

Russia and the War on Gaza: Interlocking Interests and Quiet Diplomacy

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The genocidal war being waged by Israel on the Gaza Strip since October 7 last has diverted all attention back to the Middle East, and the political, military and media policies and efforts shifted to Gaza which became the center of current events while the Russia-Ukraine war was still raging in Europe.

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Though the US reaction expressing absolute support for Israel was echoed in most European capitals, the Russian reaction, especially in the early days of the war, remained debatable, to the point where Russian policy was considered in some quarters to be ambiguous and unclear.

As a matter of fact, a reading of Russian policy pertaining to the war on Gaza cannot be undertaken unless one considers several factors that govern Russia’s domestic and foreign policy, and these factors are first and foremost related to Russian interests in Europe and the Middle East.

In this policy paper, we shall attempt an analysis of the factors that influence the course of current Russian policy. It is possible to lay down some broad outlines for these factors as seen in Russia’s initial reaction to the *Tufan al-Aqsa* operation, Russian relations with Israel and Iran, and the war in the Ukraine.

First: October 7, an embarrassing surprise

There is little doubt that the *Tufan al-Aqsa* operation, carried out by HAMAS on October 7, came as a total and unexpected shock to regional and international quarters. While leaders of the great powers, headed by the US President, rushed to visit Israel to declare absolute support for Israel and utter condemnation of that pre-planned attack, Russian officials did not follow suit. Indeed, President Putin, who contented himself with phone calls made to various parties to discuss the situation in Gaza, did not offer condolences to Netanyahu except one week after that operation.¹ The statements made by the Russian president some days after the outbreak of war were characterized by caution and gradualness, for he chose not to attack either of the two sides of the conflict, contenting himself with blaming the USA, holding Washington responsible for what was happening, and arguing that this war was a prime example of

the failure of Washington's policy in the Middle East. Instead, he reaffirmed Russia's abiding position that calls for the creation of a Palestinian state.²

However, that posture of caution gradually began to fade away among Russian officials as the war on Gaza escalated and the number of Palestinian civilian casualties started to mount. At an energy conference held in Moscow, Putin criticized published reports about an Israeli plan to drive the Palestinians to Sinai, holding Israeli settlement policies responsible for this and arguing that the HAMAS operation was due to those policies. He added: "The land on which the Palestinians live is historically speaking their own" upon which an independent Palestinian state should have been built.³ He went even further and compared Israel's siege of Gaza to Nazi Germany's siege of Leningrad during World War II.⁴

Putin was undoubtedly able to make full use of various forums and international conferences to emphasize his concern for events in the Middle East and to keep distant his own war in the Ukraine, thus succeeding in turning attention to Gaza as the most dangerous spot on earth.

Mediation or soft diplomacy?

Alongside the growing number of official statements made about what was happening, Russia then took a more measured step when Putin announced his willingness to mediate between Palestinians and Israelis, arguing that there can be no alternative to negotiations to solve the conflict. Both HAMAS and Israel responded to this announcement, but from different viewpoints. HAMAS welcomed the Russian proposal and lauded "the persistent Russian efforts being made to stop this savage and well-planned assault on our people in the Gaza Strip."⁵ HAMAS further valued highly the position adopted by Putin as regards the ongoing onslaught, and his rejection of the siege and of targeting peaceful civilians. In Israel, on the other hand, and despite obvious displeasure with Russian policies, Israeli officials did not reject the Russian proposal outright, hoping perhaps that the Russians might press HAMAS to release the Israeli prisoners it was holding.

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Accordingly, less than two weeks from the start of the war, Moscow hosted a high-ranking delegation from HAMAS, which held talks with senior Russian Foreign Ministry officials that centered, according to the Russian Press Agency, on the release of foreign prisoners held in the Gaza Strip, including Russian citizens, and the evacuation of foreign nationals outside Gaza.

HAMAS expressed its thanks for Russia's support for the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and the efforts it was making with concerned parties to arrive at a ceasefire, to open border crossings and to allow the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza. HAMAS then proceeded to release 3 people holding Russian nationality during an exchange deal with Israel as a token of gratitude and appreciation for the position adopted by Putin.

