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Russian-Israeli Relations during the Reign of Prime Minister Netanyahu: Abrasive Friendship or Realpolitik?

Relacje rosyjsko-izraelskie w okresie sprawowania władzy przez premiera Netanjahu – szorstka przyjaźń czy realpolitik?

• Abstract •

The subject of my interest is to present the most important determinants of relations between the Russian Federation and Israel. The main purpose of this paper is to describe the current state of affairs in mutual contacts and their importance for international security. In addition, it will be important to try to answer the question of whether Russia will continue to play an important role as an economic and political partner of Israel in the near future, in the face of the gradual containment of the Syrian conflict.

At the beginning, I intend to refer to the history of relations of both countries, dating back to the time of the existence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the breaking of diplomatic relations after the Six-Day War in June 1967. In the following part of the discussion, I present the relations of both entities immediately after the collapse of the Soviet empire and coming to power of Vladimir Putin, who from the beginning of his term in office has sought to significantly improve contacts with Israel. Then, I raise the problem of Moscow-Tel Aviv contacts after Benjamin Netanyahu took over as

• Abstrakt •

Przedmiotem mojego zainteresowania jest przedstawienie najważniejszych uwarunkowań relacji pomiędzy Federacją Rosyjską a Izraelem. Głównym celem niniejszej pracy jest opisanie obecnego stanu rzeczy we wzajemnych kontaktach i ich znaczenia dla bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego. Ponadto istotną będzie próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy w najbliższym czasie Rosja będzie dalej odgrywała znaczącą rolę jako partner gospodarczy i polityczny Izraela w obliczu stopniowego opanowywania konfliktu syryjskiego.

Na wstępie zamierzam odnieść się do historii relacji obu krajów, datowanej na czasy istnienia Związku Socjalistycznych Republik Radzieckich, i zerwania stosunków dyplomatycznych po wojnie sześciodniowej w czerwcu 1967 r. W dalszej części rozważań przedstawiam stosunki obu podmiotów bezpośrednio po upadku sowieckiego imperium i dojściu do władzy Władimira Putina, który od początku swojego urzędowania dążył do znaczącej poprawy kontaktów z Izraelem. Następnie poruszam problem kontaktów na linii Moskwa – Tel Awiw po ponownym objęciu funkcji premiera przez Beniamina Netanja-

prime minister again and after the Arab Spring, which implied the conflict in Syria, during which Russia and Israel established cooperation. It will also be important to trace the attitude of the authorities in Tel Aviv to the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. I would also like to refer to the relationship of both entities on the historical and cultural level, as well as on the economic and military level.

In the summary, I highlight future perspectives and try to determine whether the current relations of both countries will intensify in the face of the end of war in Syria, and whether we can observe a close alliance of both countries now and in the future, or a limited partnership, determined by the need to implement real policy in the world.

Keywords: Russia; Israel; Putin; Netanyahu; realpolitik

hu oraz po wydarzeniach Arabskiej Wiosny, prowadzących do konfliktu w Syrii, podczas którego Rosja i Izrael nawiązały współpracę. Istotne będzie także prześledzenie stosunku władz w Tel Awiwie do aneksji Krymu i wojny na wschodzie Ukrainy. Chciałbym też odnieść się do relacji obu podmiotów na płaszczyźnie historycznej i kulturalnej, a także gospodarczej oraz militarnej.

W podsumowaniu uwypuklam perspektywy na przyszłość i próbuję dociec, czy obecne relacje obu krajów ulegną intensyfikacji w obliczu zakończenia wojny w Syrii i czy obecnie oraz w przyszłości możemy mówić o ścisłym sojuszu obu krajów, czy jednak o ograniczonym partnerstwie, zdeterminowanym koniecznością realizowania polityki realnej na świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja; Izrael; Putin; Netanyahu; realpolitik

Introduction

In the face of gradual re-evaluation of visions and ideas regarding the normalization of the international situation in the Middle East related to the containment of the Syrian conflict, the fall of the Islamic State and policy of the US President Donald Trump, which significantly differs from the policies practiced so far, whereas the President also represents a strong anti-Iranian position – the Russian-Israeli relations, which during the reign of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have improved significantly, are of particular importance. In this study, I intend to take a closer look at the contemporary mutual relations of these two entities. I would like to present Moscow's position in mutual contacts with Tel Aviv towards the problems – the war in Syria, the Iranian issue, the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, historical issues, as well as current bilateral economic and military relations. The questions concern mutual relations during the USSR's existence, relations between the two entities after the collapse of the Soviet state, defining changes in this respect after Vladimir Putin came to power and Benjamin Netanyahu assumed the position of Prime Minister of Israel again. Questions on the impact of military operations in Syria on Moscow-Tel Aviv relations, the positions of both entities with regard to the genesis and course and effects of World War II, relations between the two countries in the area of policy towards Iran and current contacts on the economic and mili-

tary level also require answers. The last thread concerns the possible future implications of a closer alliance of the two powers. By way of introduction, we should briefly outline the history of Soviet-Israeli contacts during the Cold War.

