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Despite His Sympathy, Putin Is Unable to Support Israel Against Hamas

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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Despite President Vladimir Putin's personal sympathy for Israel, which has remained neutral in the ongoing struggle between Russia and the West over Ukraine, Russia cannot openly support it in the Arab-Israeli conflict because of its other commitments in the region, analysts said.

Israel's government voted to accept an Egypt-brokered cease-fire proposal on Monday to end the eight-day-long surge of violence that has claimed at least 190 lives. The Hamas Islamist group rejected the cease-fire immediately upon its release and resumed rocket fire against Israel from Gaza.

Russia's Foreign Ministry condemned the violence when it began last week and urged the sides to engage in talks rather than attempt to resolve the conflict militarily. But while

the ministry cleaves to its diplomatic line, Putin appears to sympathize with Israel more than with Palestine. One of the reasons is that Israel's power elites share Putin's ideological values.

"I support the struggle of Israel as it attempts to protect its citizens," Putin said last week at a meeting with a delegation of rabbis and leaders of civil society groups from fifteen countries, Israel National News reported.

The fellow feeling seems to be mutual. Before coming to see Putin in the Kremlin, the rabbis visited Crimea — ground zero in Russia's standoff with the West — to take part in a Holocaust memorial service in Sevastopol, prompting criticism from the Western press and leaders.

"Western leaders were against this trip to Crimea. It demonstrated that Jewish groups have their own understanding of how things should turn out in Ukraine," said Yevgeny Satanovsky, president of the Moscow-based Institute of Middle Eastern Studies.

The radical elements of Ukraine's far-right nationalist politics, which rose to the fore during Kiev's street revolution, are also working in Putin's favor. "Putin has very strong anti-Nazi, anti-fascist inclinations, so in the current crisis in Ukraine it is easy for Israel to understand where Putin's position toward Ukrainian nationalism comes from," said Alexei Malashenko of the Moscow Carnegie Center.

"Historical memory is very important for Putin, and the Israelis remember that the Babi Yar massacre took place near Kiev, not Moscow," he said in a phone interview.

Babi Yar was one of the Holocaust's largest single massacres, claiming the lives of more than 100,000 Jews.

But despite personal sympathy, Putin is unable to fully embrace Israel because of Russia's stakes in the ongoing civil war in Syria and in nuclear talks in Iran, according to Malashenko.

"Russia has to maneuver, and so far it has been doing it quite professionally," he said.

Israel's Ukraine Stance

Israel itself has tried to carefully navigate through the Ukraine crisis in order to avoid alienating Moscow. It did not take part in the United Nations' March vote on a resolution condemning Russian actions in Crimea, using a strike by staff at its Foreign Ministry as a pretext for the abstention.

"Our basic position is that we hope Russia and Ukraine will find a way as quickly as possible to normalize relations, and find a way to talks, and to solve all the problems peacefully," said Israel's Soviet-born Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who has frequently expressed his personal support of Putin, at a Jerusalem news conference in April.

The U.S. State Department was quick to respond to Israel's self-imposed neutrality on Ukraine.

"We were surprised Israel did not join the vast majority of countries that vowed to support Ukraine's territorial integrity in the UN," U.S. State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki said at a briefing after the UN vote.

In defiance of U.S. criticism, Israel and Russia decided to install a special encrypted communication line at the end of May between the Kremlin and the office of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Putin's Position

More than 1 million Russian and Soviet immigrants live in Israel today, forming a powerful political lobby. Unlike many former Russian leaders, Putin has not exhibited any signs of anti-Semitism during his time in office. On the contrary, he was the first Russian head of state to visit the country, and has demonstrated strong interest in Israel's culture and its connections with Russia.

According to Satanovsky, Putin represents a new approach to the Jews.

"He is not a hostage to myths, and anti-Semitism does not interest him. He visited Auschwitz despite strong opposition from many political forces in Russia," he said.

Kremlin Hosts Hamas

However, leaders of Hamas, considered a terrorist organization by most Western states, visited Moscow in 2006 after a personal invitation from Putin. Putin did not meet with its leaders at the time, but President Dmitry Medvedev met with Hamas's political leader Khaled Mashal in Syria in 2010.

Mashal was scheduled to pay another visit to Moscow this summer, but the trip was postponed due to the armed conflict in Israel, according to Yelena Suponina, head of the Asia and Middle East Center at the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies.

According to Suponina, Russia has been trying hard to refrain from embracing one side of the conflict in order to boost its influence in world affairs, given that it has much less resources at its disposal than the U.S.

"This is Russia's turf in world politics — talking to all sides, engaging in dialogue. While the U.S. foreign policy is determined by ideology and values, Russia's is much more flexible," she said.

"This position will yield results. In order to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, you have to talk to all sides. Just as Fatah has turned to negotiations after being a terrorist organization for the Israelis, at some point Hamas will engage in talks too, and Russia can facilitate this transition," she said.

Iranian Considerations

To straddle the interests of different powers, Putin also has to avoid upsetting Iran, analysts agreed.

Iran has been supplying Hamas with armaments and financial aid for years. Following the Monday cease-fire attempt, the Iranian-backed Hezbollah organization has already been sending more missiles to rearm Hamas in the Gaza strip, news website Wnd.com reported on Tuesday.

Russia has been opposing the imposition of U.S. sanctions against Iran over the country's nuclear program. Iran is also one of the key supporters of the Syrian President Bashar Assad, who is also backed by Putin.

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