

## RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE ISRAELI-IRANIAN RELATIONS

### İSRAİL-İRAN İLİŞKİLERİNDE RUSYA'NIN ROLÜ

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#### Abstract

The article delves into Moscow's stance in the ongoing conflict between Israel and Iran. The main argument of this article is that Russia's relations with both Israel and Iran are shaped by its broader geopolitical objectives, particularly its efforts to counter US influence in the Middle East. This perspective allows us to view Russia's actions not as isolated events but as integral moves in a larger geopolitical strategy. By providing this analysis, the article enhances the understanding of Russia's geopolitical maneuvers in the Israel-Iran conflict and serves as a foundational resource for those involved in international relations. It summarizes Russia's position as supporting Tehran and attempting to influence regional affairs while refraining from direct involvement in the Israel-Iran conflict. This approach allows Russia to undermine Western initiatives, such as the US-led Abraham Accords and critical infrastructure projects. By supporting Iran, Moscow aims to assert its influence and reshape regional dynamics in alignment with its own interests. However, an escalation into a full-scale Iran-Israel war poses substantial risks for Russia, jeopardizing its investments in Iranian infrastructure and stretching its military resources amid ongoing commitments, particularly in Ukraine. Consequently, the Kremlin faces a complex challenge in balancing its support for Iran with the need to avoid overextending its capabilities.

**Keywords:** Iran, Israel, Russia, USA, Middle East

#### Özet

Bu makale, Moskova'nın İsrail ve İran arasındaki devam eden çatışmadaki duruşunu incelemektedir. Rusya'nın hem İsrail hem de İran ile olan ilişkileri, özellikle Orta Doğu'daki ABD etkisini dengeleme çabaları gibi daha geniş jeopolitik hedefler tarafından şekillenmektedir. Bu bakış açısı, Rusya'nın eylemlerini izole olaylar olarak değil, daha büyük bir jeopolitik stratejinin ayrılmaz parçaları olarak değerlendirmelerine olanak tanımaktadır. Makalede, Rusya'nın Tahran'ı destekleyerek bölgesel meseleleri etkilemeye çalıştığı ve İsrail-İran çatışmasına doğrudan müdahaleden kaçındığı vurgulanmaktadır. Bu yaklaşım, Rusya'nın ABD liderliğindeki İbrahim Anlaşmaları ve diğer kritik altyapı projeleri gibi Batılı girişimleri zayıflatmasına yardımcı olmaktadır. İran'ı destekleyerek Moskova, bölgedeki etkisini artırmayı ve dinamikleri kendi çıkarları doğrultusunda yeniden şekillendirmeyi hedeflemektedir. Ancak, tam ölçekli bir İran-İsrail savaşına tırmanma riski, Rusya için önemli tehditler oluşturmaktadır. Bu durum, İran altyapısına yapılan yatırımları tehlikeye sokmakta ve özellikle Ukrayna'daki devam eden taahhütler arasında askeri kaynaklarını zorlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, Kremlin, İran'a olan desteği ile maliyetlerini artırmaktan kaçınma ihtiyacı arasında karmaşık bir denge kurma zorluğuyla karşı karşıyadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** İran, İsrail, Rusya, ABD, Orta Doğu

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## Introduction

The central focus of current Russian foreign policy is its aim to revise the US-centric international order that emerged after the Cold War (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). In this context, inciting conflicts serves as a key tool for achieving this objective. A prime example of Russian assertiveness is the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. In addition to Ukraine, Russia supports Tehran in the simmering conflict between Iran and Israel. However, unlike its approach in Ukraine, Russia prefers a policy of indirect involvement in this conflict, delegating direct responsibility to Iran while providing substantial support to Tehran through diplomatic, economic, and military channels.

This article analyzes Russia's policy toward Israel and Iran, positing that the driving force behind this policy is the strategic objective of counterbalancing U.S. influence in the region. This is evident in Russia's support for Iran, which serves as a counterweight to the power projection of the United States and its ally, Israel. In this context, Russia's strategic approach to the Israel-Iran conflict can be effectively analyzed through the lens of realist theory, which posits that great powers seek to ensure their security through balancing. (Paul, 2018: 11). Furthermore, by aligning with Iran, Russia challenges U.S. energy interests in the region. As Luft and Korin (2009) argue, energy resources can be leveraged as tools of foreign policy, potentially exacerbating tensions and even triggering armed conflict. Given the growing tensions between Iran and Israel, this article will dedicate a separate chapter to a comprehensive analysis of Russia's energy policy in the context of the Israeli-Iranian escalation and its potential implications for regional and global dynamics.

