



The Evgeny Primakov  
Center for International  
Cooperation

Policy brief

# Foreign Policy Priorities of Russia and Israel on War and Peace in the Middle East

V.Yu. Smirnov

N°9, 2026

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Smirnov V.Yu. Foreign Policy Priorities of Russia and Israel on War and Peace in the Middle East. № 9 / 2026. – Moscow: Primakov Center, 2026. – 16 pp.

ISBN 978-5-6056578-1-1

**№ 9, 2026**

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# Main points

- ◆ Despite differing approaches to regional issues, Russia and Israel, now marking 35 years since the restoration of diplomatic ties, have traditionally sought to keep their dialogue constructive and amicable. This has been reinforced by Russia's attention to its compatriots in Israel and Israel's to the Jewish community in Russia. A central pillar of the relationship is a shared historical memory: the role of the Red Army and the Soviet Union in the defeat of Nazism and in the establishment of the State of Israel, along with Russia's firm stance against antisemitism.
- ◆ Israel views the current escalation in the Middle East as an existential threat and is responding with a doctrine of Peace through Strength. This strategy envisions mobilization for a *seven-front war* aimed at inflicting irreversible damage on terrorist organizations, with the foremost objective being the removal of the ayatollah regime in Iran.
- ◆ Within this strategy, Israel is pursuing a hardline approach that includes: rejecting the establishment of an independent Palestinian state; affirming Jerusalem's status as a unified capital; suppressing protests in the West Bank while expanding settlement infrastructure; and declining to engage with the Palestinian National Authority (PNA).
- ◆ Israel is seeking to bolster its international standing by continuing its policy of normalizing relations with other states (the Abraham Accords) while forcefully pushing back against international criticism, which it characterizes as a rise in antisemitism. At the same time, Israel's use of force is effectively undermining prospects for a settlement based on international law (UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338), as it establishes new *security zones*, notably in Syria and Lebanon.
- ◆ The Russian Federation consistently advocates the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, calls for intra-Palestinian unity, and condemns the creation of illegal Israeli settlements, the annexation of the Golan Heights, and changes to the status of Jerusalem. Russia sees no evidence that Israel's current course will lead to anything other than further escalation.

# Introduction

This autumn, Russia and Israel will mark the 35th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations. At that time, they managed to correct a mistake that had kept the two countries on opposite sides of global politics for nearly a quarter century, setting them on a path of sharp confrontation not only over the Middle East conflict, but also across ideological, humanitarian, and other spheres.

In the years since relations were restored, Russian–Israeli ties have varied in intensity and in the level of trust. Even so, at both the level of political leadership and in the broader fabric of public contacts, neither side has lost sight of the central objective: to preserve a friendly mode of engagement between Russia and Israel.

The situation in the Middle East has objectively compelled both countries to pay particular attention to coordination aimed at avoiding conflict. Efforts have never ceased to find points of convergence in aligning their strategic approaches to managing the region’s many challenges, challenges that directly affect their national interests, as well as in advancing a core objective of global politics: an Arab–Israeli settlement. It is fair to say that peace in the Middle East, in its broadest sense, ranks among the top priorities for both Russia and Israel, even as the region has experienced a sharp escalation of conflict over the past two and a half years, the nature of which is well known.

# 1. Israel's approaches and guiding principles in Middle East policy

Israel characterizes the current escalation as an existential threat, defining it as an attempt by its enemies, and by extension enemies of the Jewish people, to pursue, in contemporary conditions, goals it associates with the Holocaust. In response to this perceived challenge, Israel has adopted a doctrine framed as achieving Peace through Strength<sup>1</sup>. The country and its society have been fully mobilized for what it describes as victory in a *seven-front war*, aimed at inflicting irreversible damage on Hamas in Gaza, the Shiite organization Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and others, and above all targeting the ayatollah regime in Iran, which it views as needing to be removed<sup>2</sup>. The military capability for this purpose has been prepared and is continuing to be expanded. Encouragement of protest movements within Iran with the aim of regime change is being pursued with little attempt at concealment. The destruction of Iran's missile and nuclear capabilities, including through American efforts, is viewed as only part of the broader solution.

