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## Israel's Immigrant Parties: An Inefficient Russia Lobby

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Olena Bagno,  
Zvi Magen

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## Summary

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Since 2009 the influence of immigrant party Israel Beiteinu on foreign and security policy in Israel has grown. The party won 15 seats in the 2009 parliamentary elections and its leader, Avigdor Lieberman, became the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Politicians with Russian origins have a certain impact on the security and foreign policy agenda but their influence is limited and their immigrant origin constitutes an obstacle. They are more successful in pressing forward domestic policies related to their constituency than pushing Russia as a priority for Israeli diplomacy. The Kremlin partially supports the initiatives of Israeli immigrant politicians, but Moscow realizes the limits of their influence. The foreign policy of Israel is only marginally shaped by Lieberman and immigrant politicians and remains highly dependent on the agenda advanced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

## Introduction

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Addressing the 65<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2010 and speaking about the peace talks initiated by the United States, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman stated that: "The guiding principle for a final status agreement must not be land-for-peace but rather, exchange of populated territory."<sup>1</sup> A day later, he issued a clarification—saying the plan was his "personal view" and did not reflect the official position of the Israeli government, in which he is a key coalition partner. The Prime Minister's office reacted by stating that "Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu is the one who handles the diplomatic negotiations."<sup>2</sup> However, Lieberman's speech was directed primarily at the Israeli electorate rather than the international community. He aims to strengthen his position in future elections where he intends to position himself as a hardliner, resembling Ariel Sharon.<sup>3</sup> The reaction of the Prime Minister's office also suggests that the Foreign Minister is a marginal actor when important foreign policy and security issues are negotiated.

Reacting to the speech, former US President Bill Clinton said that Russian immigrants in Israel have emerged as a central obstacle to achieving a peace deal. He cited his conversation with Israeli politician Nathan Sharansky saying that "Russian immigrants are among the people in Israel that are least interested in reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians... and that the people who are most opposed to dividing the land are the settlers and the Russians."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. Lieberman, "Speech at the UN General Assembly," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 September 2010, <[www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2010/FM\\_Lieberman\\_Addresses\\_UN\\_General\\_Assembly\\_28-Sep-2010.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2010/FM_Lieberman_Addresses_UN_General_Assembly_28-Sep-2010.htm)>.

<sup>2</sup> "Netanyahu Says Lieberman U.N. Speech Doesn't Reflect Israel View on Peace Talks," AFP Global Edition, 28 September 2010, <<http://inform.com/politics/lieberman-speech-doesnt-reflect-israel-view-talks-pm-1575546a>>.

<sup>3</sup> Lieberman wants to position himself as a leader of the right. In future national elections his party is likely to strengthen the "national" component of its political agenda while employing different electoral strategies toward the Russian-speaking and the right-wing electorates.

<sup>4</sup> Clinton also voiced fears that the Israeli Defense Forces, which increasingly consists of soldiers from this community, might not be fully willing to oppose Israeli settlers. See J. Rogin, "Bill Clinton: Russian Immigrants and Settlers Obstacles to Mideast Peace," *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2010.

These two declarations highlight the growing power of immigrant politicians from the former Soviet Union (FSU) in Israel's domestic policy and foreign relations. Theoretically this enables Russia to enter Israel's political and economic spheres. It is therefore worth analyzing the way Israelis from the FSU influence Israel's foreign policy and more particularly the bilateral relations between Moscow and Tel Aviv.

In this article we argue that the increasing weight of former Soviet immigrants—though incontestable—has not yet resulted in tangible accomplishments in relations between Russia and Israel. Indeed, immigrant politicians do not possess enough political weight to advance an agenda making Russia a foreign policy priority. The Kremlin is interested in entering the Israeli political arena and partially supports the initiatives of the Israeli immigrant politicians, especially in the economic sphere. However, Moscow realizes the limits of its influence, the weakness of immigrant politicians in setting foreign policy agenda as well as the ideological differences between the position of immigrant politicians and Russia's official "balanced" position regarding the Peace Process and the non-state actors like Hezbollah or Hamas.



# Immigrant Parties in Domestic Decision-Making

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## *The unique case of immigrants' political incorporation in Israel*

In terms of ethnic immigrants' political assimilation, Israel is a unique case among democracies due to the combination of two factors. Firstly, the Law of Return grants automatic citizenship to ethnic immigrants and its electoral system allows and encourages the creation of immigrant political parties. Secondly, nationwide proportional representation by party list with an electoral threshold of two percent allows minority representatives access to national politics.

There are relatively few democracies that unconditionally grant political citizenship rights to ethnic immigrants (e.g., Croatia, Romania, Germany, Latvia, Poland<sup>5</sup>). In contrast to other immigrant societies, Israel provides immediate access to citizenship to all newcomers entering the country under the regulations of the Law of Return.<sup>6</sup> This act, apart from having practical meaning, symbolizes the tie between the host state and its ethnic immigrants. Moreover, a unique political opportunity structure allows immigrants to create their own parties that immediately enter the national level politics.<sup>7</sup>

Political parties formed by immigrants from the FSU in the mid 1990s continued a long tradition of immigrant political organizations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Database of the European Union Democracy Observatory on Citizenship <[http://eudo-citizenship.eu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=190&Itemid=33&search=1&country=Croatia&idmode=&page=2](http://eudo-citizenship.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=190&Itemid=33&search=1&country=Croatia&idmode=&page=2)>.