This article begins with an analysis of Russia's policy toward Israel, providing a detailed examination of its historical evolution and current position. The second chapter is devoted to exploring Russia's policy toward Iran, emphasizing key developments and strategic objectives. The third chapter examines Russia's interests in energy and logistics, specifically within the context of the Iran-Israel conflict. The article concludes with a synthesis of the key findings. Throughout, the research employs a comparative methodology.

The following sources were instrumental in the preparation of this article. The first group consists of American scholars and experts who have contributed significantly to the study of Russia's relations with both Israel and Iran. In his article "Russia and Israel under Yeltsin", Robert O. Freedman examines the formative years of Russian-Israeli relations. In another important work, "Russian Policies during the Israeli-Hamas War since October the 7<sup>th</sup>", Freedman analyzes Russia's position regarding Israel in the context of the ongoing conflict with Hamas. Additionally, M.N. Katz's article "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Putin Era" offers valuable insights into Russian policy toward Iran under President Putin's leadership. Brenda Shaffer's book "Partners in Need: The Strategic Relationship of Russia and Iran" further enhances the understanding of Russia's strategic alignment with Iran, offering a comprehensive analysis of this bilateral relationship.

The second group of literature I focused on includes Russian scholars who have analyzed Russia's relations with Israel, Iran and the broader Middle Eastern region. Tatiana Nosenko's article, "A Difficult History: On the 20th Anniversary of the Restoration of Diplomatic Relations Between the USSR and Israel," provides insight into the reasons behind the Russian rapprochement with Israel after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Alexander Shumilin's doctoral dissertation, "Interaction of Russian and US Strategies in the Greater Middle East: Problems of Cooperation and Rivalry," offers a comprehensive understanding of Russia's foreign policy towards the Middle East as a whole. Kolesnikov R.A.'s "Relations Between Russia and Israel (2008–2018)" doctoral dissertation explores Russian foreign policy towards Israel. Melkonyan's article, "The Russian Vector of Israeli Foreign Policy," further elaborates on the current state of relations between Israel and Russia. Nogaev N.E.'s doctoral dissertation, "Main Trends in the Development of Iranian-Russian Relations at the Turn of the XX-XXI

Centuries (1991–2009),” provides an analysis of Russian-Iranian relations up to 2009. Mahdiyan M.H.'s book, “History of Interstate Relations Between Iran and Russia (XIX–Early XXI Centuries),” sheds light on current dynamics of Russian-Iranian relations. Ravandi-Fadai L.M.'s work, “Partnership Without Obligations: Features of Russian-Iranian Relations in Recent Decades,” is also an important source on this topic. I also referenced the book *Russia and Israel: A Difficult Journey*, written by Israeli author A.D. Epstein and Russian Middle East expert Kozheurov. This work provides valuable insights into the complex issues between Russia and Israel.

A distinctive feature of this research lies in its focus on not only comparing Russia's policy towards Iran and Israel but also analyzing Russia's strategic interests in energy and logistics within the context of the Iran-Israel conflict. This dimension has been notably underexplored in the existing literature, highlighting a clear gap in scholarly analysis. This article contributes to the field of international relations by addressing this gap, offering valuable insights for scholars and practitioners seeking a deeper understanding of Russia's geopolitical and economic motivations in the region.

