



Research Article

## Balancing Tehran and Tel Aviv: A Critical Analysis of Russia's Strategic Interests in the Iran-Israel Confrontation

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### ABSTRACT



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This paper critically analyzes the strategic balancing of Russia between Iran and Israel due to increased confrontations in the region. Even though Iran will continue being a major military ally to Russia, especially in Syria, Israel is a strategic partner in the intelligence coordination and technological cooperation. The study examines the way Russia manages these two alliances to be able to exert its influence in the region without losing either of the partners. Using a qualitative, case-based approach, the study uses a range of second-hand sources such as official statements, policy analyses and reports of think tanks. The results demonstrate that the approach of Russia is based on calculated ambiguity and military deconfliction systems and selective engagement that provide the country with the opportunity to act as a regional broker of power. Nonetheless, this balancing game would be highly dangerous, particularly in the event that Iran-Israel relations lead to a direct confrontation. The paper concludes that, although Russia can gain short-term diplomatic advantages, its situation is fundamentally not very stable, and its long-term capacity to mediate or contain war can be constrained by conflicting interests and by a changing balance of geopolitical power.

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### Introduction

The historical enmity between Israel and Iran has its roots in a complicated tangle of ideological, religious and geopolitical reasons. Iran has been in a direct opposition to the Israeli state since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, a stance Hezbollah and Hamas have been enabled to support through the progression of proxy groups (Litvak, 2021). On the other hand, Israel feels that Iran has existence threats due to its nuclear ambitions and militancy in the region, where there has been a series of tensions and targeted airstrikes especially in Syria. In this conflict, Russia has been consistently increasing its presence in the Middle East. The Arab Spring vacuum post-Arab Spring and the 2015 military intervention in Syria gave Moscow the strategic leeway to reclaim its position as a power broker in the region. Its alliances with Tehran and Tel Aviv are the examples of pragmatic multi-vector influence and deterrence (Trenin, 2018).

The concurrent relationship between Russia and Iran and the relations between Russia and Israel are a balancing act. On the one hand, it depends on Iran as a strategic depth and cooperation in Syria. Conversely, it works militarily with Israel to avoid confrontations and maintain sway. Such a two-tier involvement begs serious concerns on the sustainability of such a plan. What are the risks in the long run that Moscow would incur in case these

alliances collide? And what can be the possible strategic payoffs of staying connected with both competitors?

### Literature Review

#### *Theoretical Views on Strategic Balancing.*

Strategic balancing is a notion that has strong roots in the neorealist traditions, in the balance of power theory. Waltz (1979) argues that states behave so as to counter threats and maintain systemic stability in an anarchic international system. Within the Russian strategy of dealing with the Middle East, balancing is not only reactive but also proactive in nature with the motivation being to hedge itself against the domination of a single regional power, especially the United States. Compared to the classical formation of alliances, strategic hedging implies a loose and ambiguous policy where a state can pursue various enemies or partners at the same time without devoting to one (Lim and Cooper, 2015). The case of Russia and dual relations with Iran and Israel is an example of this type of hedging where the military, economic, and diplomatic instruments are used asymmetrical to prevent complete reliance. According to Snyder (2002), hedging gives smaller powers or power that is strategically limited space to

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maneuver in shifting geopolitical context which is very relevant to the role of Russia with Iran-Israel antagonism.

### **The Middle East Strategy of Russia: Development and the Reasons.**

The role of Russia in the Middle East has changed in that the foreign policy has shifted towards pragmatism and serving interest unlike the ideological involvements during the Soviet era. The Soviet Union had formed an alliance with Arab nationalist governments to offset U.S. and western influence during the cold war (Shlaim, 2012). The collapse of the USSR however resulted in a temporary withdrawal of the Middle East affairs. This has dramatically shifted since 2000, and specifically under Putin, who has reestablished Russia as a geopolitical player by seeking to regain influence by means of strategic interventions, including the incident of Syria in 2015 (Trenin, 2016).

The American recession of the region, which took the shape of leaving Iraq, nuclear agreement with Iran during the Obama regime, and decreased military presence, left a vacuum, which Russia swiftly occupied (Gause, 2019). As analysts such as Katz (2018) argue, the Middle East involvement of Russia can be explained not by ideology but rather by the wish to be treated as an essential participant in the international arena, who is able to mediate conflicts and ensure the balance in the region.