<sup>6</sup> Under the Law of Return (1950), Jews, people of Jewish descent and certain categories of convert can immigrate to Israel and are entitled to citizenship.

<sup>7</sup> Israel allows for dual citizenship, thus immigrants from Russia can retain their previous citizenship. However, several FSU republics do not allow dual citizenship (e.g. Ukraine) and immigrants from these republics have to renounce their previous citizenship during the process of immigration.

<sup>8</sup> Even before the establishment of the state, immigrants formed ethnic political parties in the Assembly of Representatives (e.g. migrants from Eastern Europe formed the New Aliyah Party, migrants from Yemen organized in the Yemenite Association). From the 1960s to the late 1970s, ethnic parties had no electoral success. A manifestly ethnic party, Sha's—a Sephardic-Haredi party—appeared in

In 1996, an ethnic parliamentary group, Geshet—National Social Movement was formed, it later joined the right-wing Likud party. From 1996-2003, a new immigrant party, Israel-be-Aliyah (IBA) headed by Natan Sharansky was present in the Knesset. IBA was gradually superseded by Israel Beiteinu (IB) headed by Avigdor Lieberman.<sup>9</sup> Some immigrant parties eventually dissolved into all-national lists (The Democratic Choice, Aliyah, IBA) while others (Shas and IB) have remained independent political bodies.

A number of distinct features have made parties of immigrants from the FSU into a durable, long-lasting phenomenon in Israeli politics. First, immigrants from the FSU constitute around 16 percent of the population, in terms of electoral strength this translates into around 20 parliamentary seats.<sup>10</sup> Second, most FSU immigrants entered the country in a relatively short period of time (1991-1996), while immigration from other countries (e.g. France, US, Canada, Ethiopia) is spread over the decades.<sup>11</sup> Third, FSU immigrants possess rich social capital that provides additional incentives for independently entering politics. They maintain a developed structure of media resources in Russian (various internet portals, a TV channel, private and public radio stations, local newspapers in Russian); a wide network of state-supported cultural and educational institutions created and managed by immigrants; and a wide network of NGOs willing to support initiatives by immigrant politicians.<sup>12</sup> The constellation of these factors explains the endurance of “Russian-speaking” political sector, and the absence of similar sectors among other groups of immigrants.

## ***Major “Russian” Immigrant Parties***

The emergence of “Russian” immigrant parties was precipitated by the Zionist Forum—an organization created in 1988 and disintegrated

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1984, it won three seats in the Eleventh Knesset. Sha’s is the only ethnic party to survive more than 25 years in the Israeli political arena. Changes in political culture and the switch from the “melting pot” principle to the idea of multiculturalism meant that the Israeli Knesset in the 1990s witnessed the largest number of ethnic-immigrant parties and parliamentary groups ever.

<sup>9</sup> For details see O. Bagno, “The Price of Fear” in M. Shamir and A. Arian (eds.), *Elections in Israel—2009*, New Jersey, Transaction Publishers, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> The Knesset comprises 120 members. Other groups of immigrants (from France, North America, South America or Ethiopia) are minuscule (less than 1% of the population) compared to the Russian-speaking migrants.

<sup>11</sup> The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was marked by waves of migration from the USSR and its successor states. The long list of destinations that absorbed immigrants of Jewish descent from the FSU is headed by Israel with its one million migrants who started arriving in 1989. For the next five years (1990-1994), monthly immigration flows increased exponentially. The inflow of immigrants grew from 1500 in October 1989 to 35,000 in December 1990. Since 1992, the annual immigration rate never crossed the 100,000 point, but it took ten years for the rate to drop below the 50,000 point.

<sup>12</sup> O. Bagno, “The Invasion of Neo-Khazars or the Arrival of Democratic Man?” (Doctoral dissertation). Tel Aviv University, Israel, 2010.

in 2001. The committee of the Forum comprised 105 members; among them were Yuri Stern, Ida Nudel and Avigdor Lieberman. Initially, the Forum was presented as an apolitical body named by its founders as a "Ministry of Aliyah," an alternative to the Absorption Ministry, which had difficulties adequately integrating immigrants into the Israeli labor market. The forum, led by Natan Sharansky, served as the basis for the creation of the IBA political party.

All through its existence, IBA positioned itself as the party to address the backlog of social and economic problems faced by immigrants. In 1996 and 1999, the party enjoyed broad support, converted to seven seats in the Fourteenth Knesset and six in the Fifteenth.<sup>13</sup> By the 2003 elections, its supporters had abandoned it; IBA obtained only two seats in the sixteenth Knesset and dissolved within Likud.