History of Soviet-Israeli Relations

Discussing contemporary Russian-Israeli relations, we must state that they are determined by the harsh relations of both entities to date, dating back to the first half of the last century. In the second half of the 1930s, during the reign of Joseph Stalin, Jews who formed government structures in the USSR after the October Revolution, began to gradually lose their influence. It was also reflected in the persecution and executions of the Great Terror. During the murders carried out in 1936–1938, many officers of the Communist Party and the security apparatus of Jewish origin were killed (including Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Karl Radek or Genrikh Yagoda – who, in the period immediately preceding these years, was the head of NKVD). Regardless of Stalin’s repression and resentment of this national group, his anti-Semitism was not widely known to world public opinion until the end of World War II. Counting on the financial support of American Jewish circles for the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War, Stalin agreed to create a Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) in the USSR, headed by a well-known cultural activist of Jewish origin, Solomon Mikhoels. Informal talks between members of the Zionist groups and Soviet diplomats took place after German aggression against the USSR in June 1941. Jewish activists argued then that after the war it would become one of the key powers determining the future of the world (Isaev, 2010, p. 30). However, the post-war activities of Mikhoels and his supporters traveling around the United States of America in order to obtain economic assistance for the war-destroyed Soviet Union contributed to the improvement of Soviet-Jewish relations. Nevertheless, the increasing independence of JAC gradually began to raise the concerns of the Soviet dictator. Stalin was rightly afraid that Soviet Jews, marked by the stigma of extermination, could pose a threat to his personal power. By proclaiming the view that every national group had suffered “equally” during the war – from 1946, he sought to curb Jewish influence in the party and society. This was reflected in the memorandum of November 26, 1946, by Mikhail Suslov, the grey eminence of the Kremlin and the later secretary of the Central Committee for ideological matters. In the document, he accused the Committee of being a tool in Washington’s policy of intending to settle “Palestinian agents of American imperialism” in Palestine, and was carrying out propaganda that was detrimental to “the

interests of the Soviet Union, because the Arab population was creating a false image of the Soviet attitude towards the Palestinian problem". According to Suslov, the committee's mistake is also to take up the issue of the status of Jews in the USSR, which "does not belong to the tasks of the organization" (Thom, 2016, p. 392). Stalin's paranoia was further fuelled by the marriage of his daughter Svetlana with a Jewish lawyer, Georgy Morozov, which he considered "the entry of Jews into his family" (Montefiore, 2004, p. 266). However, it was not until the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948 and the unwillingness of the newly formed entity to establish an alliance with the Soviets that the anti-Semitic campaign began in the USSR during which, among others, Mikhoels or artist Sergei Eisenstein died. Jewish doctors were also arrested, accused by Stalin and the Deputy Minister of State Security Mikhail Ryumin of deliberately bringing to death Andrei Zhdanov, who was expected to be the successor to the dictator and the head of the Moscow party committee, Alexander Shcherbakov. The culmination of repression against the Jewish community was the announcement in January 1953 by the Soviet press of a "plot of Kremlin doctors", as well as the assault on the Soviet embassy in Tel Aviv in February the same year. At that time, the Soviet Union broke off diplomatic relations with Israel (*Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations...*, 2000, p. 885).

Stalin's death in March 1953 brought some changes in the matter in question. After his death, the diplomatic relations with the Jewish state were restored, but in the following decades, the relations between the two countries were still cool. Several factors contributed to this. First, Israel, despite active Soviet assistance in creating its statehood, including recognition of the partition of Palestine in November 1947 and the supply of arms in the First Israeli-Arab War by the Czechoslovak side (Ben-Gurion, 1993, pp. 468–469), decided to enter into close cooperation with the United States, recognizing the Soviet Union as a state that could threaten the post-war international security system. Secondly, since the Kremlin's provision in 1955 of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, a staunch opponent of Israel's domination in the Arab world, in military equipment – Moscow began to actively support all national-liberation movements, seeing them as a chance to strengthen its political position in the Third World in the era of decolonization and inept policies of the United States, Great Britain and France, and engaged in a multifaceted approach in the Middle East, shaping the situation in Egypt or Syria, which during the reign of Hafez Al-Assad, established close cooperation with the Kremlin confirmed by the signing by the Syrian president in October 1980 of an agreement on friendship and cooperation with the USSR (Roszkowski, 2005, p. 353). In the aftermath of these events, during the subsequent Arab-Jewish wars, the Kremlin favoured the Arabs, giving them primarily weapons as well as technical and training support. We should

remember that Moscow and its Eastern European satellites supporting various terrorist groups, including the parties of Abu Nidal, Carlos and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (Kauffer, 1999, pp. 333–337) – carrying out many acts of rape in Israel and Europe, directed against Israeli civilians and representatives of the world of sports, including Israeli sportsmen during the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, hoping that Islamic terrorism would destabilize not so much the Jewish state, but would contribute to the disintegration of Western Europe and the United States, plunged at the time into perturbations after the Vietnam War and economic problems after the oil crisis of 1973 or the subsequent Islamic revolution in Iran. Thirdly, an important factor in the cool relations of both countries was the dislike of Jews among high-ranking Kremlin officials and employees of the KGB and GRU security services, organizations in which the structures of people of Jewish origin were not admitted to work (Andrew & Gordijewski, 1999, p. 536). Considering them as people of dual loyalty, it was thought that they would not be interested in strengthening the international position of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin's reluctance to this national group is also evidenced by the fact that the Soviet authorities also accused Soviet dissidents of using Zionists, who were ordered by the United States to destabilize the situation in the Soviet Union. This can be demonstrated by the statement of the head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, who in 1976 said that the campaign in the West on the release of the accused group of dissidents was a carefully planned anti-Soviet action carried out under the influence of Zionist factors centred around the British Royal College of Psychiatrists (Applebaum, 2005, p. 501). One of the dissidents of Jewish origin, repeatedly arrested and persecuted for political views, was Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky. In 1986, he was exchanged for a Soviet spy arrested in the USA and he emigrated to Israel (Tarasiuk, 2016, pp. 161–162). It seems that the prominent figures in the Kremlin were convinced that it is Israel in fact that is the decisive factor in the Cold War because of the dominance of Jewish representatives in American financial and cultural institutions. The unconditional US political and military support for Israel over the next decades of the Cold War was not supported in Moscow, as confirmed by the question of Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin addressed to US President Lyndon Johnson during one of their meetings: “Why do you repeatedly support Israel, which is smaller in population than the Arabs?” (*Oczy szeroko otwarte*, n.d.). Despite the hostility between the two countries, the Kremlin was also irritated by the recklessness of Arab countries and their excessive demands for military support. During the office of Brezhnev, secret talks were held on regular terms between representatives of the USSR and Israel. According to Vladislav Zubok, after the war Yom Kippur, the Soviet leader considered to re-establish diplomatic rela-