#### **Russia-Iran Relations**

The relationship between Russia and Iran is very complex which is characterized by proximity on the strategic front and tensions. On the one hand, they work hand-in-hand in military activities, particularly in Syria where the two sides are allied to the Assad regime. This military alliance consists of transfer of arms, intelligence cooperation, and counterterrorism cooperation (Borshchevskaya, 2022). At the economic level, they have become closer to each other through energy production and infrastructure joint ventures, especially in Western sanctions (Fulton, 2019).

However, their friendship is not smooth. Iran wants more independence and to become a leader in the region, which sometimes conflicts with Russia regarding the influence in the after-war Syria, where both countries claim to influence the southern country in the direction of their politics (Vakil, 2020). Furthermore, Russia has been pragmatic yet cautious regarding the destabilization of the region and Israeli security interests, in contrast to supporting the rights of Iran towards the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but has been supportive (Kozhanov, 2018).

#### **Russia-Israel Relations**

Unlike the case with its relationship with Iran, the relationship with Israel is one founded on military deconflict, technology cooperation, and mutual counterterrorism interests. With the direct presence of Russia in Syria, the country has come up with a deconfliction system with Israel to avoid air confrontations especially when Israel attacks Iranian targets in Syria (Guzansky and Marshall, 2021). Such a set up shows that Russia can accommodate the interests of Israel without necessarily antagonizing Iran. Israel and Russia are good trade partners in defense technologies, high-tech industries, and agricultural goods economically. Sociopolitical connection between the two countries is also facilitated by the Russian speaking diaspora in Israel which is estimated at more than one million (Freedman, 2018). Russia is however very wary of sharing in strategic intelligence particularly on Israeli operations in the U.S. allied defense networks, which note the boundaries of trust in their relationships.

#### **Iran-Israel Frontation: security and ideological aspects.**

The Iran-Israel conflict is based on an existential and ideological opposition where Iran considers Israel as an illegitimate occupier and Israel considers Iran as an existential

threat. The role of Iran in supporting the Shiite militias, particularly Hezbollah, has made it to have a strategic reach as far as north and east as Israel and in effect surround it in all four directions (Levitt, 2013). Inbar and Sandler (2020) state that this is a projection of power which Israel has countered through preventive strikes against weapons convoys and Iranian military installations, especially in Syria and Iraq.

This is not a military but also a symbolic conflict where each side resorts to rhetoric and propaganda to strengthen domestic legitimacy and alliances in the region. The effort of Russia to establish equidistance by arming one side yet diplomatically involved the other has been necessitating a complex balancing process which is becoming more and more dangerous as tensions mount.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This case study applies a hybrid theoretical approach of using both the insights of the Realism and the Strategic Hedging Theory in approaching the complex nature of the Russia involvement with the Iran and Israel in the context of a volatile region. These theories give the means needed in analyzing the motives, actions, and foreign policies which make Russia act the way it does in the Middle East.

This analysis is based on realism, especially the structural form of realism. Waltz (1979) also argues that the survival of states is the main aim of states in the anarchic international system. States aim at maximizing power or balancing power as a way of ensuring that they are not dominated by others. Realism could be used to give a pragmatic perspective to the actions of Russia particularly its efforts to maintain strategic independence with its opposition to unilateral control of the Middle East by the United States and NATO. Geopolitical rationality in this context means the attempts of Russia to establish itself as an essential participant in the Middle Eastern life by taking advantage of the confrontation between Iran and Israel. This reasoning is in line with the fact that Mearsheimer (2001) argues that great powers make every effort to eliminate the emergence of regional hegemonies and to ensure their presence through strategic interventions and balancing measures. The Russian line of support to Iran in Syria, the sale of arms, and energy partnerships can be regarded as the attempts to balance the U.S.-Israeli unions. At the same time, its own diplomatic activity and military deconfliction systems with Israel are indicative of a realist approach of restraining escalation and retaining freedom of movement of its army in the Levant (Trenin, 2016).