Accompanying elements of Israel's broad strategic plan include decisive and uncompromising actions justified by the need to ensure the national security of the state and its population. In condensed form, this policy involves:

- ◆ the rejection of any steps that could lead to the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Any development along the lines of the Oslo accords is not accepted<sup>3</sup>;
- ◆ the firm and non-negotiable status of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The concept of East Jerusalem has been effectively set aside, including through a sustained set of multifaceted measures aimed at shaping the city's character accordingly;

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1 PM Netanyahu in Julis: "I am not naïve. I understand who and what we are dealing with. I told President Trump: We both believe in the same idea – it is called peace through strength. First come strength: peace will follow". 28.08.2025. <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event-north28082025>.

2 PM Netanyahu in a direct message to the Iranian people. 12.11.2024. <http://www.gov.il/en/pages/spoke-iran121124>; Statement by PM Netanyahu. 24.06.2025. <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event-statement240625>.

3 PM Netanyahu's Statement with President Donald Trump in the White House. 30.09.2025. <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event-statement-300925>.

- ◆ the forceful suppression of any protest activity by the Palestinian Arab population in the West Bank that is treated as equivalent to terrorist activity; and comprehensive Israeli security control over developments in the Palestinian territories;
- ◆ the gradual *integration* of territorial space in the West Bank through carefully planned decisions and practical measures to develop settlement, transport, and other infrastructure in the area; refusal to engage with the Palestinian Authority (PA); and increasing visibility of anti-Arab activity among Jewish settlers, particularly youth, as a growing factor in the situation in the West Bank.

The coercive component of Israel's Middle East policy is dominant, but it is significantly supplemented by strategic measures intended to demonstrate the country's active participation in regional and international processes and to strengthen its position on the global stage. These include such directions as:

- ◆ ongoing efforts by Israel to advance the normalization of its relations with moderate regional regimes, first and foremost Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Israelis acknowledge that the success of the Abraham Accords reached in the years preceding the Gaza war has been limited. For Israel, it is important to demonstrate the relative marginality of the Palestinian issue, as well as the fact that many states have genuine interests in normalizing relations with it, even if this were to require agreeing to Kazakhstan's participation in the Abraham Accords or recognizing the self-proclaimed Somaliland;
- ◆ Israel is responding vigorously to growing international criticism over what is described as disproportionate actions by the IDF against civilians in the Gaza Strip. Pro-Palestinian demonstrations and statements by public movements and organizations defending Palestinian civilians and opposing violence are being interpreted as a rise in antisemitism worldwide, which Israel is determined to confront decisively;
- ◆ It would be wrong to underestimate the scale of the public trauma caused in Israel by the situation involving hostages taken captive by Hamas militants or who died in captivity. The severity and emotional intensity of the response at both the state and societal levels reached unprecedented levels and dominated the national agenda until the body of the last hostage, R. Gvili, was located and returned to Israel for burial. On the Russian side, statements were made on multiple occasions strongly condemning Hamas attacks and the taking of hostages;
- ◆ Through its military and political actions, Israel is, in effect, undermining the prospect of a Middle East settlement based on the legal principles enshrined in UN decisions, including UN Security Council Resolutions

242 and 338. As a result, on both the Syrian and Lebanese fronts, Israel is shaping new realities in the form of “security zones” that it already exercises close control over, beyond the Syrian Golan Heights and, in Lebanon, up to the Litani River.

Regarding the future of the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian population of the enclave is currently under external oversight involving the United States and Israel. The Israeli leadership, it appears, is content with the present ambiguous framework following the ceasefire agreement of 10 October 2025, including progress toward the second phase of the so-called Trump plan. The Israeli army occupies and controls a significant portion of the Strip along the *yellow line*. Israel intends to pursue the complete elimination of Hamas, not merely its disarmament or the dismantling of its tunnel infrastructure. Elaborate reconstruction plans for Gaza appear to be of limited concern; instead, operational plans remain in readiness for expanding Israeli-controlled areas of the Strip, including through potential offensive operations to that end.

