

Change and continuity in Russian Middle Eastern policy : Israeli vector

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Since the beginning of its military operation in Syria in 2015, Russia has been one of the major players in the Middle East, which can alter the facts on the ground immediately. Russian involvement in Syria signaled a landmark not only in Syrian and Middle Eastern politics but also in the Russian foreign policy course, once it is the first Russian military operation beyond former Soviet territories and set off Russian assertive engagement in the region. The Middle East turned to be the ground, where Russia has sought to consolidate its position before the Western alliance, as western sanctions following the Ukrainian crisis were to leave Russia in isolation. Nevertheless, since its involvement in the Syrian civil war, Russia has gained more leverage in the region through diplomatic and military means, beyond its aims to stand against Western coercion. Developing its direct bilateral pragmatic relations with regional actors increased the radius of Russian action both in the region and world politics. Russia has become the only government, proved to be capable of speaking to all parties of the conflicts in the region such as Israeli-Palestinian, Saudi Arabia-Iran, Israel-Iran.

The international system, shaken by the collapse of the USSR has been transforming since then. The assertive Russian Middle Eastern policy which can be also discussed as an outcome of this transformation raised interests in IR studies due to the ambiguity stemming from the changing international system and its consequences. The factor of change can be observed in Russian foreign policy as well. Understanding the incentives of the Russian political course in the region requires comprehension of the changing and long-standing components of it. Israel plays a critical role in this respect. During the Cold War, Israel, as a party of Middle Eastern conflict has been in the center of great-power rivalry among the USSR and the USA in the region. Support of the USSR for the establishment of Israel, ceasing the diplomatic relations with Israel after the Six Days War in 1967, rapprochement during the late 1980s and development of bilateral relations during the 1990s cannot be comprehended precisely unless amalgamating with the West factor. Several aspects can explain this: first, the Russian behavior is influenced by the development and behavior of the Western nation[1], second, since colonial period the West has been the most significant actor in regional politics[2], third Israel was and still is the most important western ally in the region. On the other hand, the change factor could be traced on several occasions in the Israeli vector even before the Russian operation to Syria. While Vladimir Putin became the first president visiting Israel, Israel has supported Russia in the Chechen War, after which Russia and found a common ground for fighting against terrorism. Furthermore, Israel did not join the western sanctions against Russia. These developments marked the divergence of Russian-Israeli relations from the Western-Russian relations and bilateral relations kept developing. Russian neutrality, Israeli governments independent from the West decision-making mechanism, the cultural ties built thanks to the 1,2 million Russian-speaking Israelis, the Obama Administration's policies toward Israel supported this tendency. Furthermore, Israel, with whom Russia developed relations during the rapprochement with the West, was important for Russia to act as a global power with a strong diplomatic tool in Israeli-Palestinian peace process, unlike the Cold War period, when the absence of diplomatic

relations limited Russia to mediate among the parties[3]. Once Russia actively involved in Syria, the relations have gained a more independent character as in other directions of Russian Middle Eastern policy[4], they have come to consider immediately in their foreign policies each other's interests and concerns. Russia understands Israeli security concerns about the northern borders. For its part, Israel could manage to keep its partnership with the USA and to accept Russia's return to the region as a global power[6]. Israel is an indispensable part of Russian multilateral policy in the region not only because it has leverage over Iranian expansion but also a partner in the fight against terrorism.

This paper focuses on the Israeli vector of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East and the evolution of the bilateral relations in a changing world order. Analysis of Russian-Israeli relations requires the use of both constructivist and realist approaches with regards to long-lasting status-seeking/enhancing policy of Russia in its global affairs on the one hand and Russian national interests in the region in security, economic and strategic level on the other.

Источники и литература

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