### **1. The Evolution of Russian-Israeli Relations**

During the Cold War, the USSR and Israel failed to establish allied relations. Despite having initially supporting the establishment of Israel, the USSR severed diplomatic ties with the country twice, in 1953 and 1967, due to Israel's alignment with the Western bloc. Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership in the mid-1980s initiated a thaw that led to the restoration of full diplomatic relations by 1991 (RIA, 2016). In this context, it is crucial to emphasize that the primary catalyst for Moscow's rapprochement with Israel was the fact that by the mid-1980s, it became apparent that the Soviet Union was being outpaced in the Cold War. The Soviet Union, in its attempts to compete with the military buildup of the United States, confronted significant economic and political crises that rendered the maintenance of its empire increasingly untenable. This predicament compelled Soviet leadership to pursue cooperative relations with Western nations, particularly to gain access to advanced technology (Mearsheimer, 2001: 369). Moscow aimed to improve economic ties with the U.S., but the Jackson-Vanik Amendment of 1974, linked to Soviet restrictions on Jewish emigration, hindered this goal. U.S. lawmakers saw these policies as human rights violations and withheld support for Moscow. To overcome this, the Soviet Union worked to improve its image by easing emigration restrictions and strengthening ties with Israel. This approach gained support from U.S. Zionist groups, who became more willing to back the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment (Nosenko, 2011: 91–92).

During Yeltsin's early presidency, the normalization of relations with Israel continued to grow, particularly through increased trade and cultural exchanges. However, these gains faced challenges, as shifts in Russian foreign policy during the 1990s affected bilateral relations. The optimism seen in Israeli-Russian ties in 1992 gradually gave way to a more complex and sometimes tense diplomatic situation. This change was largely due to Russia's decision in the early 1990s to strengthen ties with Iran, including increased military and nuclear cooperation, which inevitably strained its relationship with Israel. (Freedman, 1998:164).

When Yevgeny Primakov became Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1996, the country's foreign policy underwent a significant shift. Rather than continuing its efforts to strengthen ties with the West, Russia began focusing on curbing U.S. influence. In this context, nations such as Iran and Iraq gained greater importance in Russia's foreign policy (Fedorov, 2001). Under Primakov, Russia grew more critical of Israeli policies, especially during the 1996 'Grapes of Wrath' operation in Lebanon and the 1997 collapse of the peace process. (Freedman,1998: 164-165). Moreover, this period saw the restoration of military and technical cooperation between Russia and Syria (Podtserob, 2015: 338-339). Overall, Military cooperation between Russia, Iran, and

Syria has emerged as a consistent source of tension in Russian-Israeli relations. Each successive arms deal has exacerbated these tensions, prompting formal protests from Israeli officials. (Epstein & Kozheurov, 2011a:165).

In the early 2000s, as tensions grew between Russia and the West, Russia focused on increasing its influence in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in countries like Syria, Libya, and Palestine. This was part of Russia's strategy to play a bigger role in peace efforts, including mediating between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. However, Russia's decision to supply advanced anti-aircraft systems to Syria and Iran strained its relationship with Israel (Shumilin, 2009: 74-75).

Another point of contention in Russian-Israeli relations has been the role of Hamas. While Russia has condemned Hamas for its acts of terrorism, it has refrained from officially designating the group as a terrorist organization. Moreover, Putin recognized Hamas's electoral victory in 2006 as a legitimate result of democratic processes. From that point, Russian officials began holding regular meetings with Hamas representatives. (Borshchevskaya, 2023). Russia's engagement with Hamas in February 2006 further complicated bilateral relations with Israel. Israel criticized the move, seeing it as a cause for concern. (Epstein & Kozheurov, 2011b:60-62). This issue remains a problem in Russian-Israeli relations to this day (Staff, 2023a).

Moscow's foreign policy decisions and strategic alliances in the region often diverge from Israel's interests, contributing to a growing sense of mistrust between the two nations. The central point of disagreement was their different positions on the Syrian conflict. Russia has long viewed Syria as a key ally, while Israel considered Syria an adversary, particularly due to Syria's close ties with Iran. Syria and Israel also haven't been able to make peace, and the Golan Heights issue is still unresolved. In short, the history of both countries' relationships with Syria has led to different views on the situation. (Kolesnikov, 2019: 98-99).

