

Putin Praises Abbas During Visit to West Bank

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas welcoming President Vladimir Putin to Bethlehem in the West Bank on Tuesday. Putin praised Abbas' "responsible" position in negotiations with Jerusalem, offered veiled criticism of Israel, and said Russia had no problem recognizing a Palestinian state. **Mohamad Torokman**

BETHLEHEM, West Bank — Visiting President Vladimir Putin praised his Palestinian counterpart on Tuesday for the latter's "responsible" position in negotiations with Israel, frozen for nearly four years, and he said Russia has no problem recognizing a Palestinian state.

Putin also offered veiled criticism of Israel, saying unilateral actions — an apparent reference to continued Israeli settlement expansion on war-won land — is not constructive.

Putin spoke at the end of a visit to the biblical West Bank town of Bethlehem, with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas by his side. Putin inaugurated a Russian cultural and language

center in Bethlehem and toured the church built over the traditional birth grotto of Jesus.

Israeli-Palestinian talks on the terms of Palestinian statehood broke off in 2008. Repeated efforts to restart them have failed because of wide gaps between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Abbas.

Netanyahu says he is ready to resume talks anytime, but he refuses to halt construction in Jewish settlements on lands that Israel captured in the Middle East War of 1967.

Abbas says there's no point negotiating as long as Israel keeps building for Jews in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, occupied territories the Palestinians want for a state, along with the Gaza Strip. Israel has moved half a million settlers to the West Bank and east Jerusalem since the 1967 war.

"We talked about ways of overcoming the dilemma of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process," Putin said Tuesday. "I point out here the responsible position of President Abbas and his endeavor to reach a peaceful settlement based on a two-state settlement."

"I am sure that all unilateral actions are not constructive," he added.

Russia is an important Middle East player, in part because it is a member of the so-called quartet of mediators, which also includes the United States, the European Union and the United Nations.

With negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians frozen, Abbas has sought to increase Palestinian leverage by seeking UN recognition of a state of Palestine according to the pre-1967 war frontiers. Palestinian diplomats have also toured the world in search of recognition of Palestine by individual countries. Dozens of countries, including the former Soviet Union, did so after a 1988 statehood declaration by the Palestine Liberation Organization. Putin said Tuesday that Russia sticks by that decision.

Abbas reiterated Tuesday that negotiations with Israel remain his key goal. He said he asked Putin for help in persuading Israel to release Palestinian prisoners who've been in jail since before the interim Israeli-Palestinian peace deals of the mid-1990s.

Later Tuesday, Putin traveled to neighboring Jordan, where officials said he discussed with Jordan's King Abdullah II ways to end the uprising in Syria, restarting Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, Iran's nuclear program, Russian assistance to Jordan to build a nuclear reactor for peaceful purposes and modernizing an oil terminal in the Gulf of Aqaba.

As the closed-door meeting began in Amman, Jordan's banned Tahrir, or Liberation Party, condemned Putin as an "enemy who is not welcome in Jordan."

It called Putin "an arch enemy of Islam and Muslims," citing his close ties with Assad. "His visit to Jordan is an arrogant challenge to the feeling of Muslims and a disdain of innocent blood shed in Syria."

On Monday, Putin met with Netanyahu, who urged Russia to step up pressure on Iran to curb its suspect nuclear program. Putin said his talks with Netanyahu covered Iran and the bloody uprising in Syria, but he added that he saw negotiations as the only solution for such matters.

At a state dinner later Monday, Israeli President Shimon Peres pressed Putin further, asking that he “raise his voice” against a nuclear Iran. Putin responded by saying that Russia has a “national interest” to secure peace and quiet in Israel but did not elaborate further.

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