While IBA was a minority party, Israel Beitenu—throughout its electoral history, and in particular in 2009—positioned itself as a national party, representing broad rather than minority interests and using ethnic appeals only as a tool for mobilization. Avigdor Lieberman, Michael Nudelman and Yuri Stern organized IB for the 1999 elections, winning votes from IBA among the nationalist and security oriented electorate. In 2000 the party joined the National Union, an alliance of right-wing religious parties. In the 2003 elections the joint list won seven seats, with IB gaining four of them. The success of anti-clerical party Shinui among the immigrant secular right electorate in 2003 and its subsequent disintegration created a large group of voters who could not have been targeted by IB as part of an alliance with the National Union that had a clearly religious orientation. In 2006, IB split with the National Union and gained seven more seats from immigrants in 2006. These could have been secular voters who left Shinui and those who planned to vote for Kadima under the leadership of Ariel Sharon.<sup>14</sup> The party continued with its catch-all strategies in 2009 and managed to add another four mandates in the Eighteenth Knesset. In the Eighteenth Knesset there are 16 representatives of the Russian-speaking community.<sup>15</sup> The eight Russian-speaking MKs on the IB list were supported by more than 56 percent of the Russian-speaking immigrant electorate

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<sup>13</sup> In 1992, Israel adopted a system of direct election of the Prime Minister. Introduction of this reform can partially explain the rise of small parties, IBA and IB (in 1999) among them. The Prime Minister was directly elected separately from the Knesset in 1996, 1999 and 2001. The direct election of the Prime Minister was abandoned after the 2001 election, because it led to further fragmentation of the parliament.

<sup>14</sup> M. Shami, R. Ventura, A. Arian and O. Kedar, "Kadima Forward in a Dealigned Party System?" in A. Arian and M. Shamir (eds.), *The Elections in Israel 2006*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 2008, p. 15-45.

<sup>15</sup> They constitute more than 50% of the Israel Beiteinu representatives in the Eighteenth Knesset (75% in 2006); and respectively 14, 7 and 18% of representatives in Kadima, Likud and Sha's. Source: <<http://izrus.co.il/obshina/article/2010-10-03/11934.html>> (in Russian).

(among IB voters in 2009 more than 64 percent were FSU immigrants). The party has a liberal economic platform and a hawkish stance the political processes between Israel and its Palestinian and Arab neighbors. The party's composite political image—integrating both immigrant and national elements—allowed its leader, Avigdor Lieberman to occupy the Ministry of Foreign Affairs opening the way to limited influence on Israel's foreign and security policy.

The Israeli political system gives immigrant politicians considerable potential for political influence. Their presence is visible in domestic politics, but until recently it was much less obvious in the international arena, where their "Russian" immigrant status constitutes an obstacle. However, Lieberman's international activity and growing domestic importance are likely to translate into influence upon foreign policy. This is because Israel's foreign and security policies are strongly influenced by domestic political considerations and the ideological stances of members of the coalition governments. Henry Kissinger's famous adage still holds true: "Israel has no foreign policy, only a domestic political system."

# The Role of FSU Immigrants in Setting Israel's Foreign Policy

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## *Political agenda of immigrant parties*

In 1992 when the idea of creating a political party on the basis of the Zionist Forum appeared for the first time, immigrants lacked administrative and financial resources for this enterprise. Four years later in 1996 Israel-be-Aliyah won seven seats in the national elections and adopted a centrist though somewhat vague political stance. It supported the Peace Process and simultaneously the right of the Jewish people for the land of Israel; it also declared neutrality with regard to the elections of the Prime Minister. IBA was characterized by lack of ideological clarity, it focused mostly on immigrant issues and employed Russian as the official language of its electoral campaigns. Restricting its focus to immigrants from the FSU and concentrating on immigrant issues at the expense of all-national topics resulted in gradual loss of relevance and ultimately disintegration of the party.<sup>16</sup> IB adopted a different strategy which added to its longevity by attracting both immigrant and non-immigrant public and making the political platform of the party relevant to the general public.

The political campaigns of IB in 2006 and 2009 focused on issues related to Israeli domestic and foreign policy rather than on sectarian or ethnic policy issues such as lobbying Russia's national interests. This narrow focus, typical for ethnic parties, was absent in the IB campaigns.<sup>17</sup> There were three major political messages produced by the party in 2009: "Lieberman—I trust him," "no citizenship without loyalty," and "only Lieberman understands Arabic."

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Nudelman and Yuri Stern left IBA after 1996 created Aliah and entered Ihud Leumi (Fifteenth and Sixteenth Knesset), Roman Bronfman left IBA after 1999 and joined Meretz-Yahad—Democratic Choice bloc. The most devoted members of IBA, Marina Solodkina and Yuli Edelshtein, joined Likud after the 2003 elections, when Sharansky became the minister for Jerusalem Affairs and ceded his place to Solodkina in 2003. In 2006, Solodkina joined Kadima and remained in the Knesset. In the Sixteenth Knesset there was no consolidated party representing FSU immigrants, while in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Knesset IB received 11 and 15 seats respectively, about 2/3 of them from recent FSU immigrants.

