

Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Israel on June 25 for his first state visit since retaking the presidency. The visit was arranged in mid-May, and so at least part of the agenda was set, given events in Syria and Egypt. The interesting thing about Israel and Russia is that while they seem to be operating in the same areas of interest and their agendas seem disconnected, their interests are not always opposed. It is easy to identify places they both care about but more difficult to identify ways in which they connect.

By George Friedman of Stratfor

It is therefore difficult to identify the significance of the visit beyond that it happened. An example is Azerbaijan. Russia is still a major weapons provider for Azerbaijan, but the Israelis are now selling it large amounts of weapons and appear to be using it as a base from which to observe and, according to rumors, possibly attack Iran. Russia, which supports Armenia, a country Azerbaijan fought a war with in the late 1980s and early 1990s and technically still is at war with, ought to oppose Israel's action, particularly since it threatens Iran, which Russia does not want attacked. At the same time, Russia doesn't feel threatened by Israeli involvement in Azerbaijan, and Israel doesn't really care about Armenia. Both are there, both are involved and both think Azerbaijan is important, yet each operates in ways that ought to conflict but don't.

The same is true in the more immediate case of Syria, where its downing of a Turkish plane has created an unexpected dynamic for this visit. To think about this we need to consider Russian and Israeli strategy and its odd lack of intersection in Syria.

Russia's Need for a U.S. Distraction

Russia has complex relationships in the region, particularly focused on Syria and Iran. Russia's interest in both countries is understandable. Putin, who has said he regarded the breakup of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical catastrophe, views the United States as Russia's prime adversary. His view is that the United States not only used the breakup to extend NATO into the former Soviet Union in the Baltics but also has tried to surround and contain Russia by supporting pro-democracy movements in the region and by using these movements to create pro-American governments. Putin sees himself as being in a duel with the United States throughout the former Soviet Union.

The Russians believe they are winning this struggle. Putin is not so much interested in dominating these countries as he is in being certain that the United States doesn't dominate them. That gives Russia room to maneuver and allows it to establish economic and political relations that secure Russian interests. In addition, Russia has tremendously benefited from the U.S. wars in the Islamic world. It is not so much that these wars alienated Muslims, although that was beneficial. Rather, what helped the Russians most was that these wars absorbed American strategic bandwidth.

Obviously, U.S. military and intelligence capabilities that might have been tasked to support movements and regimes in Russia's "near abroad" were absorbed by conflict in the Islamic world. But perhaps even more important, the strategic and intellectual bandwidth of U.S. policymakers was diverted. Russia became a secondary strategic interest after 9/11. While some movements already in place were supported by the United States, this was mostly inertia, and as the Russians parried and movements in various countries splintered, the United States did not have resources to respond.

The Russians also helped keep the United States tied up in Afghanistan by facilitating bases in Central Asia and providing a corridor for resupply. Russia was able to create a new reality in the region in which it was the dominant power, without challenge.

The Russians therefore valued the conflict in the Middle East because it allowed Russia to be a secondary issue for the only global power. With the war in Iraq over and the war in Afghanistan ending, the possibility is growing that the United States would have the resources and bandwidth to resume the duel on the Russian periphery. This is not in the Russian interest. Therefore, the Russians have an interest in encouraging any process that continues to draw the United States into the Islamic world. Chief among these is supporting Iran and Syria. To be more precise, Russia does not so much support these countries as it opposes measures that might either weaken Iran or undermine the Syrian government. From the Russian point of view, the simple existence of these regimes provides a magnet that diverts U.S. power.

Israel's Position on Syria

This brings us back to Putin's visit to Israel. From the Russian point of view, Syria is not a side issue but a significant part of its strategy. Israel has more complex feelings. The regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad, while the Soviets were allied with it, represented a significant danger to Israel. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Syria lost its patron and diminished as a threat. Since then, the Syrians under al Assad had two virtues from the Israeli point of view. The first was that they were predictable. Their interests in Lebanon were built around financial and political goals that could be accommodated by the Israelis in exchange for limitations on the sorts of military activity that Israel could not tolerate. Furthermore, Syria's interests did not include conflict with Israel, and therefore Syria held Hezbollah in check until it was forced out of Lebanon by the United States in 2005.

