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Why Russia and Hamas Are Growing Closer

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Palestinian Hamas militants. **Zain Jaafar / AFP**

The Kremlin purports to take a hard stance on terrorism. Yet since the massacre in southern Israel carried out by Hamas militants on Oct. 7, it has only grown closer to the group.

Despite the killing of 16 Russian nationals, and even as Muscovites laid flowers at the Israeli embassy, the Kremlin declined to condemn Hamas's actions, expressing only "grave concerns." Some might see its overtures toward the group as an attempt to sow chaos. In fact, Moscow's goal is to cement its status as a friend of the Global South.

The Kremlin's relationship with terrorism has a complicated history. The Second Chechen War — a defining episode for President Vladimir Putin early in his rule — was justified as a response to the threat of Islamist terrorism. Not long after, Russia reacted to the 9/11 attacks by lending its support to the United States and backing the invasion of Afghanistan, to the extent that it even countenanced the deployment of U.S. troops to Central Asia. Later, in 2015,

Moscow linked its intervention in Syria to the struggle against terrorism.

In Syria, Russia claimed to be targeting "thousands" of ISIS militants from Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union, to which it feared they would spread their ideology if unchecked. And, of course, the Kremlin has not shied away from labeling its political opponents terrorists, from supporters of the jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny to Ukrainian activists and Crimean Tatar dissidents.

All the while, where advantageous to its interests, the Kremlin has happily ignored or even worked with organizations labeled as terrorist, such as in Afghanistan, where the Taliban now shares a cordial rapport with Moscow.

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In the case of Hamas, Moscow has long cozied up to the group, declining to designate it as a terrorist organization as many other countries have done, even after the Oct. 7 attacks, and making clear that it is loath to sever contact with Hamas.

In doing so, Russia provides Hamas with what terrorists most covet: the legitimating effect of recognition. In 2006, following the group's historic victory over Fatah in legislative elections, Putin was among the first world leaders to congratulate it.

A year later, Putin hosted Hamas's then-leader, Khaled Mashal, in Moscow, receiving praise from Mashal for his "courage and manliness." Putin was thanked again by Hamas after the Oct. 7 attacks, this time for his "position regarding the ongoing Zionist aggression against our people."

While allegations that Russia transferred weapons to Hamas remain unproven, Russia has at the very least facilitated material support for the group: on the eve of the attacks, Hamas received millions of dollars through a Moscow-based crypto exchange.

The rapprochement with Hamas is consistent with a historical pattern. During the Cold War, Moscow armed and otherwise supported Palestinian militants, including those engaged in terrorism, continuing to do so even at the height of détente.

Hamas bears little resemblance to the left-wing Palestinian nationalists with whom the Soviets did business. It was with the more secular Fatah that Hamas fought a civil war in the mid-2000s, and this month, it was an ISIS flag rather than a red banner that the Israel Defense Forces claimed to have found in a kibbutz attacked by Hamas.

Even so, Moscow's support for Palestinian militancy remains driven by the same motivation: the desire to boost its standing in the Global South. Russia is seizing an opportunity to bolster its claim to be challenging what Putin calls "the ugly neocolonial system of international relations." Hence the Kremlin's half-hearted response to the attacks and continued willingness to engage Hamas, and more broadly its outreach to Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank, whose capitals have a Kalinka Russian cultural center and a Putin Center, respectively.

Similarly, Russia's self-presentation as a peacemaker should be considered in the context of

status-seeking behavior. Its message for the Middle East is that U.S. domination of the region has produced disastrous results, not least the war between Israel and Hamas itself, and that Russia would be a much better mediator and diplomatic partner than any of the Western powers.

In his first comments after the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas, made in a meeting with the Iraqi prime minister, Putin pointed to the conflict as a "vivid example of the failure of the United States' policy in the Middle East." Meanwhile, in a meeting with the Arab League's secretary general, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov condemned Washington's "destructive policy" on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Russia, then, is surgically targeting Middle East leaders with its messaging on the war. Yet neither this diplomatic offensive nor its support for Hamas is meant to destabilize the region.

Moscow's approach to terrorism may be instrumental, but its fear of the spread of terrorism from the Middle East is real. Russia has repeatedly been targeted by terrorists over the years and has something to lose from chaos, even in the Middle East.

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In Russian, the Middle East is known as the Near East (*Blizhny Vostok*), a testament that in Russian minds, it is not so distant a region. Whatever happens in the Middle East, it is thought in Moscow, is likely to spill over into Russia.

Moscow's lack of appetite for chaos was evident in its measured response to the Arab Spring, during which Russia unequivocally opposed the instability associated with regime change.

It is also worth remembering that Russia has spent the past two decades building ties with Israel, striving to stay on good terms even as it has also engaged the country's sworn enemies in Tehran, Damascus, and Gaza.

Amid the international isolation of Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, Israel has notably refrained from sanctioning Moscow or arming Kyiv. Given this, the Kremlin will be keen to avoid alienating Israel, much less breaking off relations between the two countries.

As such, while Russia may grow closer still to Hamas in symbolic ways, there is little reason to expect it to increase its material assistance to the group — of which there is little evidence as it is. Most likely, these overtures will remain at the level of rhetoric.

The reality is that, for Moscow, the crisis in the Middle East is an opportunity to pitch itself to the region and the wider Global South as a diplomatic partner: a pitch that would gain nothing from the creation of further chaos in a part of the world the Kremlin regards as strategically important and to which it believes itself to be highly exposed.

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