Although the Realism has provided an explanation of the logic behind the overall balancing of survival and power, strategic hedging theory has offered a more specific explanation of the dual alignment of Russia. According to the authors Lim and Cooper (2015), strategic hedging is the effort of a state to lessen risks through diversifying relationships and maintaining open lines with other participants. Hedging is contrasted with strict band wagoning or balancing in terms of flexibility, ambiguity and contingency planning. The example of Russia and parallel relations with Iran and Israel demonstrate a perfect example of hedging in a multipolar system. The Russian balance between supporting Iran militarily in Syria and the economic and diplomatic engagement with Israel would not cost it alignment to either of the two parties but rather use them both to have geopolitical leverage. Kuik (2008) says that such strategies are more common in the areas where power is not distributed in a rigid way and where ideological and strategic interests also collide. In addition, the multipolarity of the present international system due to the waning unipolar leadership of the U. S, the emergence of China and the aggressive foreign policy of Russia makes the mid-tier powers such as Russia to navigate through the competitors without the stringent commitment to alliances. This hedging policy makes Russia stronger in its bargains and it

strengthens the perception of Russia as a counterforce and not a partisan player.

Realism, strategic hedging and constructivist ideology intersects enable us to see that the policy of Russia against the Iran-Israel conflict is not ideologically fixed or a random strategic decision. Instead, it is a strategic form of power control, to increase the leverage of Moscow regionally, maintain flexibilities in foreign politics and build its reputation as a world power broker.

**Research Methodology**

The study will take the qualitative, interpretive case study design, which is befitting in delving into the complexity and ambiguity of the fact that Russia has a dual interest in Iran and Israel. A qualitative design would make possible a phenomenological image of the strategic behavior, the geopolitical intent, and the maneuvering of diplomacy whereas the case study format will give detailed understanding of the particular interplay, trends and historical events that characterize the balancing strategy of Russia in the Middle East.

The research utilizes various secondary data information so as to guarantee a triangulated and thorough conceptualization. They are peer-reviewed academic papers, analyst assessments, and strategy briefs of leading think-tanks like Carnegie Moscow Center, Chatham House, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Moreover, documents and policy statements of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Israeli Ministry of Defense, and the communicative messages of the Iranian government will be analyzed to trace the official postures, statements, and even the military and diplomatic positions. The analysis of media content in regionally and ideologically varied sources (RT, Press TV, Al Jazeera, Haaretz, and Foreign Policy) is also a part of the research to capture the changing narratives and frames.

Three major tools of analysis will be used. To determine the recurring themes and patterns in the political speeches, press releases and the analysis of the comments provided by experts, the content analysis will be applied. Second, chronological and geographical mapping of the key interactions and military conflicts between Russia, Iran, and Israel particularly in the Levantine and Syrian theatres will be traced by using geostrategic mapping and correspondence of timelines. Third, the discourse analysis will be used to unravel the rhetorical practices and ideological discourse that stands in the official statements, pointing to the ways in which Russia portrays itself as a neutral power actor and regional stabilizer.

**The Strategic Relations of Russia with Iran.**

The Russian relations with Iran is a strategic meeting point of interests that will be formed by military, economic, and geopolitical interests. Although their partnership is usually described as coherent and sustainable, it is actually characterized by the combination of strategic alliance and tensions. The following section will also discuss why the partnership is multi-dimensional, with regard to the military bonds, economic collaboration, and perceptions of mutual threats as well as new sources of tension.

Military cooperation is one of the most noticeable and the most significant spheres of Russian-Iranian cooperation. In the last ten years, the ties between Moscow and Tehran have intensified to a great extent in the area of defense, especially regarding the conflict in Syria. Russia has provided Iran with the systems of missile defense (such as S-300), and has allegedly shared technological expertise regarding drone and missile development (Borshchevskaya, 2022; Wezeman et al., 2021). Not only have these transactions made Iran more powerful regionally in terms of its military, but they have also enabled Russia to become an important arms supplier in the region amid the western sanctions against Tehran. These two countries have had mutual military operations in Syria to assist the Assad regime. When Russian troops have concentrated on air power, logistics,

and diplomatic cover, Iran has supported it on the ground with the use of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and allied forces like Hezbollah (Fulton, 2019). This kind of synergy in operations, which is yet to be fully consolidated, has enabled both these states to exude power in the Levant as well as thrust back into the interests of the U.S. and Israelis. Nevertheless, different endpoints of the post-conflict Syrian order have already started to put a strain on this alignment (Vakil, 2020).

