

Behind the Russian-Israeli Detente

Even as Official Washington gears up for a lucrative New Cold War with Russia, America's close "ally" Israel is finding common ground with Moscow that complicates U.S. hostility, as Zach Battat explains.

By Zach Battat

Israel can be criticized for many things, such as its lackadaisical attempts at negotiating for a two-state solution along the 1967 borders and its questionable policies towards its minorities (Arabs and others). But [some in the news media](#) have criticized the Jewish state for its recent rapprochement with Moscow, which is one position that doesn't deserve criticism.

Given that Moscow has an interest for stability in the Middle East, this diplomatic contact shouldn't be taken as a "bad idea" by the skeptics simply because the United States has entered a [New Cold War with Russia](#). After all, there are reasons why Russia has an interest in Middle East stability, a goal shared by much of the world.

First, while the Caucasus region is not Russia proper, it is on its border and it's a "zone of vulnerability." Given the recent Middle East excursions or desires by the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt and Libya, Russia has gone on high alert given that many Muslim citizens in the Caucasus countries are [joining](#) the extremist organizations that are fighting in the Middle East (and Africa).

That is the main reason why Russia came to the aid of Bashar al-Assad's government last September in the Syrian civil war. It didn't want to see a chaotic "Libya outcome" (best case scenario) in Syria or see the Islamic State or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the jihadist group formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate) in Damascus.

Second, Russia has a large Muslim population ([estimated at 12-15 percent or 16 million to 20 million ethnic Muslims](#)) that it also fears might get radicalized. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia deems Islamic radicalization as one of its most serious challenges to ensure its own national integrity and stability.

A destabilized region will pose grave problems within Russia's borders. Thus, it has created a strong partnership with Israel to coordinate these stabilizing efforts. However, like all great powers, it understands that a two-state solution between the Israelis and the Palestinians is also of grave importance

for stability; with no deal, a potential [civil war](#) in Israel could break out, which could lead to unpredictable and detrimental results.

Security Interests

Like all other countries, Israel has its national security concerns, based on two principles: basic security and current security.

Basic security is concerned with the preservation of the very fundamentals of the Zionist enterprise – the preservation of Israel as the democratic nation-state of the Jewish people (that was the argument for disengaging from the Gaza Strip in 2005). Although, the Arab population correctly argues that under this structure, the Jewish state treats them as second-class citizens.

Current security is about the day-to-day maintenance of the personal safety and well-being of Israelis (i.e., preventing terrorist attacks, kidnappings, etc.). Up until recently, the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has been dealing with neither. He feels that managing the crisis would be the best way forward but, within the last year, it *seems* that he's beginning to understand that this approach would compromise Israel's national security.

It should be noted that, as prime minister, Netanyahu teeters between [two](#) camps in his coalition. The first being the "neo-Zionist" camp, a religiously inflected extremist view for the Land of Israel and justifying the settlement project as messianic. This camp is the smaller of the two and consists about [one-fifth of the Israeli population](#).

The second camp is more of a digressive one. It believes that Israel doesn't have a peace partner and that Arab leaders are determined to destroy Israel and will act in that way based on their capability. To support that argument, this camp usually cites the tragedies of Jewish history as reasons not to negotiate with their Palestinian counterparts.

Which camp Netanyahu is in at the moment is anybody's guess, but neither is amenable to a realistic peace process. Yet, Netanyahu's recent actions would suggest that he is cooking something up.

A couple of years ago, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman [suggested](#) that the main regional players should concur on any agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. It seems that Netanyahu was listening.

With Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon's [open conflict](#) with Netanyahu, it was the perfect moment. In May, Netanyahu sacked Ya'alon and [appointed](#) Lieberman as defense minister in a theatrical manner.

Shortly thereafter, after "secretly" talking to Saudi Arabia, Netanyahu made amends with Turkey by signing a reconciliation deal. Subsequently, the Egyptian foreign minister arrived in Israel to discuss the Turkish deal, but also to discuss the Palestinian question.