tions between the two countries (Zubok, 2010, p. 235). The issue was also discussed at lower levels of the Kremlin administration. The leading role was then played by the quickly climbing the levels of the USSR's diplomatic career, later Russian Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, a Jew of origin and an avid supporter of cooperation with Arab countries. This diplomat has repeatedly conducted a dialogue with Israeli politicians on the normalization of mutual relations (Battat, 2019). However, all the negotiations held until 1985 did not bring much effect due to the extreme conservatism of the Kremlin team and internal problems of the declining power.

When Mikhail Gorbachev took over the rule and announced the perestroika program and international tension eased, gradual changes started in Russian-Israeli relations. The new Soviet leader, being aware of the crisis that his country was dealing with, gave up providing assistance to terrorist groups around the world and began to insist on a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. The proof of such efforts was the recognition by the PLO leader Yasser Arafat in December 1988 of the state of Israel and the renunciation of terrorism as a method of political struggle for an independent Palestinian state (Roszkowski, 2005, pp. 374–375). All these changes were positively received by the Israeli side. In 1991, the USSR Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov and the head of the Israeli government, Yitzhak Shamir met and declared further development of bilateral relations (Ayalon, 1993, p. 37). During the same year, diplomatic contacts were also established (*From Russia with Love-Hate...*, 2018). However, the collapse of the USSR and the economic problems of the new Russia caused Moscow's complete withdrawal from the Middle East, which also resulted in the Kremlin's absence in peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians in Oslo in 1993 held with the United States President Bill Clinton as a mediator. The following years did not bring any major changes. It was only when Vladimir Putin took power that the rebuilding of Russia's position in the Arab world and the intensification of relations with Israel started, especially when Benjamin Netanyahu took office again in 2009.

Instruments of Political Relations of Both Countries since Benjamin Netanyahu Took Power

As I mentioned, the new stage in mutual contacts was the rise to power and the strengthening of Vladimir Putin's position in the Kremlin after the resignation of Boris Yeltsin on December 31, 1999. A former KGB lieutenant colonel, aiming to rebuild Russia's position in the international arena, recognized that despite historical events, the improvement of relations with Israel will be extremely important for

expanding the Russian state's influence worldwide, including in the Middle East. It should be noted that Putin has established a much better relationship with Israeli politicians from the right side of the political scene than with Social Democrats. This can be demonstrated by the frequency of Putin's meetings with both Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Netanyahu, especially since he took over again the position of head of the Israeli government. It should be considered extremely meaningful that during the 19 years of his alternating office of president and prime minister, Putin often hosted many Israeli prime ministers together with many other officials (Battat, 2019). He would most frequently meet with Netanyahu. They met 14 times since 2009 (Starodubtsev, 2019), which coincided with the American re-establishment of relations with Russia and its increased activity in the Middle East. The greatest intensity of mutual contacts occurred during the period of Russian intervention in Syria, i.e., since September 2015. Since then, they had met up to nine times (Skorek, 2018, p. 122).

It seems that the Arab Spring and the fall of Ben Ali's rule in Turkey, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya became important moments enabling the development of wider cooperation between the two entities. Both in Moscow and Tel Aviv, the dismissal of these politicians was observed with concern, as they were considered to be guarantors of stability in the Middle East (*Coping with the Russian Challenge...*, 2019, p. 18). It should be noted that both countries were dissatisfied with the changes also for other reasons. In the case of Russia, the collapse of these regimes meant the strengthening of the United States position in the Middle East and the weakening of Moscow's position, which has been consistently striving since the beginning of Putin's rule to strengthen its influence in this region, lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In addition, the Kremlin feared a new phase of "colorful revolutions" in the post-Soviet area under the auspices of the US and Western countries, which would threaten the concept that assumed the re-integration of the post-Soviet countries under his leadership. The Arab Spring also led to the strengthening of the Sunni monarchy, including Saudi Arabia, which could have been a real threat to Sunni Islam's impact on such territories as Chechnya. Middle East social protests have further strengthened the international significance of Turkey, with which Moscow for some time (after shooting down the Russian plane) maintained very bad relations and despite officially professing friendly rhetoric, it still remains an uncomfortable partner.

