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Spetschinsky, Laetitia

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In the Israel-Hamas war, Russia takes the ridge road

Laetitia Spetschinsky



Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel analysiert Russlands Reaktion auf den Konflikt zwischen Israel und der Hamas und enthüllt eine deutlich abweichende Haltung im Vergleich zu den USA, Europa und vielen anderen Partnern. Moskau weigert sich, die Hamas zu verurteilen, und setzt stattdessen auf einen Friedensweg, der die Rolle USA herunterspielt und das Profil aufstrebender Mächte – insbesondere Russland – stärkt. Der Artikel untersucht historische Beziehungen, wirtschaftliche Zusammenhänge und interne Dynamiken und hinterfragt die Rolle Russlands als Vermittler. Er beleuchtet wichtige Elemente in den komplexen Beziehungen zwischen Russland und strategischen regionalen Akteuren wie dem Iran, China, Indien, den Vereinigten Arabischen Emiraten und Saudi-Arabien, sowie die Ambitionen Moskaus in den Vereinten Nationen. Im Schlussabschnitt werden potentielle Auswirkungen auf Europa erörtert, wobei die Verwundbarkeiten der EU und die Rolle der wichtigsten Mitgliedstaaten betont werden.

Executive Summary

The article explores Russia's response to the Israel-Hamas conflict, revealing a distinct stance from the US, Europe and many other partners. Moscow refuses to condemn Hamas, advocating instead a path to peace that downplays the US and raises the emerging powers' profile – especially Russia's. Examining historical ties, economic connections, and internal dynamics, the article analyses Russia's role as a mediator. It highlights significant elements in the complex relationships between Russia and strategic regional players such as Iran, China, India, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Moscow's ambitions in the UN. The conclusion discusses potential implications for Europe, emphasizing the EU's vulnerabilities and the role of key member states.

Keywords:

Israel-Hamas Conflict, Russian Diplomacy, Geopolitics, UN Security Council, International Affairs, European Union

Author:

Laetitia Spetschinsky (PhD International Relations) is an Affiliated Researcher and a guest lecturer at the Catholic University of Louvain where she has been conducting research and teaching on Euro-Russian relations for more than 15 years (Baillet Latour Chair on EU-Russia relations). Her professional background also led her to participate in the training of Belgian officials (Jean Monnet Training; 4th cycle of the Royal Higher Institute of Defence), European officials (Continuing Training for Diplomats of Member States, officials of EU delegations, the European Parliament and the Council, Brussels, European Commission). Of Belgian nationality, Laetitia Spetschinsky speaks French, Dutch, English, Italian and Russian. She lives in Vienna (Austria) with her family.

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Introduction

The terrorist attack on Israel created an outpour of reactions across the media and carried its expected lot of comments and analyses. Very few of these were devoted to the Kremlin's reaction, but Moscow's immediate responses shed significant light on the international implications of what the Israeli representative to the UN called a new "9/11" (Besheer, 2023). This policy analysis examines Russian official reactions, media headlines, and some key social media accounts to help understand the Kremlin's posture in the conflict and the likely implication for Europe.

All in all, the Kremlin is taking a ridge road. Contrarily to the US, Europe, India, and many others, Russia refuses to condemn Hamas. Rather, it insists on past mistakes and recommends a fresh path toward peace: one that involves Russia and dismisses the US.

Historically, the Soviet Union has kept ties with both sides. The Soviet Union holds a central role in the history of Israel as a defeater of the Nazis and a supporter of the creation of the Jewish state. Its stance towards the region changed in the 1960s, when great-power competition and decolonization brought Moscow to support the Arab coalition in 1967 and 1973 (Ginor & Remez, 2017).

But in the early 1990s, Israel became home to over a million Russian-speakers who took advantage of relaxed immigration rules for Soviet Jews. This massive influx profoundly impacted Israel's social, political, and business landscape. Sociologically, the establishment of what amounts today to about two million Russian speakers led Vladimir

Putin to declare in 2019 that Russians and Israelis were « a true common family » and that Russia considered Israel « a Russian-speaking country » (Putin, 2019). This Russian-speaking community quickly grew political roots in the system, with Minister Avigdor Lieberman, a Moldovan-born member of the Likud, as a spearhead. Last but not least, the powerful Russian orthodox church also maintains a vested interest and an abundant presence on Christianity's most sacred grounds.