Moscow's Ties to Iran

So, with the main Sunni states (including Jordan) having better relations with Israel, Netanyahu shifted his focus to the Shiite states. However, having no ties with Iran and its Shiite allies, Netanyahu set his sights on Moscow as the intermediary.

Moscow isn't the perfect country to broker with Iran as those mutual ties are often strained and overlap mostly because Russia and Iran seek to ensure that the Assad regime remains in power in Syria. Yet, Russia is the best option considering that the Americans are far more estranged from Iran and the two countries lack formal diplomatic relations.

The Americans also have all but given up on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the Europeans recently failed to set up talks between the two sides.

So, Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin met for the fourth time in a year, largely over security concerns about the war in Syria. But they likely discussed other matters, such as the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In recent weeks, it has become public that Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas will have talks at the Kremlin.

It's unclear if some "Moscow Accords" could work, though it may be the last, best hope. Much depends on whether Netanyahu genuinely seeks some form of agreement or if this new "regional peace plan" is just another ploy for buying time.

However, with Middle East beset with sectarian conflict and the chaos spilling into Europe, where there has been a rise in anti-Semitism and ultra-nationalism, Netanyahu might recognize the urgency of the moment and the grave threat to Israel's basic national security if the West turns against the Zionist project.

For a two-state peace process to work, both Israel and a future Palestinian state (Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem) need firm borders to avert a potential civil war, which would be in no one's interest. Yet, Netanyahu has deceived Israelis and the international community before by dangling hopes for meaningful negotiations and then finding reasons why they could not go forward.

Further complicating the situation is Washington's New Cold War with Russia, which seeks to portray every action in Moscow as negative. In this case,

however, Washington should recognize that Moscow providing a platform for Israeli-Palestinian peace talks is a positive act.

Zach Battat is a Junior Editor for Global Brief and a PhD Candidate in Middle Eastern & African History at the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies at Tel Aviv University.

Billionaires' Spectacular Stumbles

Many Americans disparage “government” for its stodginess and hail private entrepreneurs for their daring, but the reality often is different, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains in the wake of a rocket explosion.

By Paul R. Pillar

This past week, a Falcon 9 rocket built by Elon Musk’s SpaceX company exploded on the launch pad during preparations for a static test prior to the scheduled launch of a communications satellite. The explosion and fire were quite spectacular, although in an unwanted sense, of course.

This was SpaceX’s second catastrophic failure in little more than a year. Last year another Falcon 9 disintegrated two minutes after launch, with the loss of a cargo capsule bringing 4,000 pounds of supplies and equipment to the international space station. Such failures have raised, at least for the moment, the question of whether Musk is unwisely trying in his ventures to push the envelope too far and too fast.

Notwithstanding such incident-stimulated doubts, commentary in recent years about private sector space entrepreneurs such as Musk has been overwhelmingly admiring and laudatory. SpaceX has dazzled people with its feat of bringing expended boosters back to the surface with a soft landing to make them available for reuse.

Just last month a feature story in *The Economist* gushed about how “new capabilities, new entrepreneurialism and rekindled dreams are making space exciting again.”

Underlying a statement such as that is the ideologically-based belief that nimble and motivated private entrepreneurs inherently can do things better than stodgy government bureaucracies. The same story in *The Economist* states that Musk “can drive the costs of space travel lower, possibly far lower, than a

government bureaucracy can.”

That statement is true only in a broad sense that takes account of the differing goals and demands that are placed on the government bureaucracies involved, in contrast to the objectives from which the private entrepreneurs can pick and choose. If the missions and demands are kept constant, the statement is not true.

Private Insurance vs. Medicare

Look at some task in which both government and the private sector operate, such as health insurance. The government-run program, Medicare, has consistently operated more efficiently than privately-managed health insurance. Bernie Sanders is right that a government-run single-payer program is the way to go if the objectives are not only universal coverage but also the driving down of costs.

Some have asked why NASA did not work earlier on the cost-saving method of recovering unmanned rockets, as SpaceX is now. The answer is that NASA was called on to do other things – very difficult and dangerous things – in which the available resources and engineering talent had to be dedicated to tasks other than down-the-line cost-saving.

