

THE ISRAEL PROJECT

CONFERENCE CALL: RUSSIA-ISRAEL RELATIONS

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LAURA KAM: Hello and welcome again. My name is Laura Kam and I am the senior director for European affairs and special projects at the Israel Project. On behalf of our entire team, I am very pleased that such a prominent group of journalists and individuals who write and think about Russia and Israel could join us today to hear from Anna Azari, who is currently Israel's ambassador to Russia.

Today's briefing with Ambassador Azari is on the record. Now, for those of you who don't know, the Israel Project is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to providing journalists accurate information about Israel. The Israel Project is not related to any government or government agency. We have offices in Washington and Jerusalem.

Our team of more than 30 experts and former journalists is always ready to help you get the facts you need to cover the Middle East. So please do not hesitate to contact us if we can help you in any way. The information on our website is in six languages: English, French, German, Spanish, Russian and Arabic. And we also send out information to journalists in Turkey, China, Japan and Portugal and Brazil.

I'd like to point you toward our fact sheet on Russian-Israeli relations, which you can find on our website www.theisraelproject.org. Go to the quick link, press releases, and you will find it there. Now, without any further ado I would like to introduce you to our speaker today. Ambassador Anna Azari is currently the Israeli ambassador to Russia.

Ambassador Azari joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1983. From 2005 to 2006, she served as the director of the Eurasia Department, division for Central Europe and Eurasia at the ministry. Ambassador Azari has also worked as the deputy director of the CIS Department and as a member of policy planning staff. From 1999 to 2003 she served as the ambassador of Israel to Ukraine and Moldova.

In the mid-1990s, Ambassador Azari served as the deputy chief of mission for the Embassy of Israel to the Russian Federation. She lived in San Francisco from '89 to '92 while working as the consulate general of Israel to the Pacific Northwest. Ambassador Azari earned a B.A. degree in history and English literature and a master's degree in political science from the University of Haifa.

She also received a special program in Russian studies from Hebrew University and is a graduate of the National Security College. Ambassador Azari, thank you for joining us from what I believe is a very smoggy Moscow.

AMBASSADOR ANNA AZARI: Actually, I'm real happy to be online with you, but it's the second day in a row with clear skies in Moscow and we're surprised. It's still very, very warm, but we don't have any smoke or smog or whatever you call that disaster. I've been in Moscow for the last almost four years and it's a nice period to sum up the Russian-Israeli relations.

I arrived here in 2006 after the Lebanon, in the Second Lebanon War, which was problematic from the perspective of Russia. As well, Russia tended to criticize Israel on its

performance in the war. And I would say that, not on the official level, the biggest problem from the Russian point of view was that they considered Israel as a country which performed not brilliantly enough in the war itself.

Now, the four years I've spent here in Moscow might be divided into two distinct periods in Russian relations with the world, or with the Western world. And the first period is obviously the last two years of the Bush administration. And the second period is the relations on the so-called reset in the Russian-American relations during the Obama administration.

Surprisingly enough, Israel has survived in both periods, more than survived. And all the four years are years of development and progress in the Russian-Israeli relations. Probably the most symbolic part in this would be the fact that Israelis and Russia signed an agreement, which cancels the visa regime between the two countries, which is considered to be a political sign here in Russia.

I want to point out to the Americans among us that Israelis do not have a visa for free access till now, into the United States. And the relations between the countries are very intensive. The last year, we had two visits of Prime Minister Netanyahu, two visits of President Shimon Peres, to Russia. It's very intense, it's as intensive on all levels and we see --(inaudible)-- the Israeli government sees the relations with Russia as important enough, which is symbolized the fact that we have completed the procedures for opening a new consulate general in St. Petersburg.

It will probably be open in the first quarter of 2011, which shows the importance that we attribute to it. And it will be the first consulate general of Israel outside Moscow in Russia. I think it would enough as an introduction. I will be happy to proceed to Q&A.

MS. KAM: Thank you so much, Ambassador. At least ten people wrote in the same question including from the Jerusalem Post, Herb Keiron: "Were reports that Iran acquired S-300 missiles accurate from the Russians?"