Israel, meanwhile, was quick to condemn the HAMAS visit, holding that it bestowed legitimacy on what it described as the "horrors" inflicted by HAMAS "terrorists", and called upon the Russian government to expel the HAMAS delegation at once.⁶ That condemnation was followed up by summoning the Russian ambassador to Israel to express protest at the Russian move, while the Russian Embassy in Israel issued a clarification of that visit, then stressed in its announcement the call for an immediate ceasefire, the release of all prisoners held by HAMAS and the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza's population suffering intense Israeli bombardment.⁷

A HAMAS delegation visited Moscow for a second time since the outbreak of war. While the announcement by the Russian Foreign Ministry was general in tone, pointing to the fact that Moscow had urged the release of prisoners held by HAMAS and that talks had centered on the humanitarian situation in Gaza, the HAMAS announcement mentioned that its delegation had held political talks with the Foreign Ministry concerning ways and means of a ceasefire aimed at ending the onslaught against the Palestinian people and at clarifying the position and policy of the HAMAS movement having to do with the prisoner file.⁸

In this regard, Russian initiatives did not cease. Moscow announced that it had this time invited leaders of all Palestinian movements, including HAMAS, al-Jihad al-Islami and FATH, to hold talks in Moscow on February 29, 2024. The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister declared that these talks might be extended till March 1 or 2.⁹ Some observers believe that Russia is seeking to mediate among Palestinian movements to arrive at a unified Palestinian position in the face of rapid developments. Efforts being made to form a new Palestinian government may well have been discussed. Here, it may be useful to ask about the recent resignation of the Palestinian government in

preparation for the formation of a technocratic cabinet, a move welcomed by the US but without any comment from Russia.

International Law and the United Nations

Despite the paralysis dominating the UN Security Council because of rivalries in the use of the Veto, Russia continues to insist that recourse must be had to the framework of international law and by way of the Security Council. Less than a week following the outbreak of war, Russia submitted its first resolution to the UNSC on October 13, 2023, which called for a permanent humanitarian ceasefire, condemnation of all acts of violence and terror against civilians, the release of prisoners, the provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza, and allowing all civilians who wished to leave to do so. As expected, that resolution did not pass after 4 states, including the US, voted against it.¹⁰ It was noticeable that that resolution made no mention of HAMAS.

On October 25, a second Russian resolution failed to pass due to opposition from the US and the UK. In December, the US vetoed a Russian amendment to a draft resolution submitted by the Emirates that dealt with Gaza. Russia's ambassador to the UN stated that "the United States had, from behind the scene, taken control over all discussions and negotiations regarding the Emirates resolution and emptied the resolution of its essential substance." He pointed to US insistence on using a dangerous and cunning phrase, namely, "to prepare the right circumstances for a lasting stop to the fighting" which in fact meant "allowing Israel full freedom to carry out further indiscriminate and unlimited shelling of infrastructure and of the civilian population of Gaza." He argued that any state voting in favor of such a resolution will be complicit in the destruction of Gaza.¹¹

Since the outbreak of war Russia has, following the logic and principles of international law, condemned the Israeli war on Gaza, and Russian leaders have lost no opportunity to accuse Israel of violating the provisions and principles of that law, especially as regards the deliberate targeting of civilians. Foreign Minister Lavrov was quite explicit when he stated during a press interview that Israeli shelling of the Gaza Strip violated international law and that destroying HAMAS, as claimed by Israel, was impossible without the utter destruction of Gaza and exterminating most of its civilian population. He further warned against the expulsion of two million Palestinians as suggested by some Israeli and other officials, stating that this would lead to a catastrophe whose impact would last for decades.¹²

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Russian officials were doubtless aware of the difficulty of arriving at a UNSC resolution agreed by all sides, especially by the US. Yet Russia’s insistence on the resort to that Council is due to several reasons most salient of which are:

- To enhance Russian influence at the UNSC, in alliance with China as against the US and its allies.
- To demonstrate Russia’s interest in the affairs of the region despite its preoccupation with the Ukraine war.
- To oppose US policy in its absolute support of Israel in the Gaza war.
- To insist on resolving the Palestine Question within the framework of international legitimacy.

Relations with Israel

Both Russia and Israel strive to maintain relations without tensions especially in light of the friendship between Putin and Netanyahu. The importance of that relationship was underlined in recent years, particularly after Russia intervened in the Syrian crisis, and the deployment of its troops in strategic locations inside Syria alongside a no less significant Iranian deployment. Thus, Russia became of considerable interest to both Iran and Israel. War in the Ukraine complicated Russian Israeli relations but a sort of understanding soon came to exist between them which drew the boundaries of the military balance in the region whereby Israel retained the freedom to attack positions manned by Iran and its allies in Syria but without affecting relations with Russia. In return, Russia guaranteed that Israel would not go far in offering military, political and logistical support to the Ukraine in such a way as to exceed the limits agreed upon.