**1. Timeline of Key Russia–Iran–Israel Interactions (2011–2025)**

Year	Event	Description
2011	Start of Syrian Civil War	Iran and Hezbollah start fighting on the side of Assad. Israel takes a policy of neutrality but keeps a watch on the Iranian activity.
2015	Russia intervenes militarily in Syria	Russian air offensive; Moscow sides with Iran against Assad. Beginning of deconfliction negotiations with Israel.
2016	Russia–Israel military hotline activated	In order to avoid confrontations in the Syrian air space, both parties create real-time contact
2017	Israeli strikes intensify	Israel starts striking the Iranian weapons convoys and stores in Syria, Russia does not intervene.
2018	Downing of Russian IL-20 plane	Russian jets are shot down by accident by Syrian air-defences (intended to shoot down Israeli jets). Russia accuses Israel yet keeps in step.
2019	Netanyahu–Putin meetings	Tensions are confirmed by regular bilateral meetings which assure coordination and strategic dialogue.
2020	Russia criticizes Israeli strikes	Russia sets out on a path of making bolder diplomatic statements against Israeli activities in Syria.
2021	Iranian drone activity increases	Iran grows its UAV operations in Syria, Israel pre-empts with limited Russian consent.
2022	Russia invades Ukraine	Israel tries to remain neutral; Iran strengthens military bonds with Russia, and some drone transfer.
2023	Russian–Iranian strategic alignment grows	Iran sells drones to be used in Ukraine; military collaboration is intensified as Russia is isolated by the West.
2024	Israel reassesses Moscow ties	Israel expresses its concern about Russia-Iran co-operation but continues deconfliction.
2025	Proxy tensions rise in Syria	Hezbollah and other Iranian-supported organizations challenge the Israeli deterrence, and Russia walks the fine line.

Another country that has tried to enhance its economic relationship is Russia and Iran given that both nations are under strict Western sanctions. One of the foundations of their collaboration is the energy sector, as joint-ventures in oil and gas exploration and technological cooperation in upstream ventures have been on the rise (Katouzian, 2021). As an example, Russian

oil giants Gazprom and Lukoil have discussed joint ventures with Iranian oil fields, but the developments are usually frustrated by financial sanctions and legal ambiguities. Besides the hydrocarbons, Russia and Iran have also developed infrastructures, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), where by ports of the Indian Ocean are to be connected to Central Asia and Europe via Iran and Russia. This initiative will be strategically important to both Moscow and Tehran because it provides an alternate trade route that will avoid the Western dominated shipping routes (Guliyev and Akbarzadeh, 2019).

The core of the Russia-Iran relationship can be seen in the coincidence of their mutual perception of threats, most especially how they are both against the U.S. regional hegemony and expansionism of NATO. The American military presence in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq, the Persian Gulf and Syria, is perceived by both countries as a direct challenge to their national sovereignty and regional interests (Trenin, 2016). In the case of Russia, the expansion and the participation of NATO in the post-Soviet territories has strengthened its perception of the west as its strategic enemy. Iran also perceives U.S. sanctions, regime-change rhetoric and pro-Israeli support as existentialist threats. This alignment with the anti-West is further supported by information cooperation, common diplomatic platforms (e.g., the Astana Process) and mutual assistance to regional leaders who oppose American influence. Although they share a similarity in ideological grounds, with Russia grounded in great power nationalism and Iran in revolutionary theocracy, they both have one thing in common: both want to establish a regional order that is not as reliant on Western standards (Sauer, 2019).

### Constraints and Frictions

Even with a high level of cooperation, Russia and Iran experience severe limitations and sources of friction which restrict the level of their partnership and its sustainability. One of the most significant points of contact is post-war Syria, where the two powers are in opposition over the contracts of rebuilding, local proxies, and political transition (Al-Tamimi, 2021). Russia prefers a centralized Syrian state with regular international relations to Assad, whereas Iran supports a decentralized one that uses militias and ideological commitment to allow Tehran to establish itself on long-term basis. The other area of conflict is in Central Asia where Russia has traditionally ensured hegemonic control using security organizations such as CSTO and economic blocs such as the Eurasian Economic Union. Iran, which is becoming more and more active in the region, periodically competes with Russian influence by making bilateral outreach to Central Asian countries and connectivity projects (Blank, 2022).

