Airspace", *Al-Masdar News*, 31 August 2018.

²³ This discomfort was palpable following Benjamin Netanyahu's interview with Israeli journalists during his visit to Moscow in February 2019, during which he stated that "the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria is an objective shared by Israel and Russia". This posting has been anonymously criticized many times by

The Iranian regime has invested far too much in Syria since 2011, financially (about \$30 billion since 2011)²⁴, militarily and politically, to withdraw abruptly and unilaterally. Finally, recent signals tend to indicate that it is planning to maintain its presence in Syria: on the 1st of October 2019, the port of Lattakia should thus go under Iranian control. The recent meeting of the Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian Chiefs of Staff on March 18th in Damascus would have had, among other talking points, the Iran-Iraq-Syria trade axis, the outcome of which in the Levant would be the Syrian port²⁵.

1.4 – The JCPOA: Russian and Israeli postures that are not very compatible

The respective positions of Moscow and Tel Aviv vis-à-vis the JCPOA constitute a point of divergence. Benjamin Netanyahu has regularly expressed strong criticism of what he did not hesitate to refer to as a "historical error" by the Obama administration, regarding the signing of the agreement. Moscow, for its part, had made a significant contribution to the success of the JCPOA. While Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the agreement was applauded by the Israeli Prime Minister, military circles in Israel are more reserved and in any case do not share Benjamin Netanyahu's analysis of the JCPOA²⁶. Today, Washington is seeking to bring Tehran to full surrender, and is considering renegotiating a new agreement only if it includes not only nuclear aspects, but also the Iranian ballistic programme and Iran's expansion in the Middle East. This approach is in line with Tel Aviv's expectations and, increasingly, it seems, those of Europeans. On the other hand, Moscow is opposed to amending the JCPOA, even if Russia has always maintained a mistrust of Iranian ballistic ambitions²⁷. In any event, the Kremlin should not be expected to include the Syrian factor in any future negotiations to recast the JCPOA.

Russian diplomatic sources. "С сокращенным дружественным дружественным визитом" ["A shortened friendly visit"], *Коммерсант*, 28 февраля 2019.

²⁴ "Iran Wants to Stay in Syria Forever", *art. cit.*

²⁵ «Иран договаривается с Сирией и Ираком без России» "Iran get on with Syria and Irak without Russia », *news.ru*, 18 March 2019.

²⁶ Yuri Barmin, « Russia and Israel: The Middle Eastern Vector of Relations », *RIAC Working Paper*, 42/2018, pp. 13-14.

²⁷ Unlike the United States, Russian territory, in its southern part, has been within range of Iranian missiles for years.

2 – Moscow: an intermediary with renewed credibility for the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian question?

2.1 – *A crisis that is part of the power agenda regained by Moscow in the Middle East*

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the burning issues on the regional strategic agenda, with the settlement of the crises in Syria, Yemen and Libya. Following its successful military integration in Syria and its successful campaign to re-establish the Damascus regime, the Kremlin regained the status of a power in the Middle East from which it had been deprived after 1991. The credit of influence accumulated by Moscow on the Syrian case could be invested by Russia in the settlement of one of these crises in order to make it bear fruit. The conclusion through the Kremlin of a political agreement leading to the settlement of a major crisis in the Middle East would indeed make it possible to transcend the successes achieved in Syria, which are based as much on the use of *hard power* as on the Kremlin's ability to discuss with all the actors in the Syrian conflict. However, this last asset has so far proved to be insufficient for the conclusion of an agreement paving the way for a political transition in Syria.