In turn, for Israel, the Arab Spring allowed drawing conclusions on several issues. At first, Netanyahu, more than other Israeli politicians, realized that it had contributed to strengthening the position of Shiite powers, including Iran, which

has repeatedly called for the erasure of Israel from the world map. Therefore, the chairman of Likud, serving as the Israeli prime minister in 1996–1998, from the beginning of his second term of office sought to improve relations with Russia, as he came to the conclusion that only Moscow is capable of disabling Iran's nuclear aspirations. Secondly, the takeover of power in Egypt by the representative of the Muslim Brotherhood, Muhammad Mursi, arouse a genuine concern in Tel Aviv. When he was elected President of Egypt in general elections, he postulated a more independent foreign policy of his country and a modification of the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt concluded in Camp David in March 1979, considering this document unfavourable for the Egyptian side. The head of the Egyptian state also decided to travel to Tehran (Tisdall, 2012), that was – as I mentioned earlier – an eternal enemy of Israel, which became the main reason for his removal from power in 2013 and his sentencing to many years of imprisonment.

It is no coincidence that the strengthening of Israeli-Russian relations occurred during Putin's visit to Israel in May 2012, during the height of Mursi's rule. Although according to one of Russian experts, Fyodor Lukyanov, this visit was more symbolic than practical (Khanin, 2013, pp. 68–69).

The decisive argument enabling the establishment of in-depth cooperation between Russia and Israel was the start of war in Syria in 2011 and the active support of the Iranian authorities on the side of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. From the outset, the Kremlin sought to secure a dominant position in the Syrian campaign, trying to ensure a balance between all sides in the dispute.

As a result, Moscow criticized Israel's air strikes on Iranian positions for a long time. In addition, it stressed and continues to emphasize the need to maintain a nuclear agreement with Iran. Putin also objects to the claims of the Israeli authorities that Iran and Syria are conducting terrorist activities against Israel. They claim that "the Syrian army and Syria in general are in such a condition that they are not even thinking about opening a second front because they are trying to save their own statehood" (Barmin, 2018). Taking advantage of good relations with Tehran, the Kremlin also seeks to mitigate the dispute between Israel and Iran, arguing that Iran is an ally of Russia in the fight against opponents of the Assad regime. Presenting itself as a defender of peace in the region, Moscow by formally eliminating tensions hopes that the Israeli government will refrain from radical actions against Tehran, and thus limit American influence in the region. The Kremlin's efforts to mediate in the dispute should be confirmed by the activity of the Russian authorities at the height of tension between Israel and Iran in April 2018, when Moscow immediately sent Sergei Ryabkov, deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs to Iran, to let Iran refrain from reacting to the Israeli attack on Iranian positions on the night of

April 29–30, 2018. Ultimately, Netanyahu during a visit to Moscow, on the occasion of the anniversary of the end of World War II, accepting from Putin the ribbon of Saint George, also symbolizing Russian aggression against Ukraine, negotiated that Russia will not limit the military activities of the Jewish state in Syria (Rybczyński, 2018). Here, the question about Moscow's potential neutrality in the Israeli-Iran dispute should be asked. Evidence of support for Iran's actions may be the fact that the Russians did not limit Iran at all in the process of increasing the importance of Shiite fighting squads in Syria. In view of the above, one should agree with Antoni Rybczyński, who claims that Russia may tactically reach an agreement with Israel, however, in the long term, it will be closer to Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, who are in fact enemies of the Israeli state. In addition, pro-Arab tendencies and concealed anti-Semitism are still present in Russia. Therefore, if Russia has to make a choice between Iran and Israel, it will choose Iran (Rybczyński, 2018). According to Michał Potocki, while tolerating good Russian-Iranian relations, the Israeli side hopes subconsciously that after shattering all opponents of Assad, Moscow and Tehran will naturally become rivals in the fight for control over weakened Syria. Moreover, sanctions imposed on Iran by the Trump administration not only eliminate Western enterprises from investing in Iran, but also force Tehran to political and economic cooperation with the Kremlin, which may exert influence on the Ayatollah regime (Potocki, 2019). Anshel Pfeffer, the author of Netanyahu's biography, presents an opposite point of view. He wrote that the Israeli prime minister was forced to rely on Putin, taking advantage of the opportunity to destabilize the situation in Iran and Israel (Pfeffer, 2020, p. 404). Israel and Russia continued to coordinate their activities in Syria, entering into an agreement at the end of July 2018, according to which the Syrian army was redeployed in the Golan Heights. Although Tel Aviv had objections, it accepted the Russian commitment to keep Iran and Hezbollah 80 km from the Israeli part of the heights. However, this agreement did not stop Israel from striking Iranian and Syrian troops threatening the security of the country (Rabil, 2018). After further bombardments of Iranian and Hezbollah targets, Russian and Israeli generals finally agreed that Russia would not interfere with the legitimacy of such military solutions used by the Israeli. Thanks to this, there are no armed clashes between both states (Rodkiewicz, 2017, p. 20). It seems that in the era of potential termination of hostilities in Syria, Israel will agree to Russia's dominant role in exchange for the Kremlin's activity that would stop Iran, Hezbollah and other paramilitary organizations from strengthening their position. It is possible that Moscow and Tel Aviv may in the future also conduct negotiations on the control over Syrian natural resources, especially uranium. Consequently, it is highly likely that both countries

will continue to cooperate under the extinguished Syrian conflict. The argument confirming this opinion may be the words of Avi Dichter, head of the foreign affairs and defence committee of the Knesset and former director of Israeli counterintelligence. He told Interfax in December 2017 that “Russia is not our enemy and we have no problem with its permanent military presence in Syria”. The politician added that Russia should be considered a “superpower” and ally striving to secure a strategic position in the region (Rybczyński, 2018). On the other hand, the opinion is pushed that tensions may arise between the parties at any time, as in September 2018, when the Israelis shot down a Russian plane with 15 officers on board (*Coping with the Russian Challenge...*, 2019, p. 23). In turn, Agnieszka Bryc takes the view that if Russia agrees to be present on the Golan Heights on the Syrian side of Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian fighting squads, the head of the Israeli government will not hesitate to use force against the Russians in Syria, as he will recognize this step as crossing the “red line”. It could threaten Israel’s security (*Polska jest dla Rosjan chłopcem do bicia...*, 2020). Witold Jurasz has uttered his opinion aptly. According to him, the Israeli-Russian rapprochement, consisting of Israel’s understanding of Moscow’s interests in Syria, and the moderate reaction of the Kremlin to the Israeli bombing of Hezbollah’s quarters, shows that the relations of both entities are purely pragmatic. It may create ground for longer cooperation but not an alliance (*Witold Jurasz: relacje Izraela i Rosji...*, 2017).