Hence, despite some political skirmishing between the two countries since the start of the war in Europe, relations between them remained to a certain extent stable. One might interpret Israel’s refusal to host Ukrainian president Zelensky, as it hosted many western leaders who visited Israel after the *Tufan al-Aqsa* operation, as an

unwillingness to disturb the understandings with Russia. Reports in the media revealed that Zelensky was informed that “the timing of his visit was inappropriate.”¹³

But Israel’s genocidal war waged since October 8 of last year would change the course of Russian Israeli relations. While it took Putin one week to offer Netanyahu his condolences, it took Netanyahu two months to make a phone call to the Russian president. The Israeli press reported that during that call Netanyahu sharply criticized Russian policy towards the war and Russia’s anti-Israeli position in the United Nations. Nor did he neglect to sharply criticize the cooperation between Russia and Iran which he described as dangerous. On the other hand, he asked Putin to pressure the International Committee of the Red Cross as regards visiting the prisoners held by HAMAS and delivering medicines to them. The Kremlin announcement, on the other hand, was as usual cast in general terms, stating that the two sides had discussed the difficult stage that events had reached especially as regards the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip.¹⁴

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Exploiting its war on Gaza, Israel pointed the finger of blame at Iran, holding it responsible for aiding and supporting HAMAS, and used this as a pretext to increase its attacks deep in the Syrian interior and to target prominent leaders of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, whereas the Russian position maintained the framework of the Russian Israeli understanding. This illustrates the importance of coordination between these two sides as regards their interests in the region even if this led to Iranian displeasure.

Relations with Iran

Relations between Iran and Russia are of a particular nature since many mutual interests exist between the two countries, starting with the crises in the Middle East and on to the Caucasus region and the Armenia Azerbaijan conflict as well as the Russia Ukraine war. While the Syrian crisis opened wide the door of cooperation and helped to maintain the Syrian regime, thus preventing any change in the regional balances of power, the war in the Ukraine made possible further cooperation between

the two sides on many fronts. Politically, Iran supported the Russian viewpoint as regards the Ukraine war and offered considerable military support especially when it began supplying Russia with advanced drones and trained Russian officers in their use. Added to these two factors was an important economic factor as the two parties increased commercial exchanges in the shadow of sanctions imposed on both.

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Furthermore, Russia recognizes the importance of Iran’s role in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Lebanon, and additionally its support of HAMAS. Therefore, Russia takes care not to involve Iran directly in the conflicts of the region, fearing events would go out of control and the broadening of the conflict. Such an eventuality would force Moscow to adopt a clear standpoint whereby it would no longer be able to maintain its neutral role.

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Hence Russia’s policy as regards the war on Gaza must inevitably consider the common interests it shares with Iran, interests that undoubtedly transcend the borders of the Middle East.

The Ukraine war

With the start of the war on Gaza, several analysts argued that Moscow was the prime beneficiary of that war. That war had shifted international attention to it in such a manner as to shift attention from the Ukraine to the Middle East. That analysis is to some extent correct especially during the early stages of the war on Gaza. As

that war came to dominate the political scene, this allowed Putin a wider margin of maneuver in his war with the Ukraine, a war that was no longer front-page news in Europe. In this regard, the journal Foreign Affairs argued that Russia would reap the advantages of events in the Middle East in the regions of the eastern Ukraine where battles have been raging to recover lands lost in the Avdiivka area of the Donetsk region.¹⁵

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It could be argued that Putin’s calculations were not mistaken. The US repositioned itself in the Middle East through the Gaza war, expressing its support for Israel through massive and unprecedented deliveries of military and material aid. Naturally, this worried Ukraine president Zelensky who, a mere two days after the outbreak of the Gaza war, was quick to express his worry that that war would divert international attention from the war in his country and warned against its impact on the war in the Ukraine. Not content with that, he accused Russia of supporting HAMAS.¹⁶ Zelensky’s fear was proven justified. Although voices were being raised in the US calling for reducing aid to the Ukraine even before the war on Gaza, that war hastened the American decision. In November 2023, the White House announced a reduction in the aid package to the Ukraine caused by the ending of Congress allocations. A month later, i.e. in December, Congress refused further aid to the Ukraine before the latter had presented a clear strategy for winning the war.¹⁷

In the first week of February 2024, President Biden criticized the Republicans who had refused aid to the Ukraine, describing the failure of Congress to do so as criminal negligence.¹⁸ The fall of the town of Advika a few days ago gave President Putin a valuable advantage which he considered an important victory, while sources in the US considered that Ukrainian defeat to be the result of a shortage of weapons.¹⁹

Gaza breaks Putin's Arab isolation

A few days after the outbreak of the war on Gaza, Putin initiated contacts with several international and Arab sides closely involved in that war which included the Egyptian President and the PA chairman. Not satisfied with mere phone calls, his visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE on December 6, 2023, came as a surprise, being his first visit to the region since the outbreak of war in the Ukraine. It is thought that Gaza was among the salient issues discussed during Putin's visit to these two states. The warm welcome he received showed the world that he enjoyed an international prestige recognized by two of the most important Gulf states. In calling for a ceasefire and a settlement of the Palestine Question in accordance with the principles of international law,²⁰ Putin intended to stress his support for Palestine, especially in an international popular atmosphere highly charged against the US and its absolute support for Israel.