In this context, involvement in the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is of obvious interest as well as a risk to Moscow. While remaining in favour of a two-state solution, Russia's position has nevertheless evolved on the Jerusalem issue: since April 2017, Moscow has considered West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and East Jerusalem as the future capital of the Palestinian state²⁸. Russia benefits, on this issue as on others, from an aura linked to its successes in Syria. In addition, its status as mediator of the Quartet was enhanced following Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which disqualified Washington from its role as the main mediator in resolving the conflict in the eyes of the Palestinians. However, the Russians remain aware that the Israeli-Palestinian issue presents a high risk of squandering the influential capital they have so dearly acquired in Syria. It should be recalled that as early as 2007, the Kremlin put forward the idea of holding a peace conference in Moscow, but this proposal did not subsequently materialize. In September 2016, the Russian capital was supposed to host a direct meeting between Mahmoud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu, but this meeting – which would have been the first between the two men since 2010 – did not take place, with both sides accusing each other of having failed to hold it. While Palestinians continue to declare themselves available and ready to meet with the Israelis, the latter – who have not formally refused the principle of a

²⁸ "Foreign Ministry Statement regarding Palestinian-Israeli Settlement", Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 6 April 2017.

conference in Moscow – seem to be wavering and avoiding to raise the subject with the Russians.

2.2 – **Achieving intra-Palestinian reconciliation**

At the same time, Russia has undertaken to work towards the reconciliation of the various Palestinian factions. These efforts are part of an approach that consists as much in creating the conditions conducive to the holding of a peace conference as in avoiding an intra-Palestinian escalation. In this regard, Moscow benefits from Egypt's efforts and from²⁹ its communication channels established directly with both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. The last meeting aimed at achieving intra-Palestinian reconciliation was held in Moscow from February 11th to the 14th of 2019, under the auspices of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and did not lead to any progress³⁰. The parties were unable to agree on a joint statement. For the Palestinian Authority, it is Hamas' maximalist position on the issue of borders and on Jerusalem, in particular, that is torpedoing Russian efforts, and at the same time making it "Israel's game"³¹. The objective of building a consensus among Palestinians, however, seems far more within reach of Russian diplomacy than the objective of organizing an Israeli-Palestinian peace conference. A Russian success on the issue of intra-Palestinian reconciliation would also be a first step towards holding such a conference in Moscow or elsewhere. Organized under the auspices of the UN, this conference could also be a pretext for the reactivation of the Quartet.

Russia's so far fruitless efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian issue may give the impression that Moscow is more interested in demonstrating its ability to maintain dialogue with the various parties than it is in a position to play a central role. The Kremlin seems to have little ability to decisively influence the resolution of the crisis, and even less to put pressure on Israelis and Palestinians to reach a compromise. Moscow lacks levers over them: the former are waiting for the "agreement of the century", which is supposed to be proposed by the Trump administration, and Palestinian-Russian economic relations amount to just about ten million dollars of trade between 2007 and 2017³². However, both Israelis and Palestinians also want to keep the channels open with Moscow on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Tel Aviv believes, rightly or wrongly, that openly rejecting Russian proposals for good offices could have a negative impact on the dialogue with them in Syria. For Palestinians, ties with Russia are part of the Abbas administration's overall

²⁹ Cairo succeeded in promoting the creation of a Palestinian national unity government in October 2017, which has since failed.

³⁰ « Moscow Keeps Calm with Palestinian Reconciliation, undermines Trump's 'Deal of the Century' », *Al-Monitor*, 17 February 2019.

³¹ Interview of the author with an Arab diplomat in Moscow, March 2019.

³² Statistics of the Russian Federal Customs Service.

survival strategy, as well as international efforts to support the cause of a Palestinian state.

The dynamic on which the Kremlin could eventually capitalize in the wake of its military success in Syria has been exhausted, and in any case did not seem sufficient to invite a peace conference to Moscow in September 2016. Clearly, Russia's good relations with Egypt, as with Israel, as well as the flourishing links between Moscow and the Gulf petromonarchies, serve the Russian contribution, however limited, to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In addition, a political settlement of the Syrian conflict could potentially have a positive impact on the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, to date, Russian added value lies in the Kremlin's efforts to achieve Palestinian unity.

3 – In search for a fresh start on trade and investments

Over the past ten years, Israel and Russia have traded an average of \$2.7 billion annually. As with the vast majority of its economic partners, Russia's trade balance with Israel remains structurally in surplus (see Table I below). In 2018, Russia was the 19th trading partner of the Hebrew state, which for its part was Moscow's 3rd economic partner in 2017 in the Middle East region (41st in the world)³³. Israel imports mainly hydrocarbons, rough diamonds, metals and cereals from Russia. For its part, Russia imports agricultural and pharmaceutical products, machinery and electronic systems as well as refined products from the petrochemical industry of the Hebrew State. Over the period 2007-2017, Israeli-Russian trade represents about 6.6% of trade between Russia and Middle East countries (including Egypt).