Moreover, the two nations have opposing opinions of Israel and nuclear policy. Russia acknowledges the security interests of Israel; however, the country is strategically coordinated with the military activities of Tel Aviv, but Iran is categorical with the Israeli state, and it supports anti-Israel resistance forces. Another reason that Moscow supported the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is based on the priorities of nuclear non-proliferation, whereas Iran regards the nuclear program as the means of their strategic deterrence (Kozhanov, 2020). These divergent computations may be worsened in case tensions in the Iran-Israel theatre are aggravated.

### Strategy of Russia in Israel

The relations between Russia and Israel are one of the most expedient and adaptable aspects of the Moscow policy in the Middle East. Russia has developed military coordination, strategic

restraint, and economic pragmatism in its association with Israel, unlike the ideological and security-based partnership with Iran. Although Russia has strong relations with the enemies of Israel especially Iran and Syria, it is also engaged in a friendly and tactically important relationship with Tel Aviv, which is founded on understanding and deconfliction. The following section examines the dimensions of this strategic partnership that are of the most vital concern such as military and intelligence partnership, diplomatic utility, and socio-economic ties.

One of the key foundations of the relationships between Russia and Israel is military deconfliction and in this case in Syria within the context of the Syrian civil war. Since the direct military intervention of Russia in Syria in 2015 it has been involved in a

coordinated airspace management mechanism with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), which was aimed at eliminating accidental collisions and the freedom of Israeli operations against Iranian targets (Guzansky and Marshall, 2021). This coordination is provided by the means of a hotline communication system between the Russian Hmeimim airbase and the Israeli military, with the high degree of operational trust (Tsurkov, 2020). Russia has not explicitly allowed Israel to strike on Iranian weapons shipments, missile depots, and IRGC bases but has enabled it to make preventive attacks (implicitly) despite forcedly supporting the Assad regime in Syria and walking quietly as Iranian forces remain in the nation (Makovsky, 2020). Restricting the imbedding of the Iranian forces in the southwestern part of Syria, especially around the Golan Heights, Russia also recognizes the red lines of the Israelis, demonstrating the balancing diplomacy of Moscow (Inbar and Sandler, 2020). In the intelligence level, there is no formal alliance but situational intelligence sharing has taken place on counterterrorism and regional instability. Russia enjoys the strong surveillance capabilities that Israel has especially on the jihadist movements, whereas Israel is observing Russian-Syrian-Iranian relations that would protect its strategic depth (Freedman, 2018).

### 2. Russia-Israel Agreements and Cooperation

Year	Mechanism/Activity	Details
2015	Military deconfliction hotline	Prevents mid air accidents in the Syrian airspace. Still active.
2016–2019	Intelligence coordination (unofficial)	Concentrated on counterterrorism and airspace controllers.
Ongoing	Economic cooperation	Agri-tech, cybersecurity, and constrained dual-use technological cooperation.
2018	Israeli diplomatic protest against S-300 to Syria	Russia underestimates the strategic threat of Transfer to Israel.
2022	Israeli neutrality in Ukraine	Has reserved relations regardless of Western-Russian enmity.

### Diplomatic Power: Israel as a Bridge and Balancer

Russia considers Israel as a significant diplomatic key to the west and a critical participant in its balancing strategy in the Middle East. However, Russia has been able to have non-confrontational and cooperative relations with Israel despite its close relations with Iran and Syria, in large part because Moscow is willing to be viewed as an impartial broker and world power (Trenin, 2016). This delicate balance has been crucial to the presence of the personal relations between Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu has visited Moscow more than

any other foreign capital other than Washington over the last ten years, and this explains why Russia has been a critical coordinator to Israel (Kozhanov, 2020). It is through these regular summits that the two leaders have been able to circumvent the obstacles of bureaucracy and establish direct channels of communication during times of increased tension in the region like Israeli airstrikes into Syrian airspace or arms sales disputes.

In addition to the military and diplomatic provisions, Russia and Israel have strong economic and cultural relations, which strengthen the strategic relations. One important force behind these relations is the Russian speaking diaspora in Israel which is believed to have a population of over 1 million which is about 15 percent of the Israeli population. These Russian-Israelis, most of whom moved there in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, play the role of socio-political bridges, allowing cultures to mix, tourists to arrive, and dual citizens to form (Goren and Goldman, 2020). Russia and Israel have economic collaborations in the fields of agriculture, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and pharmaceuticals. Israeli companies have conducted business with Russian organizations in tech-oriented projects, especially in precise agriculture and water technologies, where Israel is the world leader and Russia requires innovations (Shirayev and Zubok, 2016). Although the level of the economic trade volumes is still small in contrast with other partners, the targeted joint ventures promote a pragmatic aspect of the bilateral relationship.