## 2. The fundamentals of Russia's Middle East diplomacy

It would be a mistake to assume that Israel's positions on the issues outlined above automatically render dialogue with it irrelevant. Over the past 35 years, Israel has never denied Russia a role as one of the key actors in shaping the contours of the military-political situation in the Middle East and North Africa.

At the same time, Israel is well aware of the principled position of the Russian Federation on the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian state, coexisting alongside Israel in peace and security, with its capital in East Jerusalem. Equally consistently, Russia supports the achievement of Palestinian national unity on the basis of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Moscow is convinced that overcoming internal divisions would strengthen and further develop the existing institutions of Palestinian governance, regardless of criticism directed at Russia for maintaining contacts with representatives of Hamas.

There are other fundamental truths that the Russian Federation intends to adhere to, convinced that without them neither the Palestinian issue nor a comprehensive Arab–Israeli settlement can be resolved. These include the understanding that:

- ◆ Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are considered illegal;
- ◆ any unilateral change by Israel to the status of Jerusalem is unacceptable;
- ◆ the annexation by Israel of the Syrian Golan Heights occupied in 1967 is illegal.

The principled positions of the Russian Federation on these issues are shared by the overwhelming majority of countries in the world. This was clearly demonstrated by two high-level conferences held in New York in June and September 2025, during which, among other things, support was expressed for

the two-state solution<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the Russian Federation has no convincing evidence that the principles and policies Israel adheres to and implements in practice will lead to anything other than a further deterioration of an already catastrophic situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, thereby generating new and serious threats to security and stability across the entire Middle East region. This also applies to the broader context of the military campaign Israel continues to conduct on the so-called *seven fronts*.

Potential risks if the current conflict dynamics persist:

- ◆ A surge in international terrorism raises the question of how secure we truly are from it today. Israel has historically viewed Russia's role in countering terrorist threats positively, as well as the potential for Russian–Israeli cooperation in this area. But what would happen if the displacement of the Palestinian population from Gaza were to become a reality? If Israel were to proceed with the annexation of occupied Palestinian territories accompanied by the expulsion of Palestinians beyond their borders? If a third Palestinian intifada were to erupt in the West Bank?
- ◆ A new, potentially destructive war between Israel and Iran, backed by the United States, remains a serious concern. Preventing such a conflict, whose consequences are difficult to predict but could be catastrophic, is a genuine objective of Russia, as well as many other states. There is an established negotiation format that should be followed, guided by the need to adopt reasonable and well-considered decisions, particularly regarding the future of Iran's nuclear program. At the same time, Russia consistently advocates ensuring the security of every country without detriment to others and stands ready to convey this position to both Iranian and Israeli leadership.
- ◆ The intensifying struggle for power in Syria is a further complicating factor. From the perspective of Israel's military and political leadership, Russia's presence in the country has had a stabilizing effect, and it may continue to do so in the future. There is little indication that Russian–Israeli mutual understanding in this area is being eroded, even though

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4 High-level International Conference. New York Declaration on the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution. Distr.: General. 4 August 2025. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/CONF.243/2025/1>.

Statement by Sergey V. Vershinin, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the second round of the High-Level International Conference on the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution. New York, 22 September 2025. [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/2048249](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/2048249).

Joint Statement by the Co-Chairs of the High-Level International Conference on the Peaceful Settlement of the Palestinian Question and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution. 24 September 2025. <https://www.spa.gov.sa/ru/N2406451>.

the Israeli military seeks to establish its own rules of engagement in southern Syria, including what it describes as the “protection” of the Syrian Druze and related measures. At the same time, the question of how far the Damascus authorities are prepared to *compromise* on issues of national sovereignty is not one that should be attributed to the Russian Federation.