Throughout the post-soviet decades, the economic ties between Russia and Israel have grown steadily: according to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), the exports of Israel to Russia have increased at an annualized rate of 4.51%, from \$258M in 1995 to \$813M in 2021, while the exports of Russia to Israel have increased at an annualized rate of 8.56%, from \$203M in 1995 to \$1.72B in 2021 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2022).

Where does Moscow stand in the conflict?

As a major player with reputational interests scattered across the region, Russia is now trying to leverage its position as an unbiased actor between Israel and the Muslim world.

While some seem to doubt that Moscow can hold this position longer (Ellyatt, 2023), declarations of the Russian authorities indicate how Moscow intends to play this delicate score.

On the morning of the attacks, the Foreign Ministry reaffirmed its "principled and consistent position that this conflict, which has been going on for

75 years, has no forceful solution and can be resolved exclusively by political and diplomatic means, through the establishment of a full-fledged negotiation process on a certain international legal basis, providing for the establishment of a Palestinian independent state within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, living in peace and security with Israel” (Zakharova, 2023).

In this view, the ongoing deterioration of the situation is a consequence of two factors: the “chronic non-compliance with the relevant resolutions of the UN and its Security Council” and “the actual blocking by the West of the work of the Middle East ‘quartet’ of international mediators within Russia, the United States, the EU, and the UN” (Zakharova, 2023).

A (planned) meeting between Sergei Lavrov and the Secretary of the Arab League, Ahmed Abu al-Gheit, took place on Monday, October 9th. The two diplomats shared the idea that this time, it would not be enough to stop the bloodshed. Instead, they said, the time has come to address the roots of the problem and to design a comprehensive Palestinian-Israeli settlement (based on a two-state scenario).

On October 10th, during a visit of the Iraqi Prime Minister in Moscow, Vladimir Putin made his first public comment on the conflict, essentially blaming the US for its repeated failure to “take the core interests of the Palestinian people into account” (Hülsemann, 2023).

As the crisis unfolded, Vladimir Putin held a series of telephone conversations on October 16th, first with Arab leaders Bashar al-Assad (Syria), Ebrahim

Raisi (Iran), Mahmoud Abbas (Palestine) and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (Egypt), then, later in the evening, with Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel). These exchanges underline that Russia intends to avoid taking sides in the conflict itself and to focus instead on “the failure of United States’ policy in the Middle East” (Hülsemann, 2023).

For Moscow, the key to a peaceful Middle East is thus threefold: an efficient UN security council, a resolution-compliant Israel, and consistent involvement of Russia in peace talks.

This diplomatic path fully aligns with Moscow’s stated ambitions to end the domination of the West in world affairs (Putin’s core ambition ever since the Munich Security Forum in 2007). The Arab-Israeli conflict might provide another tragedy to serve just that ambition. Its advantages are quite clear to the Kremlin: it draws credits, weapons, and media attention away from Ukraine (Lavrinenko, 2023). It also sows dissension in European public opinion just months before the start of the electoral processes. However, what may seem to be a window of opportunity also bears great risks for the Kremlin. Russia, too, must deal with clashing loyalties inside and outside its borders.

Russia is a multiethnic country

Russia, with a population of 145 million citizens, is home to a 20ish-million-strong – and growing – Muslim community. In the Caucasus in particular, religion cements a sense of identity and purpose

in the ever-delicate relation to the Kremlin. Therefore, it seems only logical to examine how Ramzan Kadyrov positions himself in the war between Hamas and Israel. The answer came without waiting: in a self-recorded video posted on his telegram channel on October 9th, the Chechen leader called on other countries to refrain from intervening, and on European governments to refrain “from bombing civilian targets for the sake of igniting fear” (?), and on Muslims across the world to defend “the truth” against the “provocations” of West (Kadyrov, 2023). He also offered his men’s services as peacekeepers and protectors of the Mosques in Palestine.

The role of Chechen warlords is not pivotal to the conflict itself. Still, Kadyrov’s stance within Russian internal affairs, especially after the death of Wagner’s chef Evgeniy Prigozhin, has gained visibility, and, maybe, traction... A trend the Kremlin cannot afford to disregard: the Chechen fighters’ role in Ukraine is still essential to Russia, and the Muslim vote in the presidential election this winter needs to be secured regardless of Putin’s actual polls.

