



The rivalry and cooperation between Israel and Russia in the field of armament industry

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Both, the Russia Federation as well as Israel, are countries with developed armament industry and defence sector. For Israel, which has been dominating the world rankings of arms expenditures per capita for a long time, it is, as its representatives declare, a question of survival in the region where its existence is often perceived by the neighbours with animosity or overt hostility. In the Russian Federation, armament industry, as one of few branches inherited from the Cold War era, has managed to retain its importance with high and still growing share in export and GDP generation.

With the exception of countries like the US and Israel, top weapon and defence system producers don't usually collaborate between each other. On the contrary, their mutual relations may be labelled as competitive and often tense. This holds true also in the case of the Russian Federation and Israel. This was manifested during recent months after the outbreak of the Russian-Georgian conflict over South Ossetia in this year's August, that is to say, Israel was among primary Georgian Army's suppliers **(1)**. In the course of last seven years, it has been supplying to Tbilisi weapons and ammunition, vehicles, anti-tank shells, artillery system electronics, pilotless aircrafts and it has also been training Georgian forces **(2)**. The fact that the large Israeli minority has done business in Georgia and the Georgian Defence Minister Davit Kezerashvili used to study in Israel, was its citizen and speaks fluently Hebrew, has only facilitated this cooperation.



Following the outbreak of the Caucasus conflict, however, concerns were sparked in Israeli political circles **(3)**, in Foreign Affairs Ministry in particular, that this situation could have contributed to the intensification of Russian military support of Syria and other Arab states, mainly Iran. The reason is that Russia has launched negotiations or has already concluded contracts on anti-aircraft defence systems and other equipment with several states in the region during recent months. In 2007, for instance, Saudi Arabia bought from Russia tanks T-90, 150 fighter helicopters Mi-17 and Mi-35 worth 2.2 billion dollars and an anti-medium-range-missile system.

Syria, which backed publicly Russian intervention in South Ossetia as second, straight after Belarus, has also intensified negotiations about the supply of arms and defence systems from the Russian Federation. Moreover, Damask has shown interest in medium-range missiles BUKM1, anti-aircraft missiles type Pancir-S1 and fighter jets. With regard to the August crisis in Caucasus, President Bashar Asad has offered Russia the possibility of deploying GPS guided tactic missiles Iskander with 280 km range, capable of striking any target in Israel, in Syrian territory. Russia hasn't reacted officially to this offer yet. At the end of August, the Defence Minister Sergey Lavrov answered journalists' questions saying: "Russia will sell to Syria only those defence means which won't impinge upon balance in the region." **(4)** Possible deployment of these missiles in Syria and in the Russian province Kaliningrad could be the response to the planned deployment of anti-missile shield in Europe. Meanwhile, in the Syrian harbour Tartus, a former Soviet base from the Cold War era, the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov has anchored. **(5)** Moscow at the same time weighs up the opening of another military base in the coastal town of Latakija near Lebanon. **(6)**



Obviously, Israel isn't very fond of this kind of coming together. According to the President of the Defence and Foreign Affairs Committee of the Israeli Parliament Tzahih Hanegbih "the intensification of Russian-Syrian military collaboration may destabilise the Middle East and encourage Damask to pursue unrealistic and adventurous policy". **(7)** These concerns were the primary reason for the visit of the then Israeli PM Ehud Olmert in Moscow at the beginning of September during which he reminded Dmitry Medvedev about Vladimir Putin's commitment that Russia wouldn't export "offensive" weapons to Syria and Iran in order not to disturb balance of powers in the region. The coming together of Damask and Moscow didn't cater for Olmert, who was hoping that he would redeem the end of his political career, tainted by a corruption affair owing to which he had to give up the post of party chief and the office Prime Minister, by finishing indirect peace talks with Syria. The reason is that it's easier to negotiate with an economically and militarily weak country. Moscow hasn't endorsed all Syrian military orders yet because as the host of the Middle East peace conference, scheduled for November 2008 at first and later postponed to March 2009, it is very particular about not irritating any of parties involved. And that's what Israel stakes on at the moment.