**Conclusion.** In the persistently complex and volatile situation in the Middle East, with the risk of new escalations remaining high, Israel can be confident that the Russian Federation does not pose any threat to its security.

### 3. Israel's stance on the special military operation (SMO) and the 'cementing' factors in bilateral relations

Israel's political approach to issues related to the **special military operation** conducted by the Russian Federation in Ukraine requires a thorough and unbiased assessment. In the early stages of the conflict, Israel's leadership tried to present the country's position as being on the *right side of history*. The temptation to side with the collective West in condemning Russia was so strong that they willfully ignored the criminal nature of the Bandera regime in Kyiv, and Israel completely turned a blind eye to Russophobic practices in Ukraine, among other things. Nevertheless, the cost of expressing solidarity with the West ultimately proved too high for Israel: it would have meant sacrificing its friendly relations with Russia, joining the anti-Russian sanctions regime, harming bilateral humanitarian ties, and so on. In the end, that did not happen. At the same time, Russia refrained from taking any actions that could have escalated the situation, despite the existence of forces eager to drive a wedge between the two countries and their peoples.

In addition to the Middle Eastern dynamics outlined above, several factors actively support the preservation of the friendly character of Russian–Israeli relations:

- ◆ Russia's attention to the approximately 1.5 million compatriots living in Israel, and Israel's attention to the Jewish community in Russia, are key factors in this context. Although these phenomena differ in nature, they significantly shape the high standard of the humanitarian dimension in relations between the two states. It is not an exaggeration to say that the free movement of Jews from Russia to Israel, together with the continued freedom of personal contacts between people, underpins the stable character of bilateral relations. This is reflected in a continuous flow of information, shared linguistic and cultural ties, regular air connections between the two countries, the fulfillment by both states of pension obligations toward citizens in each other's jurisdictions, and the maintenance of a certain level of tourism and

pilgrimage exchanges. It is also reflected in the preservation of trade and economic cooperation, which continues despite sanctions pressure and external interference by third parties;

- ◆ A key cementing factor in Russian–Israeli relations is **historical memory**, including the widely shared awareness in Israel of the role of Red Army soldiers in the liberation of Auschwitz and of the Soviet Union’s role in the United Nations General Assembly decision that formed the basis for the proclamation of the State of Israel.

Approximately 4,700 veterans of the **Great Patriotic War** living in Israel have been awarded commemorative medals on the occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory<sup>5</sup>. In central Jerusalem stands the “Candle of Remembrance” monument dedicated to the survivors of the Siege of Leningrad; it was unveiled on 23 January 2020 by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir V. Putin. Two years earlier, on 9 May 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu participated in the “Immortal Regiment” march on Red Square, carrying a portrait of Hero of the Soviet Union Wolf Vilensky. There are many similar examples illustrating this shared commemorative space;

- ◆ Claims by detractors suggesting that Russia does not understand the **tragedy of the Holocaust** are false and do not correspond to the context of friendly Russian–Israeli relations. The memory of the victims of the Holocaust is sacred; the crime committed by the Nazis against the Jewish people is unforgivable; and the lessons of this tragedy have been absorbed by people in Russia regardless of their nationality;
- ◆ Russia’s efforts to **combat antisemitism** also play an important role in this context. The determination with which this fight is pursued in the country is viewed in Israel with due respect and appreciation. And no matter how certain incidents or events are repeatedly highlighted in various *reports on antisemitism in Russia*, what remains decisive is a principle famously expressed by Gleb Zheglov, a character from the well-known series *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed*: “The state of law and order in a country is measured not by the absence of criminals, but by the authorities’ ability to neutralize them.”