Blaming the US might not save Russia from domestic turbulence. Some in Russia might remember the vibrant appeals Putin once made in the fight against terrorism – one of the “three evils” that Russia and China jointly vowed to uproot, along with separatism and extremism. Others, including in the Caucasus, might not understand why the leader they have served so loyally in the war in Ukraine, fails to protect their Muslim brothers. The events of the airport of Makhatchkala (Daghestan) on October 29th exemplified the risk of a surge of pro-palestinian, anti-semitic violence in

the Caucasus. However, there again, the Kremlin was quick to blame foreign interference – in this case, a Telegram account (“Morning Dagestan”) linked to Ilya Ponomarev, a former Russian official who “defected” to Ukraine in 2014 and has since then taken an active anti-Russian stance (Meduza, 2023).

More broadly, what happens in Israel will also test Putin’s reputation as a leader. For him to prove that he is truly able to reassert Russia’s role in the world, he cannot appear to be sidelined in the Middle East. This is how he can prove that Russia has risen from the 1990s - when war, peace, secession, or international recognition (purportedly) happened without taking Moscow’s interest into account. One should bear in mind the grudge Russia still holds about being played by Milosevic, about NATO intervention beyond article 5, and about the recognition of Kosovo – at a time when Yeltsin was incapacitated and Russian foreign policy was muted.

This means that Putin will make sure no peace can be achieved without Russia at the steering wheel.

Navigating international waters

The invasion of Ukraine has put Russia at the crossroads between regained influence and international isolation. Moscow has departed from its alliance with the West but hasn’t yet reached the shore of a multipolar world guided by the interests of the emerging powers. But, as Sergei Lavrov puts it in an article published on October 10th, “the future world (i.e. ‘a new and fairer multipolar order

that reflects the world's cultural and civilizational diversity') is taking shape in the midst of a battle" (Lavrov, 2023). And at this point, Moscow cannot afford to imperil the relationships with Iran, China, India, or to a lesser extent with its OPEC partners. But again: this might prove trickier than one thinks.

Russia is Iran's most important protector in the Middle East. Iran is a strategic ally and a political pawn Russia cannot afford to let lose in a quickly changing Middle Eastern political landscape. It is both obvious and realistic to say that Russia needs Iran just as Iran needs Russia. But clearly, Moscow cannot risk being trapped in Iran's life-threatening stance on the Israeli state. Russia and Iran might share a common goal of defying « the West » on the international scene, but they diverge on how to deal with Israel and Palestine.

On the Arabic peninsula, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are both invaluable partners when it comes to uniting the "global south", controlling energy trade, or deteething international sanctions. At the time of the Hamas strike, the UAE had "fully" normalized relations with Israel (US State Department, 2020) and Saudi Arabia was on track to reach a similar point under US auspices. The dramatic surge of violence could not but Saudi-Israeli rapprochement. For Moscow, this opens a window of opportunity to reestablish leverage throughout the Middle Eastern and northern African region, especially since Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia (along with Iran, Ethiopia, and Argentina) joined the BRICS association during the Johannesburg summit in September 2023. But Moscow could well lose ground if the freshly enlarged

economic club falls victim to geopolitical discord. As analysts put it in September 2023, "any relapse to regional conflict could jeopardize BRICS' ability to engage in meaningful, cohesive decision-making" (Alexander & Serhal, 2023).

Further east, China's position on the conflict is very compatible with Moscow's. But there too, real-life geopolitics seem to differ substantially from international posturing. China has so far been very generous in words about "unlimited friendship", including during the third Belt and Road Forum held on October 17th and 18th, but Beijing never gave Moscow concrete tokens of geopolitical support. It hasn't joined Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, and Syria in recognizing the sovereignty of Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia. Moreover, in April 2023, the Chinese representative to the EU confirmed that his country "had not provided military assistance to Russia, nor recognized its efforts to annex Ukrainian territories, including Crimea and the Donbas" (Stevis-Gridneff & Erlanger, 2023).

India, on the other hand, has stated its solidarity with Israel and has condemned Hamas' terrorist attack (Miller, 2023). India is a member of Russia and China-led Shanghai cooperation organization and a valuable asset in Moscow's outreach strategy - including, again, in the sanctions business.

Testing the UN Security Council

Despite a relatively low-key involvement in the conflict over the last decades, Russia is by no means a new player in the Arab-Israeli conflict. It

has deep and sophisticated social, political, and economic ties in the region and in neighboring countries – including where the West has lost much leverage.

Hence the drive for Moscow to assert its international capacity. And Russia is quite uniquely positioned to do that: it has the diplomatic clout, the historical credits, and an obvious interest in presenting itself as the protector of both camps. What it does not have, however, is the reputation of an honest broker or the moral authority to establish leadership in the UN Security Council.