<sup>17</sup> O. Bagno, "The Price of Fear," *op. cit.* [9].

In October 2010, Lieberman brought an amendment to the Citizenship Law—on allegiance to Israel—to the Cabinet, stating that "clearly this will not be the final word on loyalty and citizenship, but it's an important step."<sup>18</sup> Thus in 2010, the IB leader continues to position his party as a national party with "security" concerns and avoids messages that would explicitly bind it to an immigrant sector or present it as a party with a narrow sectarian agenda.

In contrast to all-national parties, representatives of immigrants have never refused to enter coalition governments and their leaders have been consistently given ministerial positions of varying importance. In the last fifteen years representatives of immigrant parties have headed the Ministry of Absorption, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Industry and Trade, Ministry of Housing and Construction, Ministry of National Infrastructure, Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Tourism.<sup>19</sup> Immigrant representatives also served as deputy ministers of Absorption and Internal Affairs and as Chairs of Financial Committee and Committee for Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs.

The two immigrant parties (IBA and IB) adopted different strategies of behavior in the Coalition governments. IBA was always a stable coalition partner and never resigned from the coalition when the government adopted foreign policy moves that diverged from the declared political views of party members. In contrast, IB has left coalitions several times when the government made steps to advance the Peace Process. The elections of 2006 and 2009 showed that the role of IB in Israeli politics has been growing.

On the other hand, the influence of immigrant politicians in setting the foreign and security policy agenda is less significant than that of their non-immigrant counterparts.<sup>20</sup> There may be a number of

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<sup>18</sup> R. Medzini, "Barak Withdraws Support for Loyalty Oath Bill," Ynetnews, 10 October 2010, <[www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3966999,00.html](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3966999,00.html)>. The cabinet approved a bill requiring new non-Jewish citizens to swear an oath of allegiance to Israel as a "Jewish and democratic state." This controversial amendment discriminates against new non-Jewish citizens (primarily Palestinian Arabs that claim Israeli citizenship by marriage). Netanyahu backed the bill in exchange for support from rightwing parties within his coalition government to extend the freeze on settlement construction. This amendment has mostly symbolic, rather than practical meaning, but it reflects the increasing nationalist tendencies in the general public.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Absorption (Yuli Edelshtein, IBA, 1996-1999; Sofa Landver, IB, 2009-present), Ministry of Internal Affairs (Sharansky, IBA, 1999-2000), Ministry of Industry and Trade, Ministry of Housing and Construction (Sharansky, IBA, respectively in 1996-1999 and in 2001-2003); Ministry of National Infrastructure, Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (headed by Lieberman in 2001-2010); Ministry of Tourism (Stas Misezhnikov IB, from 2009-present)

<sup>20</sup> Here we differentiate between the immigrant politicians (Members of Knesset) and their leaders, Sharansky and Lieberman.

reasons for this. Immigrant politicians have to take into account the advancement of interests of a Russian-speaking sector, which has numerous internal economic and social problems. They have never been a part of the military elite, which is a crucial characteristic for Israeli politicians who are dealing with the foreign or security affairs.<sup>21</sup> They are often accused of having insufficient understanding and/or knowledge of the country's history, especially pre-1967. Active involvement in foreign and security affairs can also be hampered by socialization to a Soviet-conformist political culture and lack of experience in policy-making within a democratic political reality.

### ***The key immigrant political players***

Both immigrant and non-immigrant politicians agree that leaders with an immigrant background can influence security and foreign policy in Israel only if they act within the framework of sectarian parties. If they join all-national parties, the road to positions that shape foreign policy and security agenda is blocked for them. Natan Sharansky and Avigdor Lieberman have emerged as the two most influential immigrant politicians. They occupied important government positions having a certain impact on foreign and security policy.

In the USSR, Sharansky was a human rights activist and spokesperson for the Moscow Helsinki Group; he was a "prisoner of Zion" who emigrated to Israel in 1986, and was later elected to the Knesset three times. He served as the Deputy Prime Minister in the government formed by Ariel Sharon in 2001-2003, as Minister of Industry and Trade, Minister of Internal Affairs, Minister of Housing and Construction and Minister of Jerusalem Affairs. Sharansky and his supporters believe that his political vision of democratization of the Arab states influenced the neo-conservative policies of US President George W. Bush in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup>

Sharansky's ideas were much less popular in Israel than in Washington, and he never managed to shake the image of an immigrant "Russian" politician. His influence on Israeli foreign policy toward Russia was minute because a) he personally did not prioritize this area; b) Israeli political elites did not view Russia as an important partner for Israel; c) he did not have enough political power to influence foreign policy issues. Sharansky gradually lost the support

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Y. Peri, *Between Battles and Ballots: Israeli Military in Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983; or U. Klein, "The Gender Perspective of Civil-Military Relations in Israeli Society," *Current Sociology*, No. 50, 2002, p. 669-688.