#### Balancing Acts and Strategic Calculations.

The Middle East strategy of Russia is most interpreted by relating to the operational conduct of the country in Syria where it has become a serious testing ground to its balancing act between Iran and Israel. Selective involvement, diplomatic ambiguity and military coordination have seen Russia seek a multi-layered policy of maintaining strategic independence and portraying the image of a trustworthy broker. But the very framework of this trade-off is weak, and it is based on the short-term tactical benefits and prone to contradictions in the long run perspective.

Syria is the main arena of the geopolitical balancing policy of Russia. The Russian intervention in Syria started in 2015 and since then, besides restoring its position in the world as a superpower, the country has been controlling other regional powers, especially those of Iran and Israel. On the one hand, Russia is on the side of the Assad regime and has provided airpower, intelligence and diplomatic cover to the regime in conjunction with Iran. On the one hand, it condones and aligns with the targeted airstrikes by Israel in the air against Iranian targets to prevent the further escalation of the conflict (Guzansky and Marshall, 2021; Al-Tamimi, 2021).

The sensitive role of holding Iranian entrenchment particularly along the Israeli border in Golan Heights has put Moscow in a distinctive mediating role. The presence of the Russian military in southwestern Syria and its implied acceptance of Israeli red lines, such as airstrikes against IRGC-related targets, can be seen as an attempt to prevent a full-blown Israeli-Iranian confrontation that would disrupt the regime of Assad (Inbar and Sandler, 2020). Iran is interested in having a long-term presence and strategic depth in Syria, but Russia seems to be more interested in state control and a modicum of stability that would allow diplomatic normalization and reconstruction (Trenin, 2016; Vakil, 2020). In such a way, Syria has turned out to be a geopolitical point and Russia tries to implement a set of its foreign policy concepts: multipolarity, sovereignty, and limited interventionism, keeping open lines to the conflicting actors in the region (Fulton, 2019).

### 3. List of Major Arms Sales and Joint Agreements (Russia–Iran, Russia–Israel)

#### Russia–Iran Arms and Defense Cooperation

Year	Item/Agreement	Details
2007	S-300 system (sale delayed)	First sale prevented by UN sanctions, eventually shipped in 2016.
2016	Delivery of S-300 to Iran	Increasing negotiations on 4th-gen jets and electronic warfare.
2018–Present	Su-30, Yak-130, drones, radars (ongoing negotiations)	Expanding talks on 4th-gen jets and electronic warfare platforms.
2022–2023	Iranian drones to Russia (Shahed-131/136)	Applied by Russia in Ukraine war; indicators of further military relations.
2024	Discussions on missile and radar upgrades	Iran provides collaboration in integration of air defense in the region.

#### Risk Hedging and Strategic Hedging

Russia is quite dependent on strategic hedging and diplomatic ambiguity to balance between the competing interests of Iran and Israel. This involves arms diplomacy, which involves the provision of superior weaponry to the opponents at various times without having to declare a formal partnership. As an example, when Russia announced the delivery of S-300 air defense system to Syria (presumably at Iranian pressure), it was a well-calculated measure not to critically impair Israeli air superiority (Kozhanov, 2020). On the same note, Russia has not been willing to sell the most sophisticated weapons systems or complete military defense to Iran, and this has acted as a reminder to both Tel Aviv and Washington. In symbolic terms, Moscow is also a neutral country in the world because it does not use inflammatory language on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and does not lose its official relations with Iran and Israel in the United Nations (Sauer, 2019). This neutral diplomacy is a type of strategic ambiguity, which enables Russia to be seen as an actor of mediation, instead of a partisan actor (Lim & Cooper, 2015).

#### Judging of Prosperity or Thresholds.

The balancing exercise of Russia in the conflict between Iran and Israel has paid off tactically in short term. It has established deconfliction with Israel, maintained its coalition with Iran in Syria, and established itself as an irreplaceable diplomatic actor in the area that has long been dominated by Western interventions (Freedman, 2018; Borshchevskaya, 2022). These tactical arrangements have been effective as evidenced by the fact that Russia-Israel military confrontations have not been direct yet hundreds of Israeli airstrikes have been conducted in Syria.