Aside from Russian-Syrian deals, Tel-Aviv has been thoroughly monitoring negotiations between Moscow and Teheran about the sale of Russian anti-aircraft missiles S-300, which are able to shoot down planes, guided missiles and ballistic missiles up to a 150 km distance and 30 km height. As early as last year, Russia supplied to Iran 29 short-range tracked anti-aircraft systems Tor-M1. Israel was worried also by the statement of the Iranian Intelligence and National Security Minister Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Ezhei concerning the intensification of Russian-Iranian collaboration in terms of the fight against terrorism **(8)**. One thing's for sure – the Russians won't let anybody to meddle with or interfere into its weapon export.



The former President Vladimir Putin declared this yet in October 2007: “Any attempts to hobble us by limits, which result from unilateral political evaluations, are unacceptable for us. Russia won’t allow anybody to prevent it from supplying weapons to foreign partners which it chooses itself.” **(9)**

For fear that too enthusiastic involvement of Israel in the Caucasian crisis could encourage Moscow, Tel Aviv suspended the sale of military technology to Georgia as early as this year’s August and at present, it has been exporting officially solely defence, communication and information systems worth 200 million dollars to this country. This restriction was supposed to be realised at the request of Russian political circles, which considered the sale of 40 pilotless planes Hermes 450 to the Government in Tbilisi an open provocation. These manifested it in a very clear way to both sides at the turn of this year’s April and May when Russian fighter jets shot down one of the planes over Georgian territory.

This means that the cooperation between Russia and Israel is under way rather in the spirit of the motto: “if you don’t supply our enemies, we won’t supply your enemies”. That’s why Israel strived to minimise its role in the conflict despite Georgian diplomat’s requests to “exert diplomatic pressure on Moscow” and recommended to the Georgians addressing Washington with similar claims. **(10)**

Besides the financial aspect of arms sale in Georgia, it is US interests that may have led Israel to engage in the region regarded by Moscow as its sphere of influence and priority interest. The goal was to limit this influence risking thus damage to mutual relations with Russia.



Relations between both countries, severed in 1967 and restored in 1987, were intensified after the coming together of Washington and Moscow following the 11 September attacks when Vladimir Putin backed George Bush in the war on terrorism. Israeli-Russian relations were even more strengthened after the Beslan hostage drama in 2004. After it came out that the attack on the South Ossetian basic school (during which more than 300 people lost their lives also thanks to Russian special forces) was contrived by Chechen terrorists and also Muslim Jihadists, the then Israeli PM Ariel Sharon offered Moscow closer cooperation in terms of the fight against Islamic terrorism. **(11)** In April 2006, Russian plane brought to the cosmos an Israeli satellite which enabled Tel Aviv to obtain information about Iranian nuclear program, which Russia was helping to build! In this year's September, the Russian company ISS Reshetnev signed a contract with Israel and the European concern Thales Alenia Space to supply equipment and montage of Israeli telecommunication satellite Amos-5. The average annual volume of direct trade between Israel and the Russian Federation exceeded 2.5 billion dollars in 2007.

Notwithstanding this intensive cooperation, Israeli media say that, for example, Hezbollah won the war on Israel in summer 2006 just because it had access to information from Russian secret services positioned along Syrian-Israeli border. (Yediot Aharonot) Israeli media present the construction of a nuclear power plant in Iranian Bushehr and supposed weapon supplies to Syria and Iran as Moscow's revenge on Tel Aviv for upholding Georgia. In both cases, however, in the centre of attention are long-running processes and negotiations which haven't been covered up in any way and which the other party was informed of. In 2007, at the request of the opposite party, Tel Aviv froze one of the arms supplies to Georgia, and vice versa Moscow froze a supply of Iskander missiles to Syria. For both countries, weapons export is first and foremost an economy affair. Its political implications amount solely



to an externality which they have to take into consideration and which is to be used for achieving global political as well as economic objectives. This is proved also by the September visit of the General Director of the Foreign Affairs Ministry Aaron Abramovich in Moscow and the conclusion of an agreement on the lifting of customs duty between both states which took effect on 20th September, 2009. Moscow hasn't reached such a level of cooperation with any other country of the Middle East.