The second advantage of the al Assad regime in relation to Israel was that it was not Sunni but Alawite, a Shiite sect. During the 2000s, Israel and the West believed the main threat emanated from the Sunni world. Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas were all Sunni. Over the past decade, a corrupt minority Alawite regime has appeared preferable to Israel than a coherent majority radical Islamist regime in the north. It wasn't certain how radical it would be, but at the same time there appeared to be more risk on the Sunni side than on the Shiite side.

Israel's position on the al Assad regime has shifted in the past year from hoping it would survive to accepting that it couldn't and preparing for the next regime. Underlying this calculus was a reconsideration of which regime would be more dangerous. With the withdrawal of the United States from Iraq and with Iran filling the vacuum that was left, Iran became a greater threat to

Israel than Hamas and the Sunnis. Therefore, Israel now desires a Sunni regime in Syria that would block Iranian ambitions.

In this sense, Israeli and Russian interests continue to diverge. At the same time, the Israelis are aware that they have very little influence over what happens in Syria. They are bystanders hoping that things work out for them. Whether they favor this or that faction in Syria matters little. Indeed, open Israeli support for any faction can hurt that side. Therefore, Syria is a demonstration of the limits of Israeli power. What happens in Syria matters a great deal, but Israel lacks the power and influence to have an impact.

Coinciding Interests

The Russians do have some power and influence. The weapons they supply to the Syrian government can help the regime survive. Their ability to block or circumvent sanctions helps both Iran and Syria. Russia cannot impose a solution, but it may be able to create the circumstances under which the United States is drawn in and diverted. At the same time, it must be remembered that Russia has its own problem with Islamic in the northern Caucasus. These groups are mostly Sunni, but there are a wide variety of Sunnis. While the Russians want to prevent a radical Sunni group in Syria, they could on this level live with a more moderate Sunni group if they cannot keep al Assad or his regime in power.

Putin's visit is intended to make the United States nervous and to try to lay the groundwork for shifts in Israel's relation to Russia that could pay off in the long run. The Israelis, however, do have things they need from Putin. They cannot control regime change in Syria, but to some extent Russia can. And here Israeli and Russian interests coincide. Israel would tolerate the survival of the al Assad regime as long as Syria does not become an Iranian satellite.

Russia could counterbalance Iran if al Assad's regime survived. If, on the other hand, his regime fell, Israel and Russia both have an interest in a moderate Sunni regime. This is where Russia must make a decision -- assuming it has the power to affect the outcome. In the long run, a moderate Sunni regime is in its interest. In the short run, it wants a regime that creates the greatest unease for the United States -- that is, either the al Assad regime as an Iranian asset or a radical Islamist regime.

There is a point where all this comes together. Turkey has decided, in response to the downing of its aircraft, to call a meeting of NATO. Turkey is not prepared to unilaterally intervene in Syria, but having lost an aircraft it could ask for a NATO intervention of some sort. Turkey has been hostile to al Assad from early on, and this gives it the opportunity to invoke the alliance under its common defense policy.

How NATO will respond is unknown, save that the rhetoric will be intense and the desire for combat restrained. Neither Russia nor Israel would be upset by a NATO intervention. From the Russian point of view, a NATO intervention involving large amounts of U.S. forces would be the best it could hope for, especially if NATO gets bogged down, as tends to happen in such interventions. From the Israeli point of view, having NATO take responsibility for Syria would be the best possible outcome by far.

Of course, this was not on the table when the Israeli-Russian meeting was set up. At that time, the meeting was meant to explore the differences on subjects such as Syria. But with recent events, the benefits of possible NATO involvement, however unlikely, are something that Russia and Israel agree on. Of course, neither is a member of NATO, and getting any NATO country to commit troops to Syria is unlikely. But what was likely to be a pointless discussion now has some point.

Israel would like Russia as a mild counterweight to the United States but without disrupting relations with the United States. Russia would like to have additional options in the Middle East beyond Iran and Syria but without alienating those states. Neither is likely. When we dig into the strange relationship between two countries deeply involved in each other's areas of interest yet never quite intersecting, an answer begins to emerge.

There is little conflict between Russia's and Israel's interests because neither country is nearly as powerful as it would like to be in the region. Russia has some options but nothing like it had during the Cold War. Israel has little influence in the outcome in Syria or in Egypt.

Still, it is in the interest of both countries to make themselves appear to be weightier than they are. The state visit should have helped serve that purpose.

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