Moscow’s position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also deserves our attention. Although the Kremlin traditionally, from the 1950s until the end of the Cold War, argued for the unconditional support of the Palestinian side in the dispute with Israel, since Gorbachev’s election, Moscow has become more restrained in supporting Palestinian radicalism. It was expressed, among others, in a significant reduction in financial support for Palestinian terrorist organizations (Bernaś, 1997, p. 342), which, in the face of restrictions on funds from Moscow, were often forced to change their tactics and try to reach an agreement with the Israeli authorities. Under Putin’s leadership, due to the limited possibilities of political and economic activity for a long time, the Kremlin in the Middle East limited their support to only verbal support of the Palestinian case, still avoiding active involvement in the dispute. Moscow’s stance was strengthened by the Syrian war that revealed the necessity to establish more intensive contact with Israel. In the light of the above, Putin and his closest associates are formally in favor of resolving the dispute, stressing that multilateral negotiations are necessary to overcome any controversy. Russia’s position is also reflected in the statement of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It states that Russia as an active participant in the peace process and a member of the Middle East quartet of negotiators on the Israeli-Palestinian agreement,

consisting of Russia, the United States, the European Union, and the UN – on the Palestinian issue, is guided by UN resolutions 242, 338, 1397 and 1515, and also other peace initiatives from 2002 and 2003. Further, it states that Russia is in favor of creating an independent Palestinian state that would coexist peacefully with Israel within the 1967 borders. The Kremlin is also in favor of withdrawing Israeli armed forces from the occupied territories (*Summary of Russian-Israeli Relations*, 2020). The goals of such a policy were consistently presented in the following years, for example in the Russian Federation's foreign policy strategy announced in November 2016, which says that Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, will conduct actions for a "lasting and comprehensive" settlement of the dispute. As a confirmation of these entries, one can consider the earlier proposal of talks between conflicting parties of September 2016 under the supervision of Moscow, but this initiative was rejected by both parties to the dispute (Wojnarowicz, 2017, p. 2).

After US President Donald Trump announced in December 2017 that the United States would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Moscow expressed concern about this move, stressing that "it remains committed to the UN decision on reconciliation principles". According to Moscow, the most appropriate move to resolve the conflict would be the status of East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine and West Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel (*Summary of Russian-Israeli Relations*, 2020). Moscow's position was confirmed by its point of view regarding President Trump's recently announced peace plan regarding Middle East. Emphasizing that Moscow is analyzing this document, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova stated that Russia will cooperate with Israel, Palestinians and other parties to the dispute in order to settle it peacefully. However, Zakharova said that at the moment, opinions on this American proposal among Arab countries are negative or sceptical (*Po rozmowach z Netanyahu...*, 2020). In other words, when speaking about Middle East's objection to Trump's initiative, Moscow disapproves of his initiative because it does not want to alienate Arab countries. It seems that this attitude of Moscow is not very favorably evaluated in Israel. The authorities of this country do not want to note that Russia will not want to sacrifice its long-term relations with Palestinian groups for relations with Tel Aviv. This would significantly weaken the political position developed since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's term in office in the Middle East arena. Taking the example of China, Moscow strives to establish contacts with every country in the region, regardless of its ideology and religion. For this reason, one should not expect the Kremlin to officially abandon the Palestinian statehood issue. On the

other hand, Kremlin activists led by Putin, in order not to worsen relations with Tel Aviv, will not overly engage in controversial issues on the Israel-Palestine line.

Another element of mutual relations arose as a result of the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. Israel's position on the above-mentioned circumstances should be considered highly restrained. The authorities in Tel Aviv seek to avoid conflict with Moscow while maintaining allied relations with Washington (Lasensky & Michlin-Shapir, 2019, p. 151). They officially announced neutrality towards the events in Donbass, seeking to further develop bilateral contacts with Moscow. Tel Aviv also did not take part in the vote on the criticism of the annexation of Crimea and did not join the sanctions against the Kremlin for this aggression (Wojnarowicz, 2017, p. 1), and on the contrary, increased its export of vegetables, fruit and meat to Russia. According to Isi Leibler from *The Jerusalem Post*, an additional reason for such a position is the belief that the Maidan revolution of dignity was not inspired by the desire to strengthen the democratic system in Ukraine. The commentator believes that Russia, although not a democracy, is more predictable and less corrupt in the eyes of Israel. In addition, it will play an increasingly important role on the international stage, in contrast to Ukraine (Benedyczak, 2015). It can be assumed that the factor determining Israel's neutral attitude is the current image of Ukraine as an anti-Semitic country since World War II. The basis for making such claims is the appeal of the chairman of the European Jewish Association, rabbi Menachem Margolin of February 2014, addressed to Netanyahu saying that the head of the Israeli government should protect Jews residing in Ukraine. Let us add that Lev Solodkin, son of former Knesset deputy, Marina Solodkin, supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Czerep, 2014, p. 6).