Nonetheless, this strategy is not very long-term sustainable. The dualism of Russian orientation is experiencing an increasing structural contradiction: the desire of Iran to dominate the region, in particular, Syria and Lebanon, is in a collision with the Israeli interests in security. It is possible that Moscow will not be able to restrain Iran decisively or satisfy the Israeli needs completely, which will cause a strategic breaking point (Al-Tamimi, 2021). The vulnerability of the balance is also revealed by shifting regional relationships, including the Abraham Accords and increasing Iranian-Russian military collaboration under the global sanctions, which may put tension on Russia-Israel relations (Blank, 2022). Besides, the Ukrainian crisis has put a strain on Russian global bandwidth and credibility. The diplomatic decision of Israel to be wary of the Russian invasion and its opposition to western powers, albeit minimal has given the diplomacy of

Moscow a twist. At the same time, the further strengthening of the military ties between Iran and Russia, particularly, with regard to the drone tools employed in Ukraine, can compel Israel to reconsider its alignment with the Russian side (Ravid, 2022). These aspects present the constraints of the hedging model in Russia in a crisis, polarized regional setting.

### International and Local Connotations.

The strategic involvement of Russia in relations with both Iran and Israel has great consequences beyond the bilateral relations. Its doings reverberate over the broader Middle East and have implications on global security structures, especially concerning U.S. policy, NATO eastern and south fronts, and dissimilar regional fault lines. Furthermore, it is the balancing stance of Russia, which has formed its image and soft power position-creating mixed reactions in the Arab world, Europe, and in other great powers like China. This section discusses these implications in the three critical perspectives, which include Western strategic re-calibration, regional instability, and reputational dynamics.

### Influence on the U.S. Policy and NATO Strategy.

The contribution of Russia in the Iran-Israel conflict particularly in the Syrian context, has direct effects on the U.S. foreign policy and the overall strategy of NATO in the Middle East region. Although the United States has robust defense alliances with both Israel and Gulf countries, the growing role of Russia in Syria and its vicinity to Israeli security politics have made the problem of Washington strategic calculus difficult (Katz, 2020). Allowing Iran to have a military presence and also cooperating with Israel has made Russia look like an inescapable player, which makes the American maneuverability and consistency of the message less frequent (Trenin, 2016). In the eyes of NATO, the increasing influence of Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean and its naval base expansion in Tartus and airbase in Latakia are indicators of a larger plan of flanking the Euro-Atlantic alliance and imposing its power into the Levant and North Africa (Gorenburg, 2021). This puts the NATO policies on southern neighborhoods to the test and creates issues with the hybrid threats, such as weaponized migration, disinformation campaigns, and coerced energy (Blank, 2022).

Moreover, the influence of this spoiler, that is, selective interference, possession of the veto in the UN Security Council, and thwarting of U.S. resolutions to conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Iran nuclear talks erodes Western diplomacy in such countries as Syria, Libya, and Iran (Borshchevskaya, 2022). However, ironically enough, Russia is wanting to be recognized as a broker, too, which is seen in its presence in ceasefire agreements and deconfliction mechanisms, which places it as an indispensable nation, regardless of how disruptive its potential is (Guzansky and Marshall, 2021).

### Regional Stability Implications.

The balancing act of Russia is also shot across to the stability of delicate states and war-ridden areas like Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Its motive is probably to avoid a direct escalation between Iran and Israel but the asymmetry of such conflicts such as the use of proxies and militia make such miscalculation probable. As an example, the Israeli airstrikes against Iranian assets in Syria may accidentally kill the Russian personnel or damage the Russian equipment, which will have a diplomatic backlash (Inbar & Sandler, 2020).