Table n° 1 : RUSSIAN-ISRAELI TRADE, 2008-2018
(MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018*
Russian exports	2 034	1 044	1 763	1 757	1 631	2 085	2 291	1 540	1 464	1 667	1 538
Russian imports	736	637	825	1 093	1 286	1 489	1 142	806	722	824	550
Volume sales representative	2 770	1 681	2 588	2 850	2 917	3 574	3 433	2 346	2 186	2 491	2 088

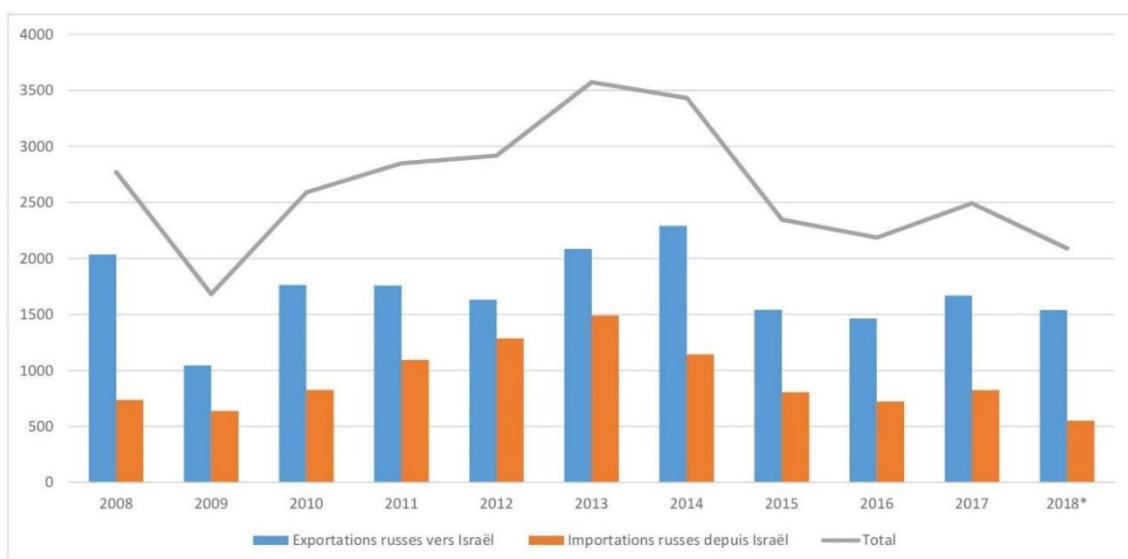
Source: Russian Federal Customs Service

³³ Only statistics for the first three quarters of 2018 were available on the Russian side at the time of writing. Egypt is included in the Middle East zone for the purposes of this study, but not the rest of North African countries.

* For 2018, only the first three quarters are recorded.
 These figures include Israeli imports of hydrocarbons and diamonds.

After suffering the shock of the 2008-2009 economic crisis, Russian-Israeli trade started to rise again in 2010 and returned to its pre-crisis level in 2011. They have continued to increase in volume until reaching their peak for the period in 2013, more than \$3.5 billion, more than double the amount of trade recorded in 2009. Since 2014, the volume of Israeli-Russian trade has been on a general downward trend. However, given the partial figures available for the previous year, 2018 should see this dynamic stabilize with bilateral trade expected to reach about \$2.5 billion, which would then correspond overall to the 2017 trade level. In order to give a new impetus to their trade, Russians and Israelis have been negotiating for several years now for the establishment of a free trade area between the Hebrew State and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). After several rounds of discussions, which did not in any way compromise the shared political will to bring this project to fruition, the documents formalizing the creation of this zone could be signed in 2019³⁴. Ironically, the establishment of a free trade area with the EEA could take place at the same time for Israel and Iran.