While analyzing the relations between Russia and Israel, we must not forget about another important issue – good personal relations between Netanyahu and Putin. Both leaders, who are of a similar age and have an alike political mindset, believe that only a strong-handed policy will properly protect the interests of their countries. This mentality of both leaders is expressed, among others, with regard to the issue of terrorism (Borshchevskaya, 2016). Even if Israel is properly a democratic country, under Netanyahu's rule, extreme groups are playing an increasingly important role in Israeli public life, sharply criticizing their political opponents, accusing them of betraying Israel's interests. The then Prime Minister Sharon not only did not condemn Russian aggression against the Chechen Republic, but even stated that Chechen separatism is synonymous with terrorism, and compared their actions to Palestinians (Averbukh & Klein, 2018, p. 2). Hence, one can understand his other statement from November 2003, when he even called the Russian leader “a true friend of Israel” (Borshchevskaya, 2016). In this field, under the rule of Netanyahu,

both power centres represented a related view. According to Medvedev, both sides face common challenges related mainly to terrorism threatening the “entire planet”, but mainly to the Middle East region (*Russian-Israeli Talks*, 2016). It was unanimously emphasized that the goal of both mentors is to maintain correct relations despite the existing differences. It has been shown that the parties have an interest in maintaining mutual contacts – Moscow through its relations with Israel systematically strengthens its political position in the Middle East, while the Israeli side is developing relations with non-Western countries, e.g., China and India (Wojnarowicz, 2017, p. 1). It seems that Netanyahu’s current policy is primarily caused by criticism of European Union countries towards Israeli diplomacy towards Iran, and is also conditioned by the increasingly authoritarian way of exercising power by the Israeli head of government and his reluctance to liberal democracy. We should agree with Pfeffer, mentioned earlier, expressing that Netanyahu feels at ease in the company of leaders such as Putin or General Sisi, who disregard tolerant democracy and admire him as a veteran of undermining many international agreements (Pfeffer, 2020, p. 406). It seems that the leadership in Israel, dominated by representatives of Likud and other extreme right-wing groups, is more likely to establish relations with Moscow due to mutual dislike of social-democratic and liberal groups, perceived by Moscow and Tel Aviv as weak and unable to ensure the security of both entities in the face of potential aggression on the part of enemies. In establishing contacts with Third World countries, the head of the Israeli government realizes that Asian countries, where observance of human rights is far from appropriate, will not criticize the Jewish state for its policy towards Palestinians. The need to re-evaluate Israeli policy was already stressed in 2007 by Alex Epstein, an Israeli scientist. He indicated then that Israel should follow its own path, building relations with various world powers, including Russia, because it would always be a global power. According to him, when establishing contact with Russia, Israel works to strengthen its international position (Epstein, 2007, s. 189). On the other hand, the economic factor should not be underestimated. According to Joshua Krasna, Netanyahu wants to achieve the goal of strengthening Israel’s international position as a country with technological capabilities. That is why it is necessary to establish closer relations with the emerging powers of the world, which are increasingly important on the economic plane, among others, with India, Brazil, China and Russia (Krasna, 2018, p. 9). It could be assumed that both countries exhibit a siege mentality, guided by the primacy of security and military understanding of power. According to Linda Averbukh and Margaret Klein, either party can accept the other’s basic interests that do not interfere with their own security criteria (Averbukh & Klein, 2018, pp. 1–2).

In the context of the relationship of both entities being the subject of analysis, we should also look at the potential difficulties in developing cooperation between them. The first important difference is the completely different perception of threats present in the Middle East. While for Russia they are mainly Sunni groups, in the case of Israel the most important problems are caused by the Shiite countries and organizations, e.g., Iran and Hezbollah. This is confirmed by Witold Jurasz, in whose opinion Tel Aviv considers extreme Shiite fundamentalism focused mainly on these entities as particularly dangerous for the existence of the state. In turn, for the Kremlin, the main problem are Sunni radicals, centred in Chechnya and other republics (*Witold Jurasz: relacje Izraela i Rosji...*, 2017). The second field of divergence is the attitude of both countries towards the United States. In subsequent foreign policy strategies of the Russian Federation, the United States and NATO are the main enemy. That is why Russia is reluctant to deepen Israeli-American cooperation. It seems reasonable to state that Israel's relations with the US will be of key importance to the shape of Russian-Israeli relations. Although at present, under the rule of Donald Trump, the relations between Washington and Tel Aviv are the best since the beginning of the state of Israel. Nevertheless, Moscow is responding to this extremely pragmatically, hoping that by strengthening Russian-Israeli contacts, it will be able to drive a wedge between the two countries, especially in view of the fact that the Trump administration more and more often in its foreign policy refers to stopping China and strengthening its influence in the area of Southeast Asia. According to an analyst, in the era of US gradual withdrawal from the Middle East and existing internal tensions caused by the establishment's opposition to Trump's anti-immigrant policy, Israel is looking for a country ready to take on the balance of the Middle East with it. And Russia, as demonstrated by the civil war in Syria and Russian assistance in breaking up the Islamic State and all opposition forces hostile to Assad, has become an extremely important player in the region (Saulski, 2019). Even though, it seems that currently Russia does not have both the strength and resources to be able to fully replace the United States in this area. In addition, it must not be forgotten that, having good relations with all anti-Israeli groups such as Hamas or Hezbollah, Moscow will not be inclined to unconditionally support the Israeli authorities, and its purpose is not to mediate between the parties to the conflict, but to further stop and prolong the stalemate. There is no doubt that the tense situation in the region and the constant threat of war makes it easier for the Kremlin to place itself as a country seeking peaceful solutions in the region.

