The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Israel's War Reflects Paradoxes of Ukraine Crisis

By Ivan Sukhov

July 16, 2014



In their preoccupation with events in Ukraine, the Russian media have somewhat overlooked the conflict in Israel. However, my wife's best friend married a lawyer from Ashdod, Israel, and now our family can monitor the situation "first hand" thanks to their nearly constant posts on Twitter.

Those reports have described the level of intensity of the rocket attacks on Israeli territory and how the country's "Iron Dome" anti-missile system has begun to let a few rockets through. It describes how citizens relaxing in a park or at the beach hear the air raid siren but cannot reach the shelter of a nearby bomb shelter in the 12 seconds they have before impact. Especially if they are carrying small children in their arms.

We have also learned that Israel Defense Forces pilots have refused to carry out attack orders when their electronic sighting mechanisms reveal children placed as human shields on the rooftop of yet another Hamas redoubt. Still, European television channels continue describing the actions of the Israeli military as war crimes.

And many Palestinians have indeed suffered. More than 200 Palestinians have died since fighting began, with at least 39 children among the dead, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

These deaths are tragic. But Israel's response should not be unimaginable to Europeans, especially to the many countries that have sent soldiers abroad to fight terrorism.

Just imagine for a moment that these are your cities being threatened hourly by deadly missile attacks. That it is your pilots who, seeing civilians being used as a human shields, call off their missions. That your power stations, your water pipes and your food warehouses that continue to heat, light and feed the earth, but from which the enemy constantly threatens you with death, simply because of the very fact that you exist.

But it seems that Europe's distorted perception of the Middle East conflict has long taken its cue only from the Palestinian side. In 1992, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I visited the western part of recently unified Germany as part of a group of exchange students from Moscow. Our students from a country that had just died had many questions for the students of a country that had just been reborn.

In the room of one German boy whose parents were hosting Russian students, there hung a political map of the world with the flags of all countries. Someone had blotted out the Israeli flag with a black marker. As tactless Soviet teenagers, we asked the boy — whose very respectable parents had grown up in the postwar ruins — whether that strange political statement was somehow connected with the episodes of Germany's past that were still taboo to discuss. He received our question seriously and said, "No, it just disgusts me when the television shows Israeli soldiers killing Palestinian children."

But it is not quite so simple. Since then, some of my former school classmates have served in the Israeli army and others are among those now wondering if they will reach the nearest bomb shelter before a Hamas rocket strikes their home. I have also been close to the front in some other regional conflicts and know that it is impossible to understand what is really happening in a war from television reports. Accounts from eyewitnesses are the only thing worth believing.

It would give a better-rounded picture if we had eyewitness accounts from all the sides in the conflict, but until only recently, very few Russians emigrated to Palestine or Gaza, in contrast to the large numbers who move to Israel. And although my eyewitnesses provide only a one-sided account of events, I know them personally and am inclined to believe what they report.

On the basis of what they say, I must unfortunately conclude that the current European protest against Israel's actions in Gaza calls to mind the anti-Semitism that pervaded Europe prior to and during World War II. What makes it even more ironic is that these protests typically come from "left-wing forces" that have dominated European politics for the last few decades.

However, it would be unethical to condemn the European left's position on the Middle East without considering Russia's traditionally ambivalent point of view.

On one hand, Stalin, the idol of many generations of Soviet and Russian ultra-patriots, was one of the world leaders who played a key role in the creation of the state of Israel.

On the other hand, the Soviet leadership probably was more disappointed with this foreign policy move than with any other of Stalin's postwar decisions. The friendship between the Soviet Union and a number of Arab countries only added to Russia's deep and long-standing anti-Semitism, and those friendships set the tone for Moscow's Middle East policy for much of the postwar period. The Palestinian movement was one piece in the global anti-U.S. puzzle that Kremlin leaders helped lovingly assemble over a period of 40 years.

It seems that Russia's leaders pulled that old puzzle from the shelf in the second half of the 2000s. In 2006 the leaders of Hamas appeared among the Kremlin's official guests and have continued coming to Moscow since that time. Now commentators on Russia's state-controlled television become distraught over the death of Palestinian women and children that Hamas militants have once again used as "human shields" to protect their stores of explosives.

However, that sense of dismay against "Israeli aggression" is less intense now. Russians are obviously coming to understand that Hamas belongs to that same part of the global Islamic community that Moscow has been fighting in the North Caucasus for nearly 20 years.

That understanding is also one of the reasons for Russia's position on Syria. Too many of the forces battling against President Bashar Assad are familiar to the Russian military and intelligence agencies that deal with the North Caucasus. With experience from two decades of war accompanied by horrific terrorist attacks against civilians, Russia is in a position to gauge what type of evil Israel is up against.

Indeed, Russia probably would like others to think of it, in light of events in Ukraine, as defending its interests like Israel rather than a state intentionally destabilizing its neighbors. That said, Russia is having difficulty projecting this image. The Ukrainian government forces and National Guard also claim to play the role of the Israel Defense Forces, although they are not quite so successful as the Israelis.

Western sympathies clearly sides with the Ukrainians, but the effect of that support isn't quite noticeable on the front line — just as the effect of the European "anti-war protest" has little bearing on the fears and anxieties of the front line in Gaza.

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