<sup>22</sup> I. Shumilina, *Kulturno-ideologicheskii aspekt blizhnevostochnoy politiki administratsii G.Busha ml.*, [Cultural and Ideological Aspects of Middle Eastern Politics in the Administration of George W. Bush], Institute for US and Canadian Studies (doctoral dissertation in Russian), Moscow, 2008.

of the immigrant electorate and left the political scene in favor of an academic career; in 2009 he was appointed to the chairman of the Jewish Agency.

Lieberman, who—unlike Sharansky—spent all his political life in Israel,<sup>23</sup> is considered a "Russian" politician for three reasons, namely his popularity among immigrants; his nationalistic, "Soviet" totalitarian approach to the solution of the conflict and to Israeli Arabs; and his political and business activity in the post-Soviet space. Lieberman's image as a "Russian" politician is usually evoked by his opponents to discredit his approach to foreign policy. He has been Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2009, also serving as Deputy Prime Minister. In the past he was appointed a Minister of Transportation, Minister of National Infrastructure and Minister of Strategic Affairs. In 2004, Lieberman was removed from the cabinet of Ariel Sharon due to his opposition to the disengagement plan. In 2007, he left the government of Ehud Olmert in opposition of the Annapolis Conference.<sup>24</sup>

As Foreign Minister, Lieberman has been less welcome in Washington than in Moscow. His first visit to the US was made in June 2009 after he visited Moscow where he met with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, President Dmitri Medvedev, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov; in Washington Lieberman met with the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton but was not introduced to the President. In most EU states he has not been welcomed warmly due to his radical views and limited power within the Israeli political elite. However, his visits to the FSU states and in particular to Russia have been frequent.<sup>25</sup> In 2009-2010 Lieberman visited Russia, Moldova, Belorussia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Lithuania and met with his Turkmen and Uzbek counterparts.

During his visits to the FSU states, Lieberman advanced the ideas of close economic cooperation in the spheres of agriculture, technology (telecommunications, IT, nanotechnology and biotechnology) and tourism. In Azerbaijan he talked of strategic partnership and technological and military cooperation. At a conference attended by Sergey Mironov, Chairman of the Council of Federation of the Russian Federal Assembly, Lieberman returned to

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<sup>23</sup> The Liebermans immigrated to Israel in 1978 from Moldova (former MSSR) when Avigdor was twenty years old. He attended the Hebrew University of Jerusalem where he shared a class with Tzachi Hanegbi, who got him interested in a political career. Lieberman joined a student club called "Kastel," which was associated with Likud, and began to actively take part in on-campus political activities.

<sup>24</sup> The Middle East peace conference that articulated for the first time a two-state solution as the mutually agreed-upon outline for addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

<sup>25</sup> In December 2009-January 2010 alone there were eight visits of high-ranking Russian officials to Israel (among them the Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, Nikolai Patrushev and the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council of Russia, Mikhail Margelov).



the idea that strategic relations between Russia and Israel ought to enter a new qualitative stage.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, while meeting with Georgian Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure, Ramaz Nikolaishvili in August 2010, Lieberman stated that "with consideration of the sensitivity of the situation in the Middle East and Caucasus the military cooperation isn't in the agenda of bilateral relations."<sup>27</sup> This statement may be viewed as a part of a complex multi-stage bargain between Tel Aviv and Moscow. Indeed, in September that year Defense Minister Ehud Barak signed a Military cooperation agreement with his Russian counterpart Anatoly Serdyukov and in October Moscow announced that it would not sell Iran S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems. Overall, the deal was worth over a billion US dollars.<sup>28</sup>

However, Lieberman's relations with Russia are not as close as he may want to present. In 2009, he repeatedly stated that "Russia has a special influence in the Muslim world," and that he considers it "a strategic partner that should play a key role in the Middle East."<sup>29</sup> In an interview to Russian press he stated that "Israel has insufficient appreciation for the 'Kremlin factor'" and that he intends "to mend this gap."<sup>30</sup> By 2010, a year and a half after this declaration there have been almost no practical developments in this area.<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, during his visit to Israel in June 2010, Sergei Lavrov reconfirmed Russia's support for engaging Hamas in any future negotiations on Palestine and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Overall, then, Moscow is cautious and its relations with Israel have not become qualitatively closer in the last two years, despite Lieberman's "Russian" origins. There may be a variety of reasons for this. One is that Russia continues to view Israel as a tool for advancing its interests with the US. The influence of Israel's "Russian" politicians in Washington is narrow, making them less attractive for Moscow.

In addition to politicians, it is worth wondering whether the Russian "oligarchs" who immigrated to Israel or have Israeli citizenship exert some kind of leverage on Israeli politics. Indeed, they are often

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<sup>26</sup> Speech delivered at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), 7 November 2010.

<sup>27</sup> In 2008 Moscow was highly critical of Israeli military cooperation with Georgia, since then Israel halted weapons sales to that country and constantly tries to downplay the issue. See "Cooperation between Israel, Georgia in Military Sphere is Out of Agenda," *News.az*, 19 August 2010, <[www.news.az/articles/21273](http://www.news.az/articles/21273)>.

<sup>28</sup> <[www.strategypage.com/htm/htmurph/articles/20101011.aspx](http://www.strategypage.com/htm/htmurph/articles/20101011.aspx)>.

