

Kremlin's Passive Stance On Israel-Hamas War Risks Damaging Its Relationship With Israel

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Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin. kremlin.ru

Makeshift memorials have [sprung up](#) near synagogues and Israeli diplomatic missions across Russia in the days since Hamas militants launched a surprise offensive on Israel.

These spontaneous acts of sympathy by ordinary Russians contrasted with a lukewarm response from the Kremlin toward the attack that has resulted in the deaths of more than 1,300 people in Israel — [including](#) at least four Russian citizens — and over 1,500 in Gaza.

Regional analysts and experts told The Moscow Times that while Moscow's response to the Oct. 7 attack might be in line with its long-standing policy of maintaining friendly ties with all political actors in the Middle East, Israel views Russia's attempt at neutrality as a firm expression of both a pro-Palestinian and pro-Hamas position.

Whether the Kremlin is acting deliberately or merely miscalculated remains up to interpretation.

“It seems like the Kremlin doesn’t realize the extent of shock in Israeli society,” said Milàn Czerny, a journalist and expert on Russian–Israeli relations based in Tel Aviv. “If you want to stay neutral, then you are against Israel — this is the mindset today.”

President Vladimir Putin [stopped short](#) of condemning the attack, nor has he offered condolences to his counterpart and reputed personal friend, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In his first public comments about the attack made Tuesday, Putin accused Washington of pursuing a pro-Israel policy against the interests of Palestine. The Kremlin reportedly [instructed](#) Russian officials to follow Putin in blaming the U.S. and its failed Middle East policy for the conflict.

Russia and Israel have maintained close ties since the Soviet collapse, which was [reinforced](#) not only by the fact that Russia is home to the world’s seventh-largest Jewish community, but also the two sides’ strategic interests.

Related article: [Driven From Home by War, Russian Emigres in Israel Resolve to Stay Despite Hamas Attacks](#)

“Israel’s military elites are very conscious of Russia’s presence in Syria and Russia’s ties with Iran ... For that reason [they] didn’t want to quarrel with Russia despite being encouraged to do so by Ukraine,” said Marianna Belenkaya, an expert on Arab affairs and a journalist at the Kommersant business daily.

The Kremlin, meanwhile, has long aspired to cement itself as a trusted mediator in the Arab–Israeli conflict and firmly advocated for inter-Palestinian unity, including between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. And Hamas delegations have paid [several visits](#) to Moscow since the start of the Ukraine war.

“In past flare-ups, Russia has been very careful in maintaining the middle ground,” expert Czerny told The Moscow Times, noting that Russia’s stance was also an attempt to put itself in the opposition to the U.S., the Kremlin’s adversary and a key supporter of Israel.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine brought about the first visible cracks in the two countries’ bilateral relationship.

Though Israel never joined its Western allies in sanctioning Russia or supplying weapons to Ukraine, the country’s official rhetoric has been firmly supportive of Kyiv.

Among the most vocal opponents of the invasion was opposition leader Yair Lapid, who openly condemned Russia’s actions in Ukraine, [including](#) during his brief tenure as prime minister.

“I think Putin is angered by the Israeli leadership’s ambiguous position on the war in Ukraine,” said regional expert Ruslan Suleymanov.

Israel, in turn, could not help but take note of anti-Semitic remarks made by high-ranking Russian officials, Suleymanov said. In one of the most controversial incidents, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [claimed](#) that Adolf Hitler may have "had Jewish blood" in an attempt to paint Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is Jewish, as a Nazi.

"There has long been a conviction that Putin has a lot of faults, but he is not an anti-Semite and Russia's Jewish community felt relatively at ease," said expert Belenkaya.

"But last year we saw that as soon as Israel started behaving not to Russia's liking, it prompted a wave [of anti-Semitic remarks]."

No less damaging to the Israeli-Russian relationship has been the Kremlin's increasing reliance on Israel's sworn enemy Iran, especially when it comes to procuring kamikaze drones to use for striking at Ukraine.

"That matters to Israelis because Iran is seen as the arch-supporter of Hamas and Hamas is seen as the mortal enemy of Israel," said Rajan Menon, the director of the grand strategy program at the U.S. think tank Defense Priorities.

Amid a near-total isolation from the West in the wake of the Ukraine invasion, the Kremlin has been banking increasingly on alliances with the states of the so-called Global South, which, in turn, are expected to react negatively to Israel's expected ground invasion of Gaza, according to Menon.

"Putin sees them as a constituency that he does not want to alienate by ... taking Israel's side," Menon told The Moscow Times.

The visibly worsening ties between Russia and Israel prompted many to scrutinize the relationship between Putin and Netanyahu, which has long been painted as a close friendship.

Though Netanyahu repeatedly praised Putin's toughness and stressed their closeness in his [autobiography](#) published last year, some experts and members of Israeli diplomatic circles believe this relationship was merely a projection made by Netanyahu and never found resonance with Putin.

Related article: [Russia Played Both Israel and Hamas. Will Moscow Take a Side?](#)

No matter the real state of their relationship, experts agree that it is unlikely to significantly influence Russia's overall standing with Israel or its future role in the Middle East.

And — contrary to its [aspirations](#) — Russia is unlikely to ever emerge as a trusted mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

"It is possible that Hamas might welcome Russia if negotiations would eventually be possible ... but the Israelis won't get involved in a diplomatic initiative that doesn't have the U.S. playing a major role," said Menon.

Zelensky's [expected](#) visit to Israel and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' [planned](#) trip to Moscow appear to signal that neither Israel nor Russia can afford neutrality and that the

alliances in both wars might soon become more clearly defined.

Yet the escalation between Israel and Hamas has already served the Kremlin by redirecting the world's attention away from the war in Ukraine — at least temporarily.

“I believe this escalation will soon end with a ceasefire agreement just like it happened before. So the Kremlin's happiness won't last long,” said expert Suleymanov.

“The de-facto standoff between NATO and Moscow will now have two tracks: the Ukrainian one and the Middle Eastern one.”

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