Apart from the fundamental difference regarding the status of Iran and different views on the resolution of the Palestinian issue, another contentious point in Israel's mutual relations with Russia is the questioning of Russian society towards

Jews, initiated as early as in the tsarist times. Contrary to all the forms of anti-Semitism stigmatized in Russian mass media, Russian society continues – as in Soviet times – to see the Jewish community as groups that seek to enrich themselves at the expense of ordinary people. It could also be stated that this image was facilitated by Russia's economic problems in the 1990s and the domination of oligarchs in the public space with Boris Berezovsky, who was of Jewish descent (Benedyczak, 2015). Despite the fact that his removal from the public space, in fact, had nothing to do with his origin, the society enthusiastically accepted his downfall, recognizing that Jews, directly related to the United States, were seeking political and economic fall of Russia. It must be admitted that currently the image of Israel in Russian society has improved significantly. A 2017 Levada centre study found that 57% of Russians have a positive attitude towards this country. What is significant, in the case of the European Union and the United States, such support amounted to 39 and 37% accordingly (Averbukh & Klein, 2018, p. 3).

Elements of Historical and Cultural Nature in Russia-Israel Relations

In this study, we should not ignore issues of historical and cultural nature and background in the mutual relations of the entities. Despite the political differences described above, during the time of Prime Minister Netanyahu, they came much closer in the area of issues related to the common history. Putin's desire to remain silent about some discrepancies may be testified by his statement during a visit to Israel in June 2012, when in an interview with Israeli President Shimon Peres, he said that it was no coincidence that the Soviet Union was one of the initiators of support for the establishment of the state of Israel after World War II (Borshchevskaya, 2016). There is clear manipulation on the part of Putin. While emphasizing the participation of the USSR in the establishment of the Jewish state, he did not say that already at the turn of 1948 and 1949 Stalin, realizing that "ungrateful" Israel decided to have closer ties with the United States, launched an anti-Semitic campaign. Not until his death in March 1953 did this campaign come to an end. And the significant reluctance of the other Kremlin's leaders towards Israel lasted until April 1991 and the first-ever meeting of Prime Ministers Pavlov and Shamir. According to former Russian Prime Minister Medvedev, who was in Israel in 2016 on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of re-establishing diplomatic relations, both countries that share "common values" should look forward. He further added that Russia and Israel have similar views on the outcome of World War II and the victory over fascism, and on the ways to overcome anti-Semitism and xenophobia

(*Russian-Israeli Talks*, 2016). As evidence of a similar position on historical issues, the conflict between Poland and Israel that arose in February 2018 and was triggered by the announcement by the Polish government of the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance and statements of high Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Katz on the responsibility of Poles in the Holocaust. The Israeli accusations of the Polish side for the extermination of the Jewish population during the war are an additional argument for Russia that Poland is a country of anti-Semites and fascists, which is the same as the narrative on this matter that the Kremlin has reproduced for years. The purpose of Moscow's actions is to abominate the image of Poland among politicians in the United States, which is supposed to lead, among others, to refrain from or limit the deployment and expansion of US military infrastructure in Poland. The proximity of relations between Moscow and Tel Aviv can also be demonstrated by a conference organized in January 2020 in Jerusalem on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. There is no doubt that the fact that these celebrations were organized by the leading Russian oligarch Moshe Kantor and the organizers' disagreement to the speech of the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda, while allowing the leaders of even France or Germany to speak, proves that the Israeli side, without formally interfering in the dispute between Moscow and Warsaw which arose at the turn of December 2019 and January 2020, and concerning the issue of Russia assigning blame to Poland for starting the World War in cooperation with Hitler, in fact accepts the Kremlin's attitude towards Poland, recognizing that caring for good relations with Moscow is more important than respecting historical truth. An evidence that some Israeli factors duplicated Moscow's narrative are the words of Israeli political scientist Shlomo Avineri, who stated that by occupying Zaolzie in 1938, Poland became Hitler's partner in the aggression of Czechoslovakia (*Izraelski politolog Shlomo Avineri*, 2020). His statement takes on the Putin's narrative that Poland is jointly responsible for the outbreak of World War II. Due to that, joint consideration of history by Moscow and Tel Aviv may lead to a precedent, which could contribute to establishing a false image of Poland on the international stage.

An important factor that may contribute to improving the relationship between Russia and Israel is also the increasing percentage presence in Israeli society of citizens who have just arrived from Russia as a result of the mass migration of Jewish people from the countries of the former USSR that began in the 1980s. At that time, Russian diaspora was established on the territory of Israel. Its leading representative is currently the Minister of the Environment Ze'ev Elkin, also acting as interpreter in Netanyahu's talks with Putin. He is one of the representatives of the 17% group