On October 13th, Russia circulated a draft resolution of the UN Security Council condemning “all violence and all acts of terrorism” (without mentioning Hamas in particular) and calling “for an immediate, durable and fully respected humanitarian ceasefire and an unimpeded provision of humanitarian assistance” (Permanent Representation of the Russian Federation to the UN, 2023).

The resolution failed to pass the bar. France, the UK, the US and Japan refused to “line up” (as the Russian ambassador invited them to do) behind Moscow (Permanent Representation of the Russian Federation to the UN, 2023). China, the UAE, Gabon and Mozambique voted in favor of the resolution, while Albania, Brazil, Ecuador, Ghana, Malta, and Switzerland abstained (UN press release, 2023). After the vote, Russia expressed regrets for the missed opportunity “to put an end to the bloodletting”: “Western countries”, he said, “blocked the Council from sending a unified message for purely selfish and political interests” (UN press release, 2023).

Interestingly, the motives for opposing or abstaining pertain to two types of objections. Some countries rejected a resolution that failed to condemn Hamas terror attacks (UK), arguing that it is the Hamas that has set the crisis in motion (US). Other countries opposed it because of “how it was handled” (Japan): the text, they say, “was not subject to negotiations and reflects only the position of the proposing State” in some sort of take-it-or-leave-it tactics (Ecuador). It failed to include proper “references to humanitarian law” put forward by some members (Switzerland, Albania).

Ultimately, it appears that many who abstained or opposed the resolution were more likely to unite behind the alternative resolution made in Brazil (France); the vote on this resolution, 24 hours after the vote on Russia’s resolution did indeed gather a large majority of support or abstention but succumbed to a solitary US-veto – leaving Russia, its allies and the abstentionists unable to confer a humanitarian role to the UN Security Council. Interestingly, on this vote, Russia and the UK abstained and found themselves on the same side.

In conclusion, it appears that whereas the US and the EU address the Middle Eastern challenge as a fight against rogue organizations (and rogue states), Moscow’s initial responses portray the issue through the lens of great power rivalry. Like no other player, Russia insists that the resolution of the conflict depends on its involvement in the process and the downgrading of other players, in particular the US. To earn credit, Moscow clings on to the pole of anti-westernism: a pole with powerful weights at both ends, for sure, but maybe not the most efficient tool for such a thin rope.

How is Russia's power play likely to affect Europe?

Russia's response to the Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent war is likely to bear significant consequences for Europe. Two sets of consequences can be drawn.

First, if Moscow succeeds in securing a diplomatic and strategic frontline role alongside the US, the EU might just end up being sent to the background. The EU's geopolitical awakening will be linked to (and limited to) the war in Ukraine. Besides, Moscow's strong hand in the Middle East benefits from the ontological and political weaknesses of the EU. The EU is socially and politically vulnerable: the protests in major European cities, along with security risks (and failures) have already signaled the ripple effect of the Israeli war against Hamas within European societies. Beyond this, the challenge is, as usual, to find common ground between the 27. At the EU level, it was only on October 17th that European heads of state and government convened to define a common response to the war. Opinions and priorities diverge considerably among European parties and among capitals – divisions that need not surprise considering the stakes at play. To overcome rivalries and infightings, the EU focuses on international and humanitarian law, partly as a course correction to Ursula von der Leyen's poorly coordinated visit to Israel on October 13th. How the EU manages to carve a common and relevant position is crucial to its ability to get a voice in the concert of powers that will handle the Middle Eastern equilibria. At this point, no such thing has emerged.

Second, compared to their implication in the Ukraine conflict, European member states have relatively little pull when it comes to Israel and Palestine. Only a handful of EU states are on the line: Spain, which earned credits as host of the Madrid conference of 1991 (that led to the Dayton agreement in 1995); Ireland, with its neutral policy and long history of sympathy to the Palestinian cause; and most prominently France, which is a strategic player both in the region and at the UN Security Council. The French Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Catherine Colonna, visited Beirut on October 13th and called on the Lebanese to refrain from opening a new front. French President Emmanuel Macron landed in Israel on October 24th with a peace initiative and a proposal to build an international coalition against Hamas. As Paris deploys traditional influence around the Mediterranean, it will meet Russian diplomacy on its way. (Informal) talks at either local or systemic level between the French and Russian diplomats might have to reopen some communication lines with Moscow. The question remains whether those communications lines will be opened by individual member states and how much the EU will be involved in the process.

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