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that, despite notable differences, Russia and Israel have successfully prevented major tensions in their relationship. While Israel maintains a strong alliance with the United States, it has taken a different approach from Washington's hardline stance on Russia, most notably by choosing not to join sanctions against Moscow. However, it should be noted that this decision was not based on any support for Russia, but rather on Israel's aim to minimize the risks associated with Moscow's presence in Syria and its growing ties with Iran. In this regard, to avoid unintended conflicts, in October 2015, Russia and Israel initiated talks to prevent incidents between Israel Defense Force units and Russian forces. (Opall-Rome, 2015 ). The talks led to an understanding of the need to create joint operational guidelines for both countries' military forces, aimed at reducing the risk of airspace and maritime clashes. Notably, this agreement was made without formal written documentation. A direct communication line was established between Russia's Khmeimim airbase and Israel's air defense center in Tel Aviv. During a training exercise on October 15-16, 2015, a Russian aircraft was part of a scenario where it approached Israeli borders in a potentially dangerous way. The Israeli Air Force intercepted the aircraft but did so without conflict, safely redirecting it to avoid violating Israeli airspace (Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, 2018: 787). In the months that followed, similar incidents occurred in November and December 2015, where Russian aircraft came close to Israeli borders. However, these situations were managed effectively, preventing any serious outcomes. (Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, 2018: 787). As a result of this de-escalation protocol, Israel was able to operate within Syria with a certain degree of freedom (Melkonyan, 2020).

However, the aforementioned de-escalation mechanism should not be interpreted as Russia's stabilizing role in Syria for Israel. Russia's cooperation with Iran in Syria presented significant obstacles in this regard. At best, Russia and Israel have reached a gentleman's agreement aimed at preventing accidental confrontations in Syria—characterized as tactical and situational but lacking substantive strategic engagement. To attain the

status of a strategic stabilizer for Israel in Syria, Russia would need to facilitate peace negotiations between Iran and Israel or reduce its cooperation with Iran in favor of Israel. None of the scenarios have worked out to this day. Moreover, Israel sees Russia's involvement in Syria as a security threat, mainly because of its close relationship with Iran. (Dima Course, 2021: 3)

Russia's stance on de-escalation and its consideration of Israel's interests in the Syrian Arab Republic were driven by Moscow's desire to minimize the costs of its involvement in the Syrian conflict and to avoid overextension and unbalancing (Dobbins et al., 2019a) of Russia resulting from conflict with Israel. This conciliatory approach towards Israel can be attributed to Russia's economic vulnerabilities. Therefore, it is essential to underscore the material pressures that shape the decision-making processes (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2001:50) of Russian policymakers, especially considering the fragile condition of the Russian economy, which is 'comparatively small and heavily dependent on energy exports'. (Dobbins et al., 2019b:271). Unlike the Soviet Union, modern Russia has few true allies, with many, like Syria, seen as liabilities. (Dobbins et al., 2019c:41). By 2023, Syria's situation worsened, with poor living conditions, a struggling economy, and renewed protests hindering political progress (Polyakov, 2024).

These vulnerabilities significantly shape Moscow's cautious approach toward Israel, as the Kremlin seeks to avoid a comprehensive conflict that would impose additional burdens on an already strained budget, exacerbated by the crises in Syria and Ukraine. However, this does not mean that Russia will refrain from kinetic diplomacy against Israel. In scenarios where Russian mediation between Iran and Israel fails to yield a resolution, Moscow aims to minimize its own costs in an escalating conflict by shifting responsibility to Iran. In this context, rather than engaging in direct conflict, Russia's preferred tactic is to employ proxy measures to support Iran from behind the scenes. Moreover, Russia seeks to establish a security framework in the Middle East to counterbalance U.S. influence, with Turkey and Iran playing central roles in this effort. However, these Russian initiatives are met with opposition from Israel, which views them as a challenge to its regional security interests. (Avatkov & Krylov, 2023: 170; Krylov 2021: 8).

Overall, as Russia's frictions with the United States escalated, its relations with Iran continued to deepen, while tensions with Israel increased. This tension has notably surfaced on both, the Ukrainian and Syrian fronts. In recent years, Israel has significantly enhanced its military cooperation with Ukraine. For instance, Israel participated in the Sea Breeze 2021 exercise in Ukraine (Americas Navy, 2021). Additionally, Israel initiated the transfer of various weapon systems deemed non-lethal to the Kyiv government. By mid-September 2022, Israeli media reported the provision of anti-drone systems to Ukraine via Poland by an Israeli arms manufacturer (Goldstein, 2022). As Israel's ties with Ukraine strengthened, the Netanyahu administration approved export licenses in spring 2023 for two Israeli firms to sell electronic warfare systems with a 40-kilometer range. (Staff, 2023b).