<sup>29</sup> L. Galili and B. Ravid, "Lieberman: US Will Accept Any Israeli Policy Decision," *Haaretz*, 23 April 2009. Source: <[www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/lieberman-u-s-will-accept-any-israeli-policy-decision-1.274559](http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/lieberman-u-s-will-accept-any-israeli-policy-decision-1.274559)>.

<sup>30</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>31</sup> Aside from semi-official media events and round tables organized between Russian and Israeli officials on the level of parliamentary commissions and delegations. These delegations did not include key political leaders and did not have any influence on Israel's foreign and security policy.

suspected of attempting to influence the local political scene either directly or indirectly. Arkady Gaydamak established the Social Justice party and unsuccessfully ran for Mayor of Jerusalem in November 2008.<sup>32</sup> Indirect attempts to garner influence include Michael Cherny and Vadim Rabinovich who allegedly provide financial support for Avigdor Lieberman, his inner circle and his party. Their actual political influence cannot be objectively assessed and it seems to be exaggerated especially in the Russian immigrant press. There are no objective indicators that the Russian oligarchs of Jewish origin have notable impact on Israeli foreign policy.

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<sup>32</sup> In October 2010, Gaydamak returned to Israel from Moscow to take part in his trial for money laundering and financial fraud.

## FSU Immigrants and Russian-Israeli Bilateral Relations

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The literature on immigrant politics in host countries focuses on the triangular relations formed by immigrants, source country and host country. Thus, much has been written on the influence of ethnic lobbies on international politics,<sup>33</sup> but the case of FSU immigrants in Israel is unique. Due to their ethnic belonging to the host (Israel) rather than source (Russia/FSU) country, they have little incentive to lobby Russian political interests in Israel. On the contrary, in May 2010 Lieberman criticized Russia for supplying warplanes to Syria; in addition, during a visit to the US in September 2010, Anatoly Serdyukov confirmed that Russia will sell P-800 Yakhont cruise missiles to Syria. Sergey Lavrov's last visit to Israel in June 2010 showed that neither Russian nor Israeli positions on negotiating with Hamas or on the Arab Peace Initiative have changed since Lieberman became Israeli Foreign Minister.<sup>34</sup> The positions remain very different and Lieberman's Soviet background does not make him more lenient to Russia in the issues pertaining to the Israeli security. The two countries have divergent visions of the Middle East, the Peace Process and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and immigrant politicians completely side with the stance of Israel.

Until recently Russia showed little interest in FSU immigrants; however, the situation has changed with Russia starting to invest in building ties with the Russian speaking Diaspora worldwide. In Israel this interest was reinforced by a notable political comeback of the IB party, starting in 2006 and continuing in 2009. As a result the involvement of immigrant politicians in various official and semi-official bilateral structures (exchange of delegations at the level of governmental commissions, business forums, etc.) intensified cultural and business communication between the countries. However, this has left a relatively weak imprint in the sphere of security and foreign policy.

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<sup>33</sup> Y. Shain, *Kinship and Diasporas in International Politics*, Ann Arbor, Michigan University Press, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> "Lavrov: Rossiya prodolzhit kontakty s Hamas," [Lavrov: Russia will continue its talks with Hamas], 29 June 2010, <<http://rus.ruvr.ru/2010/06/29/10966174.html>>.

## The Russian perspective

In the years of the Putin administration, Russia's position regarding Israel vacillated, depending on the political currents. Analysts echoed by governmental officials suggest that Moscow has recently adopted a holistic approach towards the Middle East.<sup>35</sup> Friendship shown towards Islamic people is combined with good Russian-Israeli relations. The latter exemplify Moscow's strategies to advance multipolarity and, via UN-backed diplomatic action, reduce the US hegemonic influence on Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Moscow's policies in the Middle East derive from its three general foreign policy objectives: multipolarity (rebalancing global processes), regional security, and economic interests. These often interact in policies towards particular regional political actors, when no single underlying foreign policy motive can be identified (e.g., vis-à-vis Iran).

*Multipolarity.* In general, the Middle East serves as an arena for balancing US political clout to secure Russia's international standing.<sup>36</sup> Russia benefits from its role as facilitator without being held responsible for any outcome. Russia also lacks the logistical means to assume the leading position in the region.<sup>37</sup> For example, it rules out a peacekeeping role in Afghanistan or Iraq as costly and potentially harmful to its image in the Arab world and chooses to capitalize on broadly advertised—though hardly visible on the ground—humanitarian assistance.<sup>38</sup>

With regard to the *regional security* objective, a presence in the Middle East fosters conditions for stability inside Russia. Military or social tensions in Middle Eastern countries provoked by the presence of foreign militaries, civil wars, acts of terrorism, or political destabilization are apt to cause a chain reaction. Any spillover

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<sup>35</sup> E. Stepanova, "Russia's Middle East Policy: Old Divisions or New?", *PONARS Policy Memo*, No. 429, Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow, December 2006, <[http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/pm\\_0429.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/pm_0429.pdf)>; Foreign Minister Lavrov's press conference, 2 March 2009; Address by Russian ambassador to Israel, Peter Stegny at Tel Aviv University, 11 March 2009.