Graph n° 1 : RUSSIAN-ISRAELI TRADE, 2008-2018
 (MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)



Source: Russian Federal Customs Service

* For 2018, only the first three quarters are recorded.

Israel is the third largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) flows into Russia by Middle Eastern countries, with nearly \$217 million invested since 2007 in the Russian economy, far behind Turkey (more than \$1.6 billion accumulated in Russia) and the

³⁴ « Israel and Iran both set to Join Russia-led Free Trade Zone », *The Times of Israel*, 12 February 2019.

United Arab Emirates (\$334 million invested over 2007-2017). From the beginning of 2010 up to and including 2014, Israel was the second largest emitter of FDI flows to Russia from the Middle East. This second place was taken away in 2015 by Abu Dhabi, which has since seen its FDI increase year after year in Russia. This trend is expected to continue in 2018: by the end of the first three quarters of 2018, the Emirates has already invested nearly \$307 million – a record for Emirates investments in Russia (excluding sovereign wealth funds) – in the Russian economy, while Israeli investments over the same period amounted to \$21 million³⁵. In 2017, there was a decline in Israeli FDI in Russia, with a contraction of about \$81 million. In general, Israeli investments in Russia are focused on agricultural projects, for example in the Lipetsk and Voronezh *oblasts*, while similar projects have been initiated in the Saratov region³⁶. Israeli investors are thus benefiting from a favourable business climate in the Russian agricultural sector against the backdrop of an import substitution policy launched by Moscow in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis.

Table n° 2 : RUSSIAN AND ISRAELI FDI FLOWS, 2007-2018*
(MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018*
Russian FDI to Israel	50	42	25	59	88	86	158	158	16	14	12	-4
Israeli FDI to Russia	0	0	-5	39	32	37	83	76	12	24	-81	21

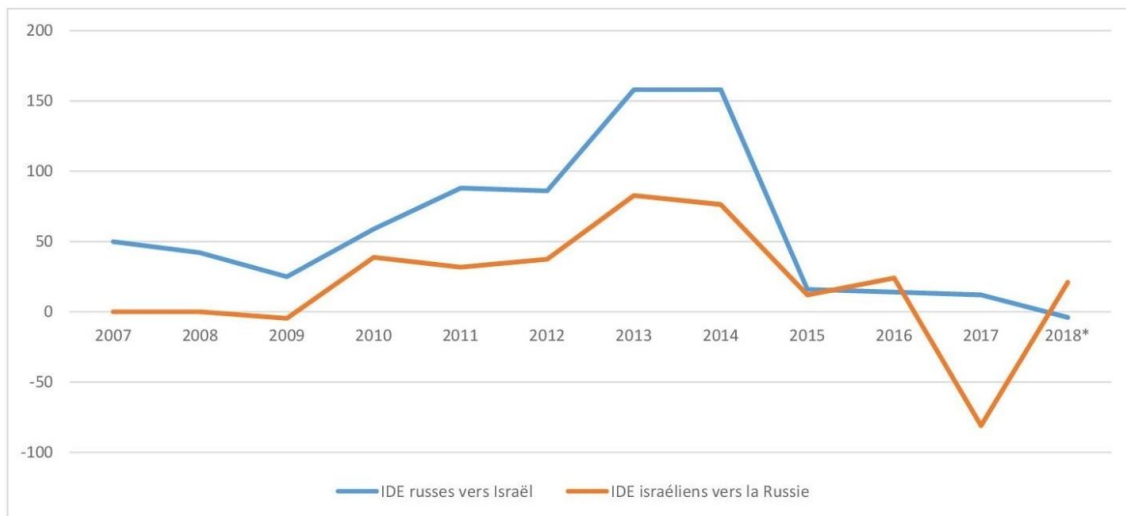
Source: Central Bank of Russia

*For 2018, only the first three quarters are recorded.

³⁵ Source: Central Bank of Russia.

³⁶ «ТПП Саратовской области и Федерация торговых палат Израиля подписали соглашение» "Saratov Region Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Chambers of Commerce of Israel signed an agreement", vzsar.ru, 15 mars 2016.