Regarding the Syrian direction, In January 2022, Moscow and Damascus conducted their first joint air patrol over Syrian territory, including the Golan Heights area, which borders Israel. (Reuters, 2022a). These actions underscored Russia's objective of balancing against Israel. On October 7, 2023, Israel increased attacks on Iran-backed fighters in Syria near the border, marking a shift in strategy by no longer informing Russia ahead of strikes. (TASS, 2024a). The Russian Aerospace Forces, in turn, were forced to once again begin patrolling the demarcation line between Syria and Israel in the Golan Heights (TASS, 2024b). As a result, the de-escalation mechanism established between Russia and Israel in 2015 is currently showing signs of dysfunction.

The pivotal moment occurred on October 7, 2023 marking a significant decline in relations between Israel and Russia. Moscow's actions during the conflict worsened tensions: it legitimized a Hamas attack on Israel by

hosting a Hamas delegation in Russia. Relations deteriorated further on April 19th when Russia advocated for UN sanctions against Israel (Freedman, 2024).

## 2. Regional Partnerships: Russia and Iran

The foundation of today's cooperation between Iran and the Russian Federation was established in the final years of the USSR. Following the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, the Soviet Union rapidly expanded its arms sales to Iran. Tehran needed weapons to upgrade its armed troops. Consequently, the Russian Iranian agreement on November 5, 1989, facilitated the sale of 24 MiG-29 fighters, 12 SU-24MK aircraft, and two S-200VE anti-aircraft missile systems to Tehran (Nogaev, 2010: 82-83.). In addition, Iran procured four diesel-electric submarines in 1990 (Kommersant, 2007). Since 1992, the collaboration between these nations extended into space technology and ballistic missiles (Nemets, & Kurtz, 2009: 95-96). A pivotal moment in their relationship occurred in January 1995, Moscow and Tehran agreed for Russia to finish building the Bushehr nuclear plant, marking a key step in their energy and technology cooperation. (Wehling, 1999: 136).

However, the deepening ties between Russia and Iran during this period raised concerns in Washington, DC (Goldman et al., 1998: 2). In 1995, Russia signed the "Gore-Chernomyrdin" agreement with the U.S., agreeing to fulfill existing military contracts with Iran by 1999 and avoid new ones afterward. (Ravandi-Fadai, 2021: 44). Despite this agreement, Moscow continued to engage in undisclosed new arms agreements with Iran, complicating its relations with the United States (Broder, 2000).

By the end of the 1990s, Russian foreign policy began to diverge from its previous pattern of closely following Western trends. This shift was marked by a more independent and pragmatic stance toward Iran. In this context, in 1997, Russian Foreign Minister Primakov and Iranian counterpart Velayati condemned the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf. (Cohen & Phillips, 2001:4). Toward the end of 1999, Russia declared it would not uphold the "Gore-Chernomyrdin" memorandum, leading Vice President Gore to sanction seven Russian entities believed to be transferring military technology to Iran. (Shumilin, 2009: 123-124). Despite these measures, Russia continued to deepen its diplomatic and economic ties with Iran.

In the early 2000s, strained Russian-American relations strengthened Russian-Iranian ties. (Katz, 2002: 78). Russia signaled increased arms sales to Iran and resumed work on the Bushehr nuclear reactor (Shaffer, 2001: 73, 82-83). Throughout the 2000s, the bilateral relations between Russia and Iran saw significant development. In March 2001, this trajectory was formalized with the signing of the "Agreement on the Fundamentals of Relations and Principles of Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran." Article 2 of the agreement outlines: "Each Party commits to refraining from the use of force or the threat of force in their bilateral relations and undertakes not to permit its territory to be used for acts of aggression, subversion, or separatism against the other Party." Article 3 specifies: "In the event that either Party faces aggression from any state, the other Party agrees not to provide military or any other form of assistance to the aggressor that could prolong the aggression, and pledges to facilitate the resolution of disputes based on the principles outlined in the United Nations Charter and international law" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2018). This agreement laid a foundational framework and established the dynamics that underpin contemporary Russian Iranian relations.

