



Russia and Hamas after 2006: Realities of a Questionable Relationship

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Abstract

This article aims at examining Russia's relations with the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and Moscow's motives and goals for the establishment and enhancement of those ties. We explore Russia's worldview to position the Middle East and Hamas in a pre-established frame, subsequently examining the reasons behind the development of these relationships. This article sets out to answer a two-fold question: What has been Russia's aim of receiving Hamas leaders and establishing high-level relations with this movement since 2006, and what components have influenced these interactions at international and regional levels? The paper argues that Russia considers its relations with Muslim nations and movements not only a foreign policy principle but also a domestic issue. Hence, it seeks to take advantage of the U.S. retrenchment from the region to expand its influence, play a mediatory role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and elevate its reputation among Muslims inside and outside the country. Recognizing Hamas' position, Russia resolved to develop its ties with Hamas' leaders, started negotiating with all the parties in the Palestinian national reconciliation process, and provided political, economic, cultural, financial, and security support to eventually affect Hamas' stance vis-à-vis Israel.

Keywords: Hamas, Israel, Middle East, Palestine, Russia

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1. Introduction

Russia's view on the Middle East, the processes of its interventions in the region, as well as its means of doing so have been the subject of many scholarly works. However, in this paper, the authors seek to explain the Russian outlook and policy towards the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, focusing on the period after the establishment of Hamas and Russia's relations with the movement. In this regard, examining the Russian worldview is of exceptionally paramount importance. This view sheds light on Russia's goals and priorities in different regions, including the Middle East. Hence, analyzing the dimensions of Russian movements in this region evidently requires considering Russia's general view on the international sphere, the significance of the Middle East, and the effects exerted by the developments in this region on Russia's view.

Having learned from the faults and errors of the Soviet era, Russia, in the era of Putin, seeks to reduce the distance from all the influential actors in the Middle East conflict. In this regard, Russia not only reinforces the relations with Israel but also promotes its relations with the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and Hamas (following their victory in the 2006 elections), seeking to attract the attention of these groups and exert its influence on their positions and approaches by utilizing particular financial tools as well as through taking political-security measures.

The discussion in this paper mainly centers on Russia's increasing attention to the Israeli-Arab conflict, especially Russia's direct interaction with the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). However, the question is, what has been Russia's aim of receiving Hamas leaders and establishing high-level relations with this movement since 2006? Also, what components have influenced these interactions at international and regional levels? To answer

such questions, it has been hypothesized that Russia's main aim for establishing relations with Hamas is reviving its influence on Arab-Israeli conflicts and generally the Middle East. Having learned from the faults and errors of the Soviet era, Russia, in the era of Putin, seeks to reduce the distance from all the influential actors in the Middle East conflict. In this regard, Russia not only reinforces the relations with Israel but also promotes its relations with the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and Hamas (following their victory in the 2006 elections), seeking to attract the attention of these groups and exert its influence on their positions and approaches through leveraging cultural, economic, and financial tools as well as by taking political-security measures.

Many scholarly works have attempted to unpack the reasons behind Russia's closeness to Hamas. Shedding light on the Russian view of Hamas' ascendance to power in 2006, Epstein writes that in the 1990s, many Russian analysts believed that Hamas had lost its power and position and that it lacked the capability to rebuild its position. However, in 2007, Russia was faced with a Hamas takeover of government institutions in the Gaza Strip (Epstein, 2007, p. 10). According to Krylov and Morozov (2018), this new reality showed that Hamas has turned from a radical movement into a pragmatic one. Accordingly, they assert that building on its previous connections with Hamas leaders, Russia found itself in a position that enabled it to play a mediating role between Hamas and Fatah on the one hand and between the Palestinians and Israel on the other (Krylov & Morozov, 2018).

Others, like Malashenko (2008), believe that Russia's relations with Islamist movements such as Hamas should be analyzed within the framework of Russia's pragmatism as well as its understanding of the role religious leaders play in the Middle East and the Muslim

world. This pragmatism is highlighted in Bourttman's work, where he suggests that under Putin, Russia's foreign policy is not ideological compared to the Soviet Union. As such, it keeps a functional relationship with a U.S. ally—Israel—while simultaneously developing its relations with Hamas (Bourttman, 2006). In another view, Russia's developed ties with Hamas—designated as a terrorist organization by the US and EU—are better understood within its confrontational policies vis-à-vis the US (Katz, 2010). Koolae (1392 [2013 A.D.]), p. 335), however, believes that since Russia's foreign policy is not ideology-driven, it will help maintain a close relationship with Hamas provided that those relations do not negatively affect its relations with the US and Israel. Although we take these works into consideration, we believe that they lack a comprehensive approach to the arguments and policies the Kremlin has adopted vis-à-vis Hamas. This article aims to provide such a comprehensive analysis.