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Conclusion

It is only to be expected that Russia's attitude to the war on Gaza would not be isolated from its interests in the Middle East when these are strategic interests in need of alliances and agreements that ensure its influence in the region. Yet the Gaza war raised some questions as to Russia's ability to maintain balance in its relations with the various sides involved in that war.

While the war provided Russia with an ongoing opportunity to move within a framework defined by itself, i.e. in its role as mediator and adherence to international law, in addition to Russia's firm support for the Palestine question by calling for a two-state solution and for the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, a continuing war and the threat that it might spread to other arenas would not under any circumstances be in Russia's interests. This is because Russia is careful to maintain stable relations with Israel as well as a strong alliance with Iran. It is worth pointing out here that this trinity of interests whose center is Russia and which binds Russia to both Iran and Israel is a necessity for all three sides.

In contrast, Russia will maintain a policy of moderation, caution, balance, and hesitancy at the same time as one which takes the initiative regarding the Palestine Question. It will strive not to adopt a Middle Eastern policy like one who fears the repercussions of this upon one's vital interests.²¹

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In any case, the Israeli war on Gaza has demonstrated President Putin's ability to pursue a realistic and pragmatic position of soft diplomacy that satisfies the Palestinians, does not anger Iran, and maintains a thin thread of relations with the Israelis.

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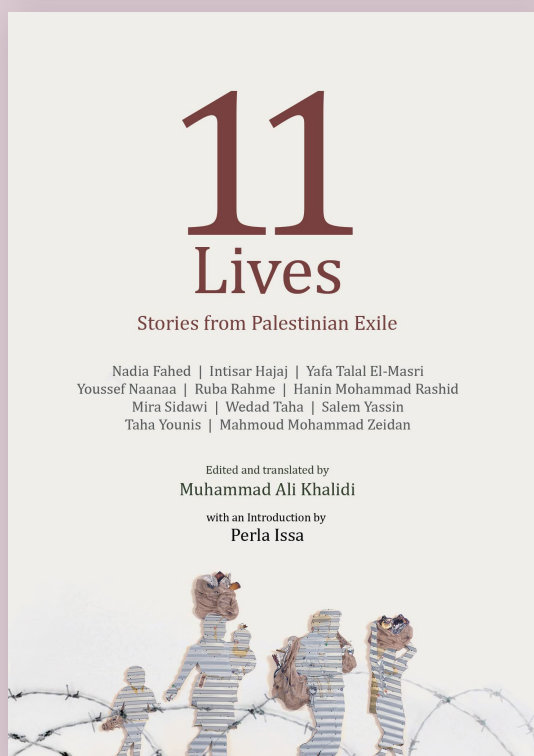
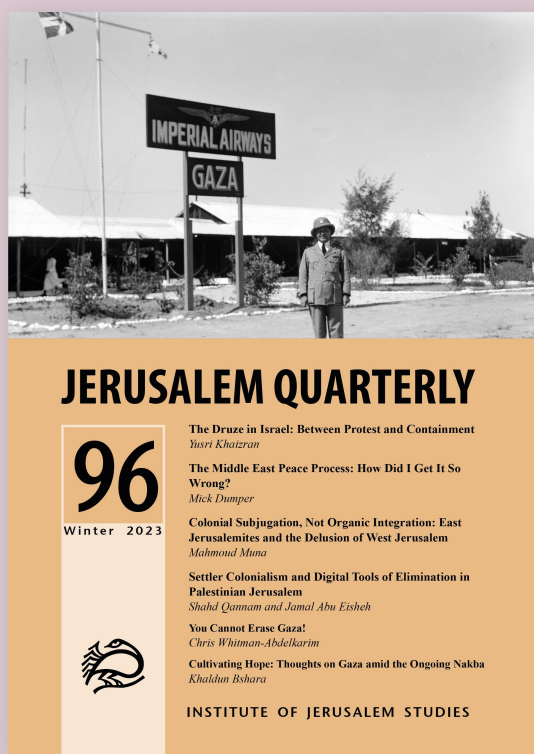
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