of Russian-speaking Jews living in Israel (Potocki, 2019). In June 2016, the Russian authorities granted pensions to nearly 100,000 current Israelis who left the USSR before it collapsed, losing Soviet citizenship. This decision was approved by the Russian-speaking part of Israeli society. In January 2018, Putin signed another presidential decree on granting pensions to Russian veterans of World War II living in Israel (Krasna, 2018, p. 10). According to Adrianna Śniadowska, the above move can also be used by the Kremlin to improve mutual relations and is an additional attempt to weaken the position of the United States (Śniadowska, 2017, p. 3). In total, the Russian-speaking part of Israeli citizens who came here from Russia in the 1990s is approximately 1.3 million people (Wojnarowicz, 2017, p. 2). Both countries also concluded an agreement on visa-free travel. Importantly, Israel is home to more than a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and the Russian language, after Hebrew and English, is the third most commonly used language in Israel (Borshchevskaya, 2016). Despite the growing sympathy for Russia in Israel, Moscow's image in the Jewish state is still ambiguous. According to Israeli opinion polls, specifically conducted by the Smith Institute, 62% of respondents believe that Moscow represents a pro-Palestinian position, and only 5% say they sympathize with Israel (Khanin, 2013, p. 53). On the other hand, 59% of respondents said that the Jewish state should continue to cooperate with Moscow (Potocki, 2019). It seems reasonable to state that Russian propaganda is behind this because very few immigrants have mastered the Hebrew language, hence, they still draw the knowledge about modern Russia and the situation in the world on Russian media (Remennick, 2013, p. 490), which in the future poses a significant threat of taking over the Kremlin narrative on issues related to the international policy.

Economic and Military Partnership of Both Countries

At the end of this study, we should put in a few comments regarding economic and military contacts of both sides. The mutual trade turnover between Russia and Israel suffered as a result of the global crisis in 2008. Subsequent recovery lasted until 2013, to collapse again and the bilateral turnover increased again (Liuhto, 2018, p. 4). According to Anna Borshchevskaya, the trade balance of relations between the two countries in 2015 amounted to USD 3.5 billion a year. This represents a threefold increase in mutual turnover compared to 2005 (Borshchevskaya, 2016). On the other hand, in 2018 trade showed the total assets of nearly USD 2.7 billion, with exports of goods from Russia constituting USD 1.95 billion, and exports from Israel – only USD 760 million (Starodubtsev, 2019). In 2017, Israel purchased

USD 7 billion in precious stones from Russia. In total, the increase in this type of purchase increased from 2.3% in 1995 to 7.9% in 2017 (Liuhto, 2018, pp. 6–7). In addition, as demonstrated by the analyst of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Michał Wojnarowicz, Russian companies supply oil to Israel and are interested in investing in the country's gas market (Wojnarowicz, 2017, p. 2). Since the discovery of the Leviathan gas field off the Israeli coast in 2010, Russian companies have been trying to include them in their further exploration. Russia wants to secure part of the Israeli energy market and influence the EU's efforts to diversify Energy in the eastern Mediterranean (Averbukh & Klein, 2018, p. 4). According to Agnieszka Bryc, the cooperation in the field of nanotechnology can be extended between the two countries through the functioning of Rusnano Israel. According to the researcher, an important element may also be the cooperation of both countries in the space sphere because Israelis use Russian systems for launching satellites (Bryc, 2015, p. 203).

Military relations are also being extended. As a result of the visits of Israeli leaders in 2010, including Netanyahu at the beginning of the year, President Peres in May, and Minister Barak in September of that year, Russia decided to buy Israeli security technologies, including unmanned aerial vehicle (Magen, 2013, p. 50). Scientific and technical cooperation was also being developed, including on the modernization of drones. At the end of 2015, Israel sold ten such exploration devices to Russia, despite concerns over Russian military and political ties with Iran (Borshchevskaya, 2016). However, it is necessary to specify that technological collaboration between the Russian and Israeli defence sectors is very limited so far, as evidenced by the fact that the production of Israeli drones for the Russian armed forces was completed after the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine (Averbukh & Klein, 2018, p. 5).

Conclusion

To recapitulate these considerations, it should be noted that the key to current Russian-Israeli contacts will be further developments of the situation in Syria. Conflict in this country and the expected end of war will determine these relationships. Due to the need for cooperation with Moscow, it is highly likely that the Israeli side will give way to the Kremlin in areas less important to itself, and more important for Russia – including issues of historical policy and relations with Poland. Israeli authorities are well aware that in the event of a potential deterioration in Moscow-Tel Aviv relations, the Russian side may increase its financial and logistical

support for Hamas and Hezbollah, may seek to strengthen Iran's position, which will not gain Israel's approval. It should be said that the development of bilateral relations is more favorable to the authorities in Tel Aviv than those in Moscow. However, the growing presence of Russia in the Middle East is a challenge for Israel, because in the long term and when the power factors change in that country, the Kremlin may begin to conduct a policy that is unfavorable to the Jewish state. It is reasonable to suppose that if the Social Democrats come to power in Israel in the near future, Russian-Israeli bonds may weaken. For Moscow, the Netanyahu government is the best possible government because both the Russian president and the Israeli prime minister have a similar mindset and authoritarian way of exercising power, based in their policy on special services and the military. In addition, both countries increasingly connect on a cultural and historical surface. However, these relationship cannot be called a strategic alliance but a community of short-term interests. The main reason why Russia's connection with Israel will not be recognized as a close alliance in the near future is the extremely pro-American relationship of the Netanyahu administration and other political forces in Israel. The result is that the Russians have great distrust for Israelis. The Kremlin is rightly aware that its position, among others, as to the Syrian conflict, expressed in conversations with the Israeli administration, can be transmitted to Washington. A certain chance for Moscow may be to change the tenant in the White House to a representative of the Democratic Party, referring to Netanyahu with reluctance for a steady course in international politics, mainly towards Iran, openness to Asian countries, authoritarian style of governing and corruption. At present, however, in the era of Democrats' weakness and President Trump's advantage in pre-election polls, this scenario is unlikely. Thus, in the near future, Russia's relations with Israel can be considered as purely pragmatic.

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