The risk of conflict spillover is increased in Lebanon due to the entrenchment of Hezbollah which is supported by Iran and is tolerated by Russia. Moscow does not have a direct say on Hezbollah, but its stance in Syria has a side effect on Lebanese-Israeli tensions (Al-Tamimi, 2021). Equally, in Iraq, the increasing command of Iran by means of Shia militias can encourage their further bravery in counterattacking U.S. and Israeli interests, especially with the perceived Russian non-cooperation (Vakil,

2020). Furthermore, Russian non-actions or misjudgments, like the inability to keep Iran action within bounds along the Golan Heights or an under-evaluation of the Israeli retaliatory levels may lead to unintended escalation. This highlights the limitations of the influence of Moscow and the fragility of the balancing strategy, in particular, the situation in areas where non-state actors can act comparatively freely (Fulton, 2019).

### Russia's Image and Soft Power

The regional approach that Russia has been taking has also influenced its image and soft power attractions in the world, albeit with contradictions. On the one hand, Moscow creates the image of a pragmatic diplomat, based on the transnationalism, the respect of sovereignty and the non-ideological involvement. This has echoed across various Arab regimes especially those that are suspicious of Western regime change agendas or human rights pushed foreign policies (Kozhanov, 2020). The perceived non-interventionist stance of Russia in domestic affairs has gained the attraction of partners such as Egypt, the UAE and Algeria who like the realist pragmatism of Moscow. Nonetheless, other people see Russia in its roles as opportunistic and transactional where it has been capitalizing on the divisions among regions to gain a strategic advantage without providing mechanisms of conflict resolution in the long term. This perception hinders the normative attractiveness and the depth of soft power of Russia in the perception of parts of the Arab populace and among policy elites in Europe (Sauer, 2019). Moreover, Russia is increasingly becoming pro-Iranish, especially since the invasion of Ukraine, which has cast an ugly head on its reputation among Israel and other Western-oriented Gulf countries, which perceive Iran as a disruptive influence.

In Europe, Russian attitude in the Middle East strengthens the general fears of Russian revisionism and the projection of power outside the post-Soviet arena. Conversely, China regards activism in the Middle East with suspicious eyes by Russia, which tends to use Russian engagement as a cushion to its own less aggressive economic growth under the Belt and Road Initiative (Gorenburg, 2021). Nonetheless, the fact that Beijing favors stability within the region as opposed to military adventurism constrains the possibility of profound Sino-Russian attunement in the Middle East.

### Summary of Key Findings

This paper has addressed the outlines and implications of the Russian balancing of Iran and Israel in Syria as a major example and discussed the larger geopolitical trends within the Middle East. As it has been analyzed, Russia is a mostly tactical and based on realpolitik approach with its pragmatism being risk-managed. Using its military strength, diplomatic ambiguity and limited cooperation, Moscow has been able to develop a lever with Tehran as well as Tel Aviv, becoming a central, yet ambivalent, player in the regional security game.

By the means of such mechanisms as military deconfliction with Israel or the ongoing assistance to the Iranian efforts in Syria Russia has achieved some level of strategic flexibility. It has been able to escape direct involvement in disputes between its allies and elicit concessions and become the power projector. Nonetheless, this freedom comes at a price: Moscow does not rid itself of the contradictions and conflicts that are inherent to its relations with both Iran and Israel at the same time. Such inconsistencies are becoming more of a reputational risk, diplomatic strain, and an operational issue on Russia, particularly as regional and international forces are changing.

### Policy Recommendations

The management of the Iran-Israel confrontation and the overall security situation in the Middle East can only be addressed through the use of well-measured actions of not only Russia, but also the international and regional stakeholders. According to the

results of the given research, the following policy suggestions can be offered in order to increase the strategic stability, reduce the development of the conflict and increase the efficiency of diplomacy within the existing system of multipolar order.

- i. Russia needs to give up tactical ambiguity and a clear vision of the future of political and security in Syria.
- ii. The expansion of its diplomat arsenal should be considered by Moscow, who may include neutral regionalists, including Oman, Qatar, or Jordan, into de-escalation platforms.
- iii. In spite of the geopolitical rivalries, Russia will continue to be a key stakeholder in any new form of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or a variant of nuclear deals.
- iv. Western actors should not have a cold war, zero-sum attitude towards Middle East diplomacy. The desire to make Russia a completely isolated country in the processes of the region might support destabilizing alignments and reduce the possibilities of the organized conflict prevention.
- v. It is time that regional stakeholders realize the shortcomings in bilateral diplomacy and adopt multipolar mediation involving Russia, U.S., China and reputable regional forums.
- vi. Lack of official crisis communication strategies between Israel and Iran raises the level of misjudgment.

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