<sup>36</sup> R. Dannreuther, "Russia and the Middle East: Towards a New Cold War?" ISA Conference, New York, 15-18 February 2009.

<sup>37</sup> E. Margolis, "Russia: Big Threat or Paper Bear," 24 March 2009, <[www.lewrockwell.com/margolis/margolis142.html](http://www.lewrockwell.com/margolis/margolis142.html)>.

<sup>38</sup> During the Lebanon war of 2006, Russia sent four jets with humanitarian cargo and teams of medics. After Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2008-2009, the Russian ambassador to Israel emphasized the importance of his country's humanitarian involvement, previously mentioned in Medvedev's address. The idea was to send two jets with humanitarian cargo to Gaza and donate to the PA fifty armored personnel carriers and two civil helicopters. The former were sent to Jordan for use by Palestinian Authority security forces.

threatens security in Russia, as it lacks the “defense perimeter installations which used to defend former Soviet borders.”<sup>39</sup>

Russia advances its *economic interests* via cooperation with Arab states. This effort has been redoubled following a setback caused by the military and political dominance of the US in the 1990s. Russia acts to enhance the volume of its bilateral trade with Arab countries, which constitutes an important market for its military industry.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, it is careful about providing state-of-the-art weaponry that can affect the fragile security balance in the region.<sup>41</sup> For example, in September 2010 President Medvedev signed a decree that prohibits “the transit across Russia, including by air, the removal from Russia to Iran, and the transfer to Iran outside Russia of any combat tanks, armored personnel carriers, large-caliber artillery systems, warplanes, attack helicopters, military vessels, missiles or missile systems as defined by the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms, S-300 surface-to-air missile systems, or materiel and spare parts used for all of the above.”<sup>42</sup>

Russia is interested in innovative military technologies that Israel could supply. For example, in October 2010, Israel Aerospace Industries has signed a 400 million US dollar contract to sell unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Russia's OPK Oboronprom. Overall military cooperation with Israel receives a lower profile in Moscow compared to economic cooperation.<sup>43</sup>

In short, Russia's political establishment is eager to play a more important role in mediating and co-sponsoring the Arab-Israeli conflict resolution process. This is viewed as a low cost tool for boosting Russia's international standing.<sup>44</sup> However, Russian-speaking Israeli politicians are not viewed as counterparts able and

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<sup>39</sup> A. Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* Westport, Praeger, 2007, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Z. Magen, Y. Sapir, O. Bagno-Moldavski, “Russian Arms Exports to the Middle East: A Means or an End?” INSS, 2010, <[www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1283415051.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1283415051.pdf)>.

<sup>41</sup> A. Kreutz, “Syria: Russia's Best Asset in the Middle East,” *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 55, November 2010, <[www.ifri.org/downloads/kreuzengrussiasyrianov2010.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/downloads/kreuzengrussiasyrianov2010.pdf)>.

<sup>42</sup> Ukaz Prezidenta Rossijskoy Federatsii “O merah po vypolneniyu rezolyutsii Soveta Bezopasnosti OON 1929 ot 9 iuniya 2010 g.” [Executive Order On Measures to Implement UN Security Council Resolution 1929 on Iran, adopted on June 9, 2010], 22 Septembre 2010, No. 1154, <<http://graph.document.kremlin.ru/page.aspx?1;1298288>>.

<sup>43</sup> For example, in May 2009 Russia halted a contract to supply of eight MiG-31E—an export model of the MiG-31 (NATO classification: Foxhound-A). Some suggest this resulted from Israeli pressure, others believe that Damascus did not have the money to pay for the project and Russia's ever pragmatic government did not want to further increase the debts Syria already owes it. The planes were apparently intended to serve Syria in intelligence missions. The deal is currently suspended, its future is unclear.

<sup>44</sup> Z. Magen, “Israel and Russian Foreign Policy,” INSS, *Insight*, No. 132, 22 September 2009.

willing to help Moscow advance these goals. Kremlin officials understand that despite common cultural background, Israeli politicians of Russian origin do not constitute part of the Russian Diaspora in its traditional sense, and their view of Arab–Israeli relations substantially differs from Moscow's.

Ultimately, Moscow builds its relations with Israel within the framework of Russia's regional and global political considerations. In this context, the bilateral relationship assumes secondary importance making Russia's achievements in this area relatively unimpressive.