AMB. AZARI: I never heard that they acquired the S-300 from the Russians. I don't think it is accurate. They were in -- a couple of weeks ago the Iranian media was quoting some, quoting the fact that they do have S-300s from elsewhere, not from Russia. And then (Iran ?) already denied the --(inaudible)-- I do not have data which confirms the fact that Iran has S-300.

MS. KAM: Okay, I'm going to stay on the Iran topic because there really were many questions about that. From Dave Goodwin in Miami Beach: "To what extent do you think Russia will actively work to stifle Iran's attempts to develop a nuclear weapon?"

AMB. AZARI: Well, I do think that the Russian approach towards Iran is a bit different. Iran is not seen through the prism of my one issue, which is a nuclear issue. As far as I can understand, Iran in -- a nuclear Iran is considered a no-no by the Russians. Russia is not interested in nuclear Iran. But she doesn't see itself as the leader in the fight.

Iran is perceived in Russia through different angles, including the issues of relations in the Caucasus, in – around the Caspian Sea and in Central Asia. Russia is not worried about Iran as a pariah state or a strange state because Iran was a good partner, not flooding radical Islam into Russia itself. So, Russia will never be an avant-garde on this issue. But it will comply with the decisions made in the U.N. maybe in mellowing them down.

MS. KAM: Yes, hi, I'm with you. Mark Kass, right: "How has the Russian accommodation or relationship with Iran complicated its relationships with Israel?"

AMB. AZARI: Actually, it's not complicated. Its relationship, I would say, is one of the issues on the way which it causes our dialogue to be very constructive because whatever the general image is we have to remember Russia was supportive of all the decisions taken on sanctions on the Iran in the U.N. And Russia always took into consideration the Israeli positions of specific issues, including the one we started with, which was the S-300. So I would say that the Iranian issue is rather something which makes our relationship more productive or intensive.

MS. KAM: To what extent, from Marc Dubey in the United States: "To what extent does Turkey's outreach to Iran and Syria affect politics in Central Asia as well as attempt a Central Asian union like the EU. Are there any?" I'll stop there. "To what extent does Turkey's outreach to Iran and Syria affect politics in Central Asia?"

ABM. AZARI: You know, I'm not in – not much very much into the Central Asian issues right now. I do think that Turkey what was considered to be, in the beginning of the '90s, a possible a model country for the Central Asian countries, as a country of Islamic majority. But there was a progressive attitude towards the international and internal relations.

I do think that this image is somewhat lost and I don't believe most of the leaders of Central Asian republics or countries would be too pleased to come close or to radicalize maybe even the Islamic approach they hold. So I do think that Turkey is turning towards the Islamic. The traditional Islamic world will not be very popular in Central Asia.

MS. KAM: Can you please comment on what you think is a greater priority for Russia – or maybe there's none – one or the other: alliances in the Middle East or fighting terrorism in the Russian republic?

AMB. AZARI: Well, it's hard to grade. But I think in Russia, like in any other country, its first priority is putting its own house in order. So I would say that if you have to prioritize – maybe it's not necessary in this case – of course then the fight against terrorism inside Russia itself is número uno, is the most important issue.

MS. KAM: Right. Has President Medvedev's call in May for direct talks with Hamas caused any lasting tension in ties?

AMB. AZARI: No, it did not. Israel's in – or, rather, I will rephrase it. Russian dialogue with Hamas is more or less a constant point of disagreement between Israel and Russia. At this

point, we weren't convinced that the Russian attitude would assume that by talking to Hamas you can bring them to comply with the demands of the Middle East Quartet.

At this point, until now it didn't work. We were very much – very disappointed by the fact that President Medvedev himself met Khaled Meshaal during his visit in Damascus. But I wouldn't say it was major – a major influence on the bilateral relations.

MS. KAM: Do you believe that Russia supports peace negotiations between Israel and her neighbors?

AMB. AZARI: Well, I don't think it's even a question of belief. Russia is a very positive player in the Quartet and it's very coordinated with other members and specifically with them, the United States and with Sen. Mitchell. So it's not a question of "if." It is a reality. They are supportive. They are – they are skeptic about the chances of success but otherwise they are a full-fledged member of the Quartet.

MS. KAM: On a different subject, how important does the Russian government view Israeli technology, both military and daily life stuff, like computer innovation? Does it make a difference to relationships?

AMB. AZARI: Well, I'm not sure that's the major issue to make a difference in the relationship. At least it used to be like that. But right now President Medvedev is rephrasing or rethinking the Russian foreign policy. And he seems to think that helping and creating modern and innovative Russia is one of the major issues in foreign policy as well.

He said that during his last meeting with all of the ambassadors of Russia in the world a month ago. So Israel and Russia have good relations. And I don't think they are structured around innovation but we are very much in context on this issue including with the Russian governmental structure for nanotechnology. And the Israeli model of --(inaudible)-- is very well-known here. And we hope that this will be continuously an issue of --(inaudible)-- in our bilateral relations and we'll have more trade around the high technologies.

But I don't think it's a major issue in framing the relationship still not even after Medvedev's declaration.

MS. KAM: What is the meaning of the Russian holy places in Jerusalem and around Israel to Russians?

AMB. AZARI: Well, the meaning is tremendous but it's very hard to quantify it. But, first of all, again, I mentioned in the beginning the fact that Russians don't need visas in order to visit Israel. This year we had seen already around 290,000 Russian tourists into Israel. We hope to have more than half a million tourists from Russia to Israel this year.

A feasible path of these people, people who come, is for religious reasons. One of the major events which puts Jerusalem in the center is the way the Russian or the Camoslav (ph) or Easter starts. It starts by a miracle taking place in the holy sepulcher, the church, by self-ignition

of a holy light, which is taken from Jerusalem every Easter into Moscow. And until it's brought to the main church in Moscow, Passover, Easter is not starting. So it is major and I believe it's becoming more and more central in the future as well.

MS. KAM: Thank you. What is the situation for Jews in Russia today?

AMB. AZARI: Well, first of all, I think they have freedom. They have freedom of religion; they have freedom of – cultural freedom. They can pray; they can study; they can congregate. The thing is, they also can have freedom from religion, which means a lot of people of Jewish origin are not necessarily members of organized Jewish communities – pretty much like elsewhere. But definitely the Russian authorities are very supportive of religious practices and congregations. And there is no problem there.

MS. KAM: Actually, we are at our last question before I'd like you to make any closing remarks that you'd like to. Have most Russians made aliyah? And what does it mean for the Russian ambassador that so many Russians do live in Israel? And what does that mean for Israeli-Russian relationships?

AMB. AZARI: Well, I assume when you ask about Russians who made aliyah we mean Russian Jews, not Russians. We still have around 145 million of Russians left. But, yes, the question of the numbers of people who are still in the ex-Soviet sphere, live in the CIS – it includes not only Russia – is an open question. People seem to think that we are talking about half-a-million of people with Jewish – of Jewish origin in all of the CIS.

Of course the fact that so many Russian speakers are living in Israel is very important for work of both ambassadors – both me and the ambassador of Russia in Israel. It means that the cultural interchange between the two countries is tremendous. It means that economic ties are easier because each Israeli company which chooses to work in Russia can supply – can send over people who speak both languages and both technologies, let's say.

So it is important and being the ambassador of Israel in Russia is very sensitive because, apart from the general Israeli press, we are very closely monitored by the Russian-speaking press in Israel.

MS. KAM: Well, thank you so much to our guest, Ambassador Azari, for taking the time to join us. And thanks to all of our guests who participated in today's briefing. Ambassador Azari will soon be leaving, as you heard, her post after four successful years. And on behalf of the Israel Project, we give you special thanks for the amazing work you've done on behalf of your country in working to strengthen Israel-Russia ties during these very challenging times.

For more information about Israel security threats please be sure to visit www.theisraelproject.org and, as always, if there is anything the Israel Project can do to help you get the facts and sources you need to cover Israel, please do not hesitate to contact us. Thank you, Ambassador.

AMB. AZARI: Thank you very much. It was a pleasure.

MS. KAM: Have a great night. Bye.

(END)