Graph n° 2 : RUSSIAN AND ISRAELI FDI FLOWS, 2007-2018*
(MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)



Source: Central Bank of Russia

* For 2018, only the first three quarters are recorded.

The Hebrew State accounted for 9.1% of Middle Eastern FDI flows to Russia over the period 2007-2017. Conversely, Israel only attracts 4.6% of Russian FDI to the Middle East over the same period.

Finally, the dynamism of the tourism sector is another lasting singularity of the Israeli-Russian relationship. In 2017, more than 331,000 Russians visited Israel, representing nearly 9.2% of the foreign tourist contingent. Russia thus maintains its position as the second largest emitter of tourist flows to the Hebrew state, behind the United States, despite two consecutive years of decline (2015 and 2016)³⁷.

CONCLUSION

The Russian-Israeli partnership acquired sufficient depth and density in the 1990s and 2000s to withstand the test of the Syrian crisis. Far from being an alliance, it is rather a tactical rapprochement based both on the unique foundations of the bilateral relationship (Russian-speaking community in Israel, rejection of revisionism on the Second World War...) and on the pragmatism that characterizes Russians and Israelis in their exchanges. However, in the Middle East context, their expectations remain asymmetric: while the Israelis demand that the Russians make a significant contribution to shat-

³⁷ Central Bureau of Israeli Statistics. Nevertheless, French tourists exceptionally outperformed Russians in 2016 by ranking second. The decline in Russian tourist flows in 2015 and 2016 is explained by the fall in the population's income in Russia these two years.

tering the Iranian footprint in Syria, Moscow would like to see its role enhanced on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

The maintenance of Bashar al-Assad seems to be at the crossroads of Russian and Israeli interests, at least in the medium term. While there seems to be a relatively unanimous consensus on this issue in Moscow, in Tel Aviv the Assad's faith divides experts, military and politicians, with some seeing the Syrian president as a pawn rather than an actor. Moreover, according to the adage "*the devil we know*", this option is more like a last resort for the Israelis. The Israeli-Russian "dispute", which followed the Il-20 accident, also seems to have been well buried at the beginning of 2019; it is in any case with this in mind that Benjamin Netanyahu visited Moscow at the end of February, obviously with success. Nevertheless, points of divergence remain between the two partners. The Hebrew State certainly considers Russia to be ungrateful on the Golan question, as Moscow persists in considering this plateau as annexed by Israel. Tel Aviv perhaps expected more restraint from Moscow on this issue – strategic for the Israelis – as they had refrained from condemning the Kremlin in 2014 to the UN for the annexation of Crimea. It is certainly from this perspective that the Israeli vote in December 2018 at the United Nations in favour of a resolution condemning Russia's occupation of the peninsula should be interpreted³⁸. Conversely, the Russians probably expected the Israelis to use their very good relations with Washington since Donald Trump's arrival in the White House to ease American sanctions against Russia. This did not happen. The JCPOA and its future constitute another point of divergence between Russians and Israelis. Finally, the energy cooperation between Israel, Cyprus and Greece, which focuses on the exploitation and export of their *offshore* natural gas to Europe, places Tel Aviv and Moscow in a competitive position on the European gas market³⁹. Russian gas has been flowing into the region for a long time and Russian companies are seeking to defend their market shares, while gas from the eastern Mediterranean will contribute more than anything else to the diversification of the European gas mix.

There are still areas of progress for the Israeli-Russian relationship. Thus, the opening of a free trade area between Israel and the Eurasian Economic Union could bring Russian-Israeli trade to a new level, which seems to be facing a "glass ceiling" in terms of volume. Besides, both Moscow and Tel Aviv have sympathy for the aspirations of Syrian Kurds to have their rights recognized. It remains to be seen to what extent this could be transformed into a genuine point of convergence.

³⁸ « Israel Joins UN Critics of Russia's 'Occupation' of Crimea », *Haaretz*, 19 December 2018.

³⁹ Thrassy N. Marketos, "Eastern Mediterranean energy Geostrategy on Proposed Gas Export Routes", *FRS Note*, n°11/2018, 8 pages.