## ***The Israeli perspective***

Israel builds its relations with Russia on the basis of understanding that a significant increase of Russian influence in the region is not to be expected. Russia will remain a secondary, pragmatic and less emotionally involved actor compared to the US. Its attitude towards Israel as a low cost tool to advance its goal of multipolarity will not alter unless Israel turns into an attractive economic partner. This will not to happen in the foreseeable future taking into account Russia's natural resource-oriented economy and slow pace of technological reorganization. On the other hand, Russian-Israeli economic co-operation seems to be growing in part because of active involvement of Russian-speaking Israeli politicians willing to advance this direction. Since 2009—the year of Lieberman's appointment—there have been three meetings of the Russian-Israeli inter-parliamentary commission for economic cooperation, while in the previous four years (2004-2009) no meetings took place. Some Israeli officials from the MFA believe that strengthening of economic ties can alter Moscow's security considerations in the region in favor of Israel: "The Russians tell us, increase the annual trade balance between our countries from 3 to 10 billion dollars and feel the implications in all other spheres."<sup>45</sup>

Israel does not adapt its foreign policy and security moves to Russia's political aspirations and is not worried about releasing political messages that might irritate Russia. However, the idea that Israel accepts Russia as one of the key players in the conflict resolution process, aired by Foreign Minister Lieberman, may be reinforced depending on Russia's willingness to get closer to the Israeli position. Israel constantly emphasizes the common goal of fighting terrorism. During his visit to Moscow in September 2010 Minister of Defense Ehud Barak said that Israel was "ready to continue sharing experience with the Russian military on fighting terrorism and ensuring security." During a meeting with Sergey

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<sup>45</sup> B. Ravid "רוסיה מוכרת טילים לסוריה, ישראל חורקת שיניים" [Israel Grits Teeth over Russia's Sales of the Missiles to Syria], *Haaretz*, 12 November 2010.

Mironov and Avigdor Lieberman in November 2010, MK Moshe Ya'alon, former Israeli Chief of Staff, emphasized the potential that military intelligence connections can have for strengthening ties between Israeli and Russian. However, it seems that the Russians are also reluctant to advance this specific direction because their methods of fighting asymmetrical wars diverge from Israel's and because they are more interested in Israeli technologies that can boost the Russian military complex. In addition to buying Israeli UAVs, Vladimir Putin, during his meeting with Ehud Barak in Sochi, mentioned that Russia is considering the possibility of equipping Israeli aircraft with Russian laser technology. He said the possible deployment in Israel of a Russian laser station, part of the Glonass navigation satellite system, was also on the table.<sup>46</sup>

Immigrant politicians advance the idea that the economic attractiveness of the Israeli–Russian business partnership should be revived and reinforced. Mutual trade turnover between Russia and Israel increased from 12 million US dollars in 1991 to 2.8 billion US dollars in 2008. In 2009, the trade turnover between the two countries decreased due to the economic crisis but both sides believe that there are prospects for productive economic cooperation.<sup>47</sup> Non-immigrant Israeli policy-makers often neglect this aspect of bilateral relationships while for the Russian side economic utility remains one of the leading considerations in articulating its foreign policy goals. Overall, in foreign policy Israel acts with a clear understanding that for the foreseeable future no party is capable of usurping the US' primary role in the region.

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<sup>46</sup> "Russia, Israel mull laser technology deal," RIA Novosti, 6 September 2010, <<http://en.rian.ru/world/20100906/160488444.html>>.

<sup>47</sup> V. Putin during his meeting with B. Netanyahu, 16 February 2010, <<http://premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/9424/>>.

## Conclusion

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The potential of immigrant parties to influence Israel's domestic political agenda is relatively high. This is due to a constellation of institutional, political and socio-demographic factors. Despite high potential, the influence of immigrant parties until recently has been almost exclusively restricted to domestic politics. This started to change in 2006. The electoral success of IB in 2009 strengthened its leader, Avigdor Lieberman, and allowed the party to bargain for positions of influence. The party is shifting the focus of its attention from the local to foreign and security policy area. In practical terms though, the influence of IB and its leader is limited and immigrant background still constitutes a considerable constraint upon political power.

The increasing political weight of FSU immigrants in Israel has not resulted in a broader room for maneuver for Moscow in its relations with Tel-Aviv. As Foreign Minister Lieberman declared a new era of cooperation between Israel and Russia, but this declaration has not resulted in significant practical steps. Several reasons may account for this. The perspectives of Israel and Russia on the major regional issues (e.g. conflict settlement with the Palestinians, military-technical cooperation with Syria and the Iranian nuclear issue) are very different, though Dmitry Medvedev has publicly criticized Iran's hard-line leadership on several occasions. Also, the US remains the major international player in the Middle East and Russia is incapable of taking its place. Israel is viewed by Russia as the US' ally and as such is not expected to promote Moscow's regional objectives. Forging cooperation with the Arab world is a higher priority for Russia. Indeed, despite Israel's clear interest in viewing Russia as a friendly nation and even a political ally, bilateral relations remain very limited in scope, with the exception of some specific aspects.<sup>48</sup> Finally, immigrant politicians from the FSU are treated as outsiders by most European and US leaders, who prefer to deal with established Israeli political players. Indeed, Washington communicates directly with Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu while Lieberman is not part of the equation.

Nevertheless, if IB continues to strengthen its political position at home by attracting more non-immigrant supporters while preserving

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<sup>48</sup> Z. Magen, "Israel and Russian Foreign Policy," *op. cit.* [44].



its immigrant powerbase, in time its electoral success should gradually translate into growing influence on foreign and security policy.