To avoid any accusations of idealizing the current state of Russian–Israeli interstate relations, it is probably fair to acknowledge that in recent years, particularly over the past three years, the level of trust, openness, and intensity in bilateral ties has somewhat decreased. At the same time, restraint

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<sup>5</sup> V. Smirnov. Memory of the Great Patriotic War in Israel. The Present Day. RIAC analytical article. 22 April 2025. <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/pamyat-o-velikoy-otechestvennoy-voynе-v-izraile-den-segodnyashniy>.

has become more prominent, which may in fact be a more appropriate approach. In the present situation, when it is far from clear what contours the emerging “new world order” will ultimately take, including in its regional dimension, it is advisable to be guided by a well-known Russian proverb: “keep silence and will be seen as wise.”

This also applies to a factor that should certainly be mentioned—though without overstating its role in shaping contemporary Russian–Israeli relations. This refers to public sentiment. Unlike the responsible approach demonstrated by the authorities of both countries, there is a certain negative trend toward Russia within Israeli public discourse. The following factors can be identified as contributing to this:

- ◆ This tone is largely set either by media, academic, public, and other structures that are oriented toward Western values and have traditionally been unsympathetic toward *Russian* perspectives, or by immigrants from Ukraine and politicians who have reached senior positions, such as former Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein or former co-chair of the Russian–Israeli intergovernmental commission, Minister Ze’ev Elkin<sup>6</sup>;
- ◆ Strongly negative rhetoric is also present in social media statements by figures such as former Israeli ambassador to Russia Alik Milman or former Russian journalist Sergei Auslender, who went so far in his public commentary that he attracted the attention of the Russian Ministry of Justice and was subsequently included in the register of foreign agents<sup>7</sup>. The problem is that the Telegram channel of the latter, titled War with the Horde, which is aggressively hostile toward Russia, has nearly 200,000 subscribers, while the official Russian-language Telegram channel of B. Netanyahu has just over 8,000. The Russian-language Telegram channel of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a little over 50,000 subscribers;
- ◆ It is precisely from these sources that narratives circulate about alleged Russian arms supplies to Hamas and Hezbollah, claims about the training and preparation of terrorist personnel in Russia, assertions regarding

6 One year after the start of the special military operation, an Israeli parliamentary delegation consisting of Y. Edelstein and Z. Elkin visited Ukraine and, among other engagements, met with V. Zelensky. Following talks in Kyiv, these Israeli lawmakers called on the government of B. Netanyahu to “significantly increase” support for Ukraine and described humanitarian assistance as insufficient. “We must assist Ukraine in all areas where Israeli technologies, including military ones, can help protect the civilian population, its freedom and independence,” the Israeli parliamentarians stated. “Israel will significantly increase support for Ukraine – committee chair.” 21 February 2023. <https://mt.smi.today/blog/43316611822>.

7 Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. Register of Foreign Agents. No. 936. Sergei Dmitrievich Auslender. 14 February 2025. <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/pages/reestr-inostryannykh-agentov>.

an expansion of Russia's military cooperation with Iran directed against Israel, and allegations of rising antisemitism in Russia in the context of events in Gaza. The events in Dagestan in October 2023 also provided an opportunity for those inclined toward such speculation to amplify this line of argument within Russia as well.

There is no doubt that, as has always been the case in history, as conflict situations are overcome, public and political ties and sentiments will return to normal. The key is that no actions or decisions should be taken, or consciously instigated or encouraged, that could create insurmountable obstacles to the further development of these relations. There is no doubt that the leadership of both Russia and Israel will fully adhere to this approach.

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Russian–Israeli relations, despite fundamental differences in approaches to the Palestinian settlement and Israel's current military campaign, retain a generally constructive character, supported by historical memory, humanitarian ties, and the pragmatic approach of the political leadership of both countries. At the same time, the intensity of dialogue has declined, and Israeli public sentiment includes a negative trend, amplified by pro-Western media narratives. The key challenge remains the ability of both sides to prevent a slide into a new destructive war in the region and to preserve mutual understanding on issues of regional security, where Russia continues to play a stabilizing role.



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ISBN 978-5-6056578-1-1



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