The demands that Congress, presidents, and the public placed on NASA involved getting fast, spectacular, even one-time results, such as beating the Soviets to the moon; any future cost-saving did not enter into those demands.

The overall picture of the government and private sector roles in space has been that government has pioneered the technology and the private sector has later exploited it commercially. The main breakthroughs in rocket science have come under a government pedigree than runs from NASA back through the space programs of the U.S. military services and to Wernher von Braun’s team in Germany, which invented the V-2.

Most of the technological pioneering had to be government-run because, although national security or national prestige may have been at a stake, any profit opportunities were too far away to provide sufficient commercial incentive to do the pioneering. Although the current privately run activity involves some engineering refinements such as those involved in the recovery of boosters, this is not a matter of major technological breakthroughs.

Competing Billionaires

The private entrepreneur’s freedom to pick and choose objectives has made much current private sector space activity a contest among billionaires, with egos as

well as profit motives involved. Failure means one billionaire thumbing his nose at another.

The satellite that was destroyed in this week's explosion on the launch pad was one that Facebook had planned to use to bring internet service to remote areas in Africa. Soon after the incident, Mark Zuckerberg expressed on his Facebook page disappointment "that SpaceX's launch failure destroyed our satellite."

The freedom to choose objectives has meant that the private space industry has chosen some objectives far removed from any public interest. This has especially been true of a line of business aimed at lifting a few paying passengers at a time to the edge of the atmosphere and giving them a few minutes to experience weightlessness and see the blackness of space before returning to earth.

More than one firm is developing this line of business, including Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic – which suffered its own major failure two years ago when its prototype craft crashed and killed one of the pilots. The service being developed is a joyride for rich people. It is essentially the same kind of service provided by a thrill ride at an amusement park, except that both the altitudes and the ticket prices are much higher.

One of the reasons that private sector space endeavors enjoy, despite the failures, more of a perception of excitement and success is that the failures are not subject to the same after-the-fact recriminations and scrutiny that failure by a government bureaucracy is.

Failures by NASA have triggered the whole politically satisfying suite of congressional hearings and commission investigations. By contrast, Musk and Branson probably don't even have to worry much about flak from their own boards of directors. This week's explosion of the Falcon 9 is not likely to be the subject of congressional inquiry, and that is not just because it involved an unmanned rocket and no human lives were lost.

Future Risks

SpaceX and some other companies do aspire to get directly into manned orbital space flight, and this is where some of their bottom-line-improving techniques may start to bump up against public emotions when human life is endangered. One of the techniques SpaceX has used with the Falcon 9 is additional chilling of the fuel to make it denser and effectively increasing the amount of fuel on board. This means an ability to put heavier loads into orbit (and thus to charge more for the service) and to have enough fuel left over for those cost-saving recoveries of the booster.

Keeping the fuel extremely chilled, however, requires the hazardous procedure of

fueling the rocket to take place as little as 30 minutes before launch. In a manned flight the crew already would be on board by then – a more dangerous situation than the usual procedure of completing fueling while the astronauts aren't anywhere near the launch pad. But so far the brunt of anguish and recrimination when human life has been lost in American space exploration has fallen on a government agency, NASA, rather than on any entrepreneurs.

As for that question of whether Musk is pushing things too far and too fast, for his own good let alone for any larger good, additional evidence comes from Musk's other major enterprise, Tesla Motors.

Four months ago in Florida a Tesla car in "autopilot" mode was involved in a fatal crash when neither the car's system nor the driver noticed a truck crossing their path. The incident underscores the question of whether the driving public (or that segment of it that can afford a Tesla) is ready for this kind of semiautomatic operation, and whether such a not-yet-fully-an-autopilot arrangement, in which the natural tendency is to rely more than one should on the car doing its own thing, ought ever to be sold. Certainly sounds like an instance of going too fast in pushing a product out the door.

Meanwhile, it falls to government employees, including local police as well as traffic engineers in state departments of transportation, to try to keep the public safe with machines like that on the road.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of Why America Misunderstands the World. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)