On the contrary, relations between Moscow and Washington are very tense nowadays. It is to such extent that in connection with the conflict in Caucasus, US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice declared on 18th September that Russia was becoming "isolated" and "internationally irrelevant". **(12)** This polarisation, the most significant one since the end of the Cold War, was yet deepened by the conclusion of agreements on the construction of an anti-missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. Due to dissensions concerning the status of South Ossetia, Moscow has suspended its participation in the program Partnership for Peace and joint peace operations with NATO for half a year. Washington tries to push through Georgian and Ukrainian membership of the alliance yet more emphatically. Furthermore, Ukraine plans to increase anchorage charges for Russian Black Sea fleet in Crimea, from which the Russians will have to withdraw in May 2017 after the expiration of a 20 year contract. The announced reconstruction of an old Soviet base in Syria and a naval exercise in Venezuelan waters amount to a logical step and political foresight and, last but not least, a response to the cancellation of several meetings on G8 level by US administration as well as the backing out of the so-called Treaty on Nuclear Cooperation between the West and Russia. On the basis of this treaty, a processing centre for burnt nuclear fuel from US reactors was to be built. Thus Moscow will forfeit several billion dollars per annum. The US has become too much involved in Russian sphere of influence and Russia responded to it in an analogous style by



sending its bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, to the Caribbean, which is a delicate zone for Washington.

On 25th September, Moscow's absence blocked the meeting of the foreign affairs ministers of six countries, namely the US, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China, on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, the termination of North Korean nuclear program and sanctions on Iran – just at the moment when North Korea announced that it would restore the dismantled reactor in Yongbyon. Moreover, Moscow has blocked the entry of further observers from Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe to South Ossetia and it also leaves the question of the future UN observer missions in Abkhazia open. This endangers peace agreements negotiated by the European Union. The Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov commented as following: “The West cannot have everything. It isn't conceivable to punish Russia and require cooperation from it concurrently.” **(13)** Nonetheless, Russia voted for the prolongation of the mandate of international forces in Afghanistan on 22nd September. Moscow's policy becomes thus less readable and less predictable and reminds of a complicated chess game in which both players try to deploy their figures strategically with respect to the move of opponent's figures, but without any prospect of beating the rival soon. No big conflict threatens probably, however, we may assume that till the end of year, the Russians won't give or forgive George Bush's administration anything. As for possible cooperation or helpfulness, they have more than one string to their bow in case of negotiations with the new administration. The same holds true for Israel. Moscow is sure to wait till Israeli political scene stabilises. It means it will wait whether the former Foreign Affairs Minister Tzipi Livin will manage to confirm her position of the leader of the strongest political party Kadima and to obtain enough support among other political subjects, which seems uncertain today. Russia can only profit from wait-and-see attitude and



unpredictable diplomacy at present and Moscow seems to be pretty aware of it. Armament industry as well as defence sector, however, is thus much crucial for Russia that it will let nobody meddle with its trades, like any other country producing and exporting weapons would do in fact. And that's the reason why Israel will weigh up its involvement in conflicts within Russian sphere of influence more carefully also in the future.

Notes:

(1) Apart from Israel, also the US, Germany, France and the Czech Republic supply weapons to Georgia.

(2) According to the statements of the Russian Deputy Chief of General Staff General Anatoly Nogovitsyn at a press conference held on 19th August, 2008. RIA-Novosti, <http://en.rian.ru>.

(3) Haaretz, 10th August, 2008. <http://haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1009928.html>.

(4) RIA Novosti, 20th August, 2008. <http://en.rian.ru>.

(5) Newsru.com, 21st August, 2008.

(6) Times, 22nd August, 2008.

(7) Henry, M.: Le raidissement russe inquiete Israel. Le Figaro, 22nd August, 2008. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2008/08/23/01003-20080823ARTFIG00055-le-raidis...>

(8) L'Iran et la Russie intensifient leur coopération dans la lutte contre le terrorisme. RIA Novosti, 6th September, 2008. <http://www.campaigniran.org/casmii/index.php?q=node/6253>.

(9) RIA-Novosti, 31st October, 2007. <http://en.rian.ru>.

(10) The Jerusalem Post, 11th August, 2008

(11) Hines, M.: Eschatologie: Gog change-t-il de camp? La Russie et Israel font cause commune contre l'islamisme. Voxdei.org, 6th September, 2004.



(12) Labott, E.: Rice: Russia becoming isolated, irrelevant. CNNPolitics.com, 19th September, 2008. <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/09/18/rice.russia/index.html>.

(13) Bolopion, P., Nougayrede, N.: Les Occidentaux confrontés a la diplomatie russe du „niet“ dans les instances internationales. LeMonde, 26th September, 2008. http://www.lemonde.fr/web/imprimer_element/0,40-0@2-3214,50-1099410,0.html.