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Russia-Israel Relations: Expectations and Reality

Syria remains the main point of contention between the two countries.

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Russia has sought to maintain good relations with Israel over the past few years. The relationship between the two has been multi-faceted and sensitive to developments in the Middle East and further afield.

In the military dimension, particularly with regard to Syria, there is continuous coordination between Israeli and Russian armed forces on a number of levels, as has been the case for several years

This coordination is exemplified by the deconfliction line aimed at preserving the countries'

interests in regard to Israeli operations in Syria. Russian-speaking officers occupy both ends of the line.

Russia and Israel both have an interest in avoiding confrontation, even a tactical one, between Israeli and Russian forces, in addition to any clashes between the Israel Defense Forces and Syrian Forces.

From Israel's perspective, the Russian presence in Syria creates an address to which it can turn and an entity with authority that can and will influence any future settlement.

From Russia's viewpoint, Israel and its military actions have a direct impact on the stability of the region and the order that Russia is seeking to establish in Syria under Assad, or any other figure that it chooses to support.

Israel's ability to serve as a spoiler for Russia's plans in Syria, which may be the result of Israel's demonstrated capacity and willingness to operate against Iranian military entrenchment in the region, has been well noted by the Kremlin.

However, both Russia and Israel have unmet expectations where the other country is concerned.

Israel expects Russia to support its primary goal of distancing Iranian military presence from Syria in general, and the Israeli-Syrian border in particular.

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Russia expects Israel to "pay" for what Moscow perceives as its cooperative approach in regard to Israeli airstrikes in Syria. Israel's alliance with the U.S. creates a situation in which Russia views Israel as a bridge to Washington and expects Israel to function accordingly.

So far, these expectations have received only symbolic answers. This is due, in part, to limits on what Israel can achieve in Washington, especially in the current environment, and the U.S. security establishment's view of Russia.

This summer, Russian and U.S. National Security Advisers convened in Jerusalem, under the auspices of Israel's National Security Council. The meeting, which was unprecedented, received extensive press coverage due to the strategic issues discussed and the significance of the two powers meeting in Jerusalem, but ended without agreement.

Israel has therefore not yet provided Russia with the value it expected for its de facto understanding and acceptance of the Israeli strategy in Syria, and other Russian gestures.

One of these gestures was the Russian endeavor to deliver to Israel, from a territory under fire in Syria, the remains of an Israeli soldier killed in battle in 1982.

Russia sees the close American-Israeli alliance as a means of compensation for its goodwill, and so far Israel, in Russian eyes, has not returned the favor. This is creating growing antagonism among Russian forces deployed in Syria toward Israeli operations.

Russian expectations for a reward are not necessarily restricted to the Middle East. For example, Russia would appreciate a message being conveyed to the U.S. about the importance of allowing Syria under Assad's rule to be reaccepted as a legitimate regime to be readmitted to regional structures such as the Arab League.

Russia is also seeking global returns for its constructive behavior in Syria. These could take the form of easing sanctions or a more cautious approach by the West in the former Soviet region.

These expectations are likely to increase the frustration of the security apparatus in Russia and put additional pressure on Jerusalem.

While cooperation is likely to continue at all levels, the growing discomfort of Russia's military establishment with Israel is eroding Russia's willingness to tolerate Israeli operations in the region.

So far, Russia settles for the fact that Israel respects its priorities and takes great caution in relation to Russian assets in Syria, and in relation to critical Syrian regime assets.

However, without what Moscow perceives as a well-deserved compensation, Russia can be expected to take Israeli interests into account only to the degree that these do not coincide with core Russian interests. Future Russian decisions will serve Israeli interests only if they achieve Russian objectives.

Any flexibility in Russian policy in response to Israeli demands will be subject to continuing re-examination of Israeli co-operation and how well Israel can assist Russia in achieving its interests.

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