We address the subject based on a descriptive analysis approach through the use of meta-analysis, that is, secondary analysis and content analysis techniques, by relying on desk research and analysis of available data. It is noteworthy that in its analytical approach, this study depends on an eclectic admixture of primary and secondary sources in Arabic, Russian, Farsi, and English languages. In this study, these research techniques and documents are referred to due to their pivotal and innovative role in the overall academic and critical analysis of the subjects at hand.

This paper's structure is based on providing an initial analytical framework to investigate Russia's worldview and examine the position of the Middle East and the Israeli-Arab conflict in Russian policy-making. Then, the paper explores Russia's stance towards the primordial conflict in the Middle East in different periods and

analyzes differences in the policymakers' views in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Afterward, the paper discusses the factors influencing Russia's growing attention to the region, especially after 2004, and the adopted policies of Moscow towards the Middle East conflict ever since. Finally, the paper explicates Hamas' position in Russian Middle Eastern politics and addresses the underpinning reasons for Russia's interactions with Hamas. The findings are discussed in the conclusion section.

2. Conceptual framework (Russian Realism and Pragmatism)

In addressing the intricacies of Russia's well-developed relations with Hamas, we focus on foreign policy analysis as it seems more illustrative of the uniqueness of the nature of that relationship. States take into account various issues and components when setting the principles of foreign policy and diplomacy regarding a particular region or country. Some of these factors that have gained notable significance in recent decades are the faiths and religious beliefs of the people living in a desired country or region. Hence, the "faith-based diplomacy", coined by Douglas Johnston, the president emeritus and founder of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) in Washington, is regarded as "a useful tool of foreign policy" (Albright, 2006a, p. 9). As such, it highlights the significantly mediatory role of religious leaders in conflicts. Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State, believed religious leaders could assist with the peace-establishing process before, amid, and after negotiations and facilitate reaching and maintaining a compromise. Encouraging the adherents of different religions to cooperate prepares the grounds for recognizing "common humanity," thus promoting peace. The parties thus

acknowledge the other side as fellow humans; that is, people like themselves (Albright, 2006b, p. 78).

With Vladimir Putin at the helm, Russia defined its foreign policy based on its unique worldview that incorporates components of Realism and has shown a great deal of pragmatism in practice. The country harbors a particular perspective toward religion and the role of religious leaders in the region in its relations with the Middle Eastern governments and movements. Alexey Malashenko, a scholar in Islamic studies, contends that one of the Kremlin's reasons for focusing on religion as a component for setting the goals of the Russian foreign policy and redefining its relations with the Muslim world is that Russia continues to waver between "geopolitical" and "civilizational" choices, not showing any urgency to make a final decision (Malashenko, 2008, p. 5). Russia still pictures itself not as part of the eastern and western civilizations, but rather somewhere between the two, stressing, on the one hand, that Russia is not a western civilization, despite those in the Russian society and government who are (Western) Europhiles, and that, on the other hand, it is not an Asian civilization either, despite its historical and cultural ties with Asia.

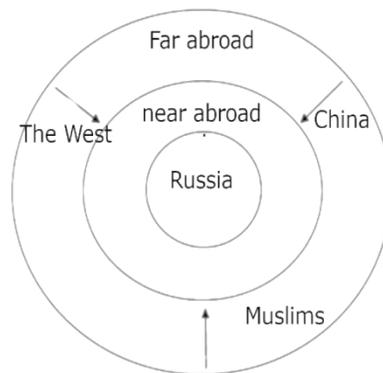
Russia contends to be neither quite European nor entirely Asian, regarding itself as a Eurasian civilization that, while having common grounds with some civilizations, is also special and unique. The idea, observed in the thoughts of pro-Eurasianism followers and more effectively in the views of a recent movement called neo-Eurasianism, can even be traced in the ideas of several Russian westophiles. Peter Chaadaev, a Russian philosopher and one of the prominent figures in the Russian pro-Western movement in the 19th, stressed that "we have never caught up with other nations... We do not belong with any of the so-called civilizations,

neither to the West nor to the East; and we have no tradition in common with any of them" (Chaadaev, 1991, p. 323).

In the Soviet era, although some political movements in the Middle East enjoyed the support of the Kremlin, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and removing ideology from the Russian foreign policy paved the way for expanding relations with the Muslims. Obviously, in the Russian Federation's early years, the statesmen were absolutely focused on the West. However, later, when Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov was in office, and especially since Putin rose to power, Kremlin turned to the East. It is possible to determine the expansion of Russian relations with the Middle East in this context. Although some Middle Eastern countries were traditional allies of the Soviets, expanding the Soviet influence in the region relied on political and geopolitical considerations, given the ideological contradiction between Islam vi-à-vis Marxism and communism. As a result