Military cooperation between Russia and Iran grew significantly during this period. Between 2002 and 2005, Iran received various Russian military equipment, including Mi-171 and Mi-17V-5 helicopters, Su-25 attack aircraft, and 29 Tor-M1 air defense systems. (Mahdiyan, 2014:114-115). In 2007, Iran and Russia signed a contract for around five S-300 battalions. Yet the fulfilment phase was delayed and later cancelled after the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1929 in 2010 banning all weapons deliveries to Iran (RIA Novosti, 2016).

Despite the initial cancellation, Russia revisited the issue in the following years. After the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, which aimed to address Iran's nuclear program, Russia decided to supply S-300 air defense systems to Iran in 2016 (Kozhanov, 2015).

Another key milestone was the agreement on the "North-South" international transport corridor, announced on May 21, 2002, in St. Petersburg by the transport ministers of Russia, Iran, and India. They believed that using this route instead of the Suez would reduce cargo delivery costs by at least 30%. (Nogaev, 2010: 80). The North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) gives Russia access to Iranian seaports and links it to the growing markets of Pakistan, India, and Southeast Asia, offering a strategic boost for economic development amid Western sanctions. (Fadai, 2023).

Despite pressure from the US, EU, and Israel, Russia continued its collaboration with Iran on the Bushehr nuclear plant. The construction of the first unit of the Bushehr nuclear power plant progressed and was finished in March 2009. (RGRU, 2011). Moscow acknowledged Western concerns over nuclear proliferation and supported International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of Iranian facilities. Russia acted as an intermediary between the United States, the "European trio", and Iran. At the same time, Moscow delayed referring Iran's nuclear issue to the UN Security Council (Shumilin, 2009: 127).

The Syrian crisis marked a turning point in Iranian-Russian relations. In July 2015, Qassem Soleimani visited Moscow, leading to an agreement for joint military action in Syria. Iran would handle ground operations, leveraging its experience and Hezbollah's capabilities, while Russia focused on air combat. A joint operations center was established with Iran, Russia, the Syrian army, and Hezbollah to coordinate military efforts (Kam, 2017: 13). In 2015, Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria set up a joint information center in Baghdad to coordinate operations against ISIS, focusing on intelligence gathering and military strike coordination (Pileggi, 2015). It's also important to mention that in 2016, Russian aircraft carried out airstrikes on Islamic State targets in Syria from an airbase near Hamadan in Iran (Dehghan, 2016). These developments highlighted a strategic alignment between the two nations, reflecting shared regional goals. Their joint efforts in Syria sought to enhance influence and strengthen cooperation on security challenges.

The growing partnership between Russia and Iran has sparked increased scrutiny from the U.S., pushing both nations to strengthen their strategic ties. This has resulted in various forms of collaboration, such as joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman with China, backing for Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the transfer of U.S. weapons captured in Ukraine to Iran, enhanced cooperation in missile defense, shared investments in new trade routes, and expertise on circumventing sanctions. Additionally, Russia has provided technical support to help Iran address internal instability, and both nations have expanded digital surveillance and censorship initiatives. A significant development has been the lifting of restrictions on sharing offensive cyber capabilities. (Grisé & Evans, 2023: 7).

Iran and Russia are also strengthening energy ties, with a 2022 memorandum of understanding outlining \$40 billion in Russian investment for Iranian gas projects. This partnership is significant as both countries hold the world's largest natural gas reserves. (Sharafedin, 2022). The cooperation between these two major gas-producing nations could grant Moscow an additional tool to influence the global energy market. Meanwhile, as energy collaboration with Iran progresses, Israel has aligned itself with initiatives that oppose Russian interests.

### **3. Russia's Energy and Logistical Interests in the Context of the Israel-Iran Conflict**

Energy resources are central to Moscow's policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East as a whole. Russia seeks to engage in energy exploration and production in the region, which holds significant reserves.

The discovery of fields such as Tamar, Leviathan, and Zohr in the 2010s sparked interest in Russian involvement in these projects, but participation remained limited due to regional conflicts, unclear borders, and competition from other countries. (Mamedov, 2021: 99-104).

Simultaneously, the European Union has demonstrated significant interest in the gas reserves of the Eastern Mediterranean as a central component of its energy security strategy. The European Energy Security Strategy, introduced by the European Commission in 2014, underscores the imperative to diversify energy sources and mitigate dependence on a single supplier, particularly Russia. In this context, importing natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean is regarded as a crucial step toward enhancing Europe's energy security and reducing its vulnerability to supply disruptions (European Commission, 2014). By January 2013, Israel had become the holder of the largest natural gas reserves in the region (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2013), emerging as a significant player in the Eastern Mediterranean's energy landscape. Potential export routes for Israel's energy resources to Europe include pipelines through Turkey, LNG terminals in Egypt, and the East Mediterranean pipeline via Greece.

The concept of the EastMed gas pipeline emerged in 2020 when Israel, Cyprus, and Greece inked an agreement for energy sector collaboration (Koutantou, 2020). However, the delineation of a new maritime border between Turkey and Libya effectively ruled out the construction of an Israeli gas pipeline to Europe without their approval (Cohen, 2020). An alternative to this project could be a gas pipeline from Israel passing through Turkey. During the visit of Israeli President Isaac Herzog to Ankara on March 10, 2022, cooperation in the energy sector was a key topic of discussion. (Daily Sabah, 2022.) Turkey aimed to supply Israeli gas to itself and Europe, but with the escalation between Israel and Hamas, these plans have been shelved as Turkey adopted an anti-Israeli stance. (Ozerkan, 2022). In light of disruptions to the aforementioned projects, Egypt has emerged as the Eastern Mediterranean's gas infrastructure hub. In 2022, Israel, Egypt, and the EU signed a memorandum to increase gas exports to Europe, allowing Israel to use Egyptian liquefaction stations for delivery. (Safty & Rabinovitch, 2022).

Excluding Russia from these projects aligns with the United States' strategic goals in the Eastern Mediterranean. In recent years, Washington has actively encouraged energy diversification among East Mediterranean states. While this approach has yielded some success, the Gaza conflict underscores significant geopolitical risks. Escalating hostilities could damage critical energy infrastructure, disrupting supply and potentially delaying regional energy plans. (Raydan, 2023). Israel's coastal proximity to the conflict zone exposes critical energy assets, like oil fields and offshore platforms, to direct threats. Historically, there have been precedents for such occurrences. In 2022, Hezbollah escalated tensions by provoking Israel and undermining Lebanon's maritime border negotiations. The group simulated a drone attack on a platform near the Karish field, likely aiming to disrupt talks and border resolution. (Fabian, 2022).

In this context, it is important to note that undermining the European Union's energy diversification strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean represents a central component of Russia's geopolitical objectives in the region. (Pierini, 2021: 2) Continued reliance on Russian gas strengthens Russia's geopolitical influence and makes Europe vulnerable to supply disruptions and price swings, weakening its negotiating power. Meanwhile, the Hamas-Israel conflict, with Iran's backing, adds to regional instability that Moscow exploits. This instability complicates efforts to develop the Eastern Mediterranean as an alternative to Russian gas.

Russia's energy sector also has a vested interest in the oil market, which has a direct connection to the ongoing conflict between Iran and Israel. Russia seeks to secure additional budget income from energy resources by fostering coalition formats designed to regulate oil prices. In late 2016, OPEC and several non-member states,



forming the OPEC Plus coalition that includes Russia, reached an agreement to curtail oil production. Within this context, the cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Russia plays a pivotal role ( Mamedov, 2021: 100). The strengthening relationship between Saudi Arabia and Moscow may have significant consequences for the U.S., particularly as Saudi Arabia becomes less inclined to comply with American requests to control global oil prices. With few options to affect oil prices, the U.S. has typically depended on convincing Riyadh to tap into its excess production capacity (Ulrichsen et al., 2022).

In October 2023, Saudi Arabia told the White House it would increase oil production next year if prices stay high. This gesture aimed to gain Congressional support for a deal in which Saudi Arabia would recognize Israel in exchange for a U.S. defense pact (Said et al., 2023). These actions could disrupt Moscow's efforts to cut oil production with Riyadh. However, the Hamas attack and Israel's response have stalled diplomatic progress. On October 13, 2023, Saudi sources confirmed that normalization talks with Israel were paused (Dagher & MacDonald, 2023). While Hamas's attacks on Israel may not be directly tied to Israeli-Saudi normalization, it's hard to see how talks can progress amid an Israeli-Hamas conflict (Cahill, 2023).

The conflict between Hamas and Israel also has significant implications for Russian interests, particularly in the realm of logistics. The United States has advanced a strategic geo-economic initiative: the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) (Cafiero, 2023). The IMEC initiative, endorsed at the 2023 G20 summit in New Delhi by the US and EU, aims to create new maritime routes between India and the UAE, along with a freight rail network connecting the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel to Europe. It also includes an oil pipeline from Saudi Arabia to Israel and a fiber optic cable (The Times of India, 2023).

The implementation of the IMEC poses potential challenges to the interests of Iran and Russia, particularly in relation to their involvement in the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) (Alzghool, 2023). These two projects are mutually exclusive. The NSTC, a longstanding initiative involving India, Russia, and Iran, seeks to enhance the transportation of goods through routes that pass-through Iran and Russia (Sergeeva, 2023). Moscow views the NSTC as a key logistical asset to bypass European sanctions post-Ukraine conflict, using the Iran route as a secure alternative to Western trade. (Smagin, 2023; Fadaei, 2023).

Recent geopolitical tensions, like the Israel-Hamas conflict, have stalled Israel and Saudi Arabia's integration into the IMEC and their broader regional rapprochement efforts. (Arha & Roa, 2024). These challenges have created a dynamic where the North-South Transport Corridor gains renewed attention. Moscow and Tehran stand to benefit from shifting regional dynamics, as opportunities emerge to advance the NSTC.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between Russia and Israel has been complex. The diplomatic thaw initiated under Gorbachev in the 1980s has evolved into a more cautious engagement. Growing Russian alliances with Iran and Syria, along with support for Hamas, have increasingly strained relations with Israel. The October 2023 Hamas attack and Russia's subsequent actions marked a sharp decline in ties, signaling a potentially more confrontational future. While Russia and Israel have sought to avoid direct conflict, their relationship remains fragile.

By the early 2000s, Russia's foreign policy had shifted toward a more pronounced anti-Western stance, allowing for continued support of Iran's military capabilities. The strategic alignment of both nations intensified during the Syrian conflict, where they coordinated military efforts to support the Assad regime. In recent years, their cooperation has expanded to joint naval drills, missile defense, and cyber capabilities, alongside energy investments aimed at leveraging their combined natural gas reserves. Despite facing opposition from the U.S.

and Israel, this partnership continues to strengthen, as Russia and Iran work to counter Western sanctions and expand their influence in regional and global affairs.

Russia's strategy concerning the Israel-Iran conflict is intricately linked to its broader geopolitical objective of challenging the U.S.-centric international order. By supporting Iran, Moscow aims to assert its influence and reshape regional dynamics in alignment with its own interests. Specifically, Russia aims to establish alternative logistical routes through Iran to circumvent sanctions while concurrently weaponizing energy and other trade routes that are vital to the United States and its allies. In this context Russia's support to Iran complicates U.S. and EU efforts to establish alternative energy supply routes from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe and critical infrastructure developments, notably India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. Additionally, Russian support for Tehran in defense is vital for safeguarding its interests in energy price regulation, as kinetic diplomacy plays a key role in protecting Russian interests in this realm.

However, the escalation of this conflict into a full-scale Iran-Israel war presents substantial risks for Russia that could have far-reaching consequences. Firstly, Russia has invested in developing energy infrastructure and other economic initiatives in Iran, viewing the country as a key ally in countering Western influence. A protracted conflict could jeopardize these investments. Moreover, the potential for direct military involvement on behalf of Iran poses significant challenges for Russia's military and financial resources. Engaging in another military commitment could stretch Russia's already strained capabilities, particularly as it continues to manage ongoing obligations such as the conflict in Ukraine. The Kremlin may find itself caught in a difficult balancing act, needing to support its ally while also ensuring that its own military resources are not overextended.

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