Israel Should Reevaluate Relations with Russia

written by Joseph Rozen | 12.11.2023



A caricature from a pro-Russian Telegram channel with antisemitic images:

"Genocide of any people is a holocaust."

- Russia has maintained close ties with Hamas for many years, supporting the terror organization both directly and indirectly. The Kremlin sees Hamas as a valuable agent of chaos due to its affiliation with Hezbollah and Iran.
- The war between Israel and Hamas benefits Russia, as it diverts US attention from Ukraine to the Middle East, and potentially weakens support for additional assistance to Ukraine. It also leads to the rise of oil and gas prices, benefiting Russia's energy sector.[1]
- Since the beginning of the Hamas-Israel war, the level of antisemitism in Russia has risen. Antisemitic expressions are now common in Russia, whether in traditional media, social media, or official statements by the Kremlin.
- Russia's position on the war against Hamas must lead to a change in Israel's policy towards Russia. It is questionable whether Russia can any longer play a constructive role in the region.
- Israel should be clearer in its support of Ukraine, not only as a moral stance but as a signal to Russia about the consequences of its actions.

> Supplying weapons to Ukraine is not a relevant option for Israel during this time of war, but Israel can increase its assistance to Ukraine in other ways.

Over the years, the Hamas terror organization was a welcomed guest in Moscow, with several visits in recent years.[2][3] Senior Hamas leaders Ismail Haniyeh, Saleh al-Arouri, and Moussa Abu Marzouq met regularly with senior Russian officials, including Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov and his deputy Mikhail Bogdanov.[4] Russia has also hosted a delegation and leaders of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In its meetings with Hamas, Russia expressed its strong support for the terrorist group.

On October 27, 2023, less than three weeks after Hamas' ISIS-like massacre of 1,400 Israelis and kidnapping of more than 240, a Hamas delegation visited Moscow and met with Bogdanov. During the visit, Hamas praised Putin for his long-time support, and called to stop the "Zionist crimes supported by the United States and the West." Hamas also promised to look for eight hostages with dual Russian-Israeli citizenship and free them, since Hamas "considers Russia to be a closest friend."[4]

These ongoing ties with Hamas are taking place despite Russia having experienced acts of Sunni terrorism in the past. Some notable incidents include the Beslan school massacre in 2004, which resulted in 330 casualties, the bombing of a Russian airplane by ISIS in Egypt in 2015, leading to the deaths of all 224 passengers, and the Moscow theater hostage crisis in 2002, among others.

While Russia has listed Al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other Sunni terror groups in its official list of terror organizations, Hamas, which is a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, is not on the list.[5] There are several reasons for this: Firstly, Hamas is a proxy of Russia's close partner, Iran. As relations between Russia and Iran have deepened following their broad cooperation in Syria and Ukraine, Russia is willing to do more for Iran than ever before, including supporting Iran's proxies. Secondly, Russia tries to disparage the US and its involvement in the Middle East peace process that has failed miserably in the eyes of Russia. Moreover, Russia has traditionally supported the Palestinian cause, and in the past claimed to host Hamas delegations in order to advance intra-Palestinian reconciliation and broker a peace solution as an alternative to US-led efforts.[6]

Hamas has acknowledged its close alliance with Russia and thanked Russia for its unwavering support. While Russia's backing of Hamas primarily takes a political form, there are indications of broader assistance to the terror organization.



Israeli PM Netanyahu: "I don't see a thing".

From a pro-Russian telegram channel

On the political level, the messages coming from Moscow are clear. Following the horrendous terror attacks by Hamas, Russian Foreign Ministry Director of Information and Press, Maria Zakharova Spokesperson, was quick to announce:[8] "We call on the Palestinian and Israeli sides to implement an immediate ceasefire, renounce violence, exercise the necessary restraint and establish, with the assistance of the international community, a negotiation process aimed at establishing a comprehensive, lasting and long-awaited peace in the Middle East". This message reflected the Russian disconnect from reality, with an effort to prevent Israeli retaliation and its right to defend itself, and no mention of Hamas. In addition, Putin compared Israel's siege of Gaza to the siege of Leningrad by Nazi Germany.[9]

Other affiliates of the Kremlin released anti-Israel and antisemitic statements and propaganda, fueling a massive antisemitic campaign in Russian traditional and social media, exposing the usually under-the-surface antisemitism in Russia.

Here are several examples:

- Solovyov, a known Kremlin mouthpiece, accused Israel on his show of waging a brutal war against Gaza, unlike Russia in Ukraine. He added

that Russia never cuts off its enemy's electricity.[10]

- Russian media twisted Israeli Defense Minister Galant's words about destroying Hamas, arguing that he called for a genocide of the Palestinians.[11]
- Another Russian channel repeated the narrative about a genocide and added fake information about Israel bombing dozens of hospitals and schools.[12]
- In a different article, RIA Novosti cited Ramzan Kadyrov who said: "the Israeli fascism, in its cruelty towards the Palestinians is probably worse than Hitler's.[13)
- In this toxic environment, thousands of incited blood-thirsty people in the Republic of Dagestan gathered in a lynch mob and stormed the local airport and hotels, searching for Israelis and Jews that were allegedly arriving in Dagestan on an October 29 flight from Israel.[14]

New antisemitic, anti-American, and anti-Ukrainian content appears every day on Russian media. Part of it is pure antisemitism and another part reflects what Russia sees as an opportunity to attack the US and its involvement in the Middle East, while drawing a line connecting the Middle East to Ukraine, with narratives aimed at weakening international support of Ukraine.

In addition, Moscow called for an emergency session of the UN Security Council, calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. The Russian draft resolution did not pass as it fell short of achieving a majority.[15] Again, the Russians failed to condemn Hamas and ignored its barbaric atrocities against civilians.

In addition, there are indications that Russia's support went beyond the political level. Hamas used weapons manufactured in Russia, such as the AK-47, RPG, and Kornet anti-tank missiles,[16] DPRK-made weapons such as the F-7 RPG and 122mm artillery shells, and Iran-made weapons such as AZ111-A2 60mm mortar fuses, M112 demolition charges and newer versions.[17 Lastly, Russian online crypto platforms have been used by Hamas to transfer millions of dollars for their terror activity, in addition to funds in Qatar, violating sanctions.[18]

Russia's Interests in the Middle East and Ties with Israel

Russia's primary regional partner is Iran, with extensive cooperation across economic, security, and intelligence domains. Their relationship deepened during

the prolonged conflict in Syria, where they collaborated to support the Assad regime.[19] While operating in Syria under the Russian umbrella, Iran was able to provide arms to various groups, including pro-Iranian terrorists in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Recently, it was reported that after airports in Aleppo and Damascus were put out of action, Iranian and IRGC cargo planes began using the Russian airbase "Khmeimim" in Syria.[20]

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the revelation of Russian vulnerabilities, Iran rushed to assist by supplying drones and weapons.[21] As a result, Iran is no longer a minor party in these relations and is considered at least an equal partner, particularly in the Middle East. This limits Russia's ability to play a constructive role on Israel's northern border, and associates Russia with what some describe as an "axis of evil."



A caricature portraying a false Russian claim that NATO's security assistance to Ukraine reaches Hamas in Gaza. *Published by fake Facebook accounts.*

Geopolitically, Russia could benefit from the conflict in Gaza by diverting international attention from Ukraine to Israel, thereby occupying American attention on two fronts. In this context, Hamas is a tool to destabilize the region. Furthermore, the resulting instability in the Middle East could lead to rising energy prices, which would benefit Russia, particularly as the winter season approaches. Additionally, the potential shift in the Middle East's political landscape following a possible normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia could pose risks to Russia's interests in the region and diminish its influence vis-à-vis the Arab world.

Since Russia's involvement in Syria in 2015 and even earlier, Israel has considered Russia a responsible power that could use its influence to prevent Iran and the Assad regime from posing a significant threat to Israel. This policy occasionally achieved minor successes, with a hotline between the Russian command in Syria and the IDF instrumental in de-escalation efforts. Russia-Israel bilateral relations also deepened, facilitated by the large Russian-speaking community in Israel and the Jewish community in Russia, forming a cultural bridge between the two nations. Israel embraced the Russian narrative regarding the Red Army's role in defeating the Nazis, refrained from joining international sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea, and largely maintained a neutral stance on Ukraine, positioning itself as a potential mediator. Prime Minister Netanyahu had frequent engagements with President Putin, with the latter even being an honored guest at events in Israel commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day.[22] Lately, the two countries even signed a cinema cooperation agreement, a decision that serves Russia's propaganda machine.[23]

Russia's current stance highlights a divergence of interests between Russia and Israel, revealing what some perceive as antisemitic tendencies. Even in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Israeli policymakers clung to the notion that Israel should maintain a low profile due to national security concerns on its northern border, as if Russia could still be relied upon to curtail Iran's activities. Just as Israel had misconceptions about Hamas, it failed to recognize the shifting dynamics of Russia's power and its potential influence over Iran. If the conflict in Ukraine was not enough to prompt a policy shift in Israel, Russia's current position regarding Hamas should serve as a wake-up call for the government.

What Should Israel Do Now?

Israel should reevaluate its fundamental assumptions regarding Russia's role in the region, and its capacity to influence Iran and its proxies. This reassessment should lead to a range of responses, from symbolic gestures to more assertive actions that the Israeli government can take in response to Russian actions.

As a starting point, without completely severing ties with Russia, Israel should consider:

1. More forcefully condemning and highlighting Russia's support for Hamas.

To date, Israel has summoned the Russian ambassador and expressed its discontent with Russia's support of Hamas, and released one statement following Hamas' visit in Moscow, which condemned "the invitation, which is an act of support of terrorism and legitimizes the atrocities of Hamas terrorists." Israel also called on the Russian government to expel Hamas immediately.[24) This statement did not directly condemn Russia, nor address its long-standing assistance to Hamas.

Sending an official invitation to the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, to visit Israel, allowing him to demonstrate solidarity with Israel. (It has been reported that Zelensky expressed interest in vising Israel right after the attack but was turned down

1. by Israel; later it was leaked that Zelensky was planning to visit Israel, but had to put the trip on hold following the leak).
2. Opposing a Russian role in the unfolding events related to the war, the hostages, the region, or the international community. Any Russian involvement will be later used to further destabilize the region and interfere with existing efforts.
3. Shifting its recognition of Victory Day over Nazi Germany from May 9 to May 8. May 8 is the day celebrated by most of the Western world, while May 9 is the day commemorated by Russia, and to date, by Israel.[25] (This would be particularly symbolic given Russia's attempts to claim that its war against Ukraine is similar to the Red Army's fight against the Nazi's.)
4. Reconsidering or at least refraining from implementing the agreement on cinema cooperation between the two countries, as it is seen as a tool of Russian propaganda with limited cultural value.
5. Exploring avenues to enhance security support for Ukraine, excluding the provision of lethal systems, for now. While Israel may not be at the forefront of supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine, it can offer other defense technologies.
6. Reviewing the visa-free policy between Russia and Israel countries. Given the significant decrease in Russian tourists visiting Israel since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it may be appropriate to reconsider this policy.

These steps will not only serve Israel's national security interests more

effectively, but also send a clear message regarding Israel's alignment with the West. They may also lead to Israel regaining respect from Russia, which often responds to displays of strength, rather than perceived weakness. Moreover, such steps may also enable Israel to free itself from security conceptions that limit its actions on its northern front due to fear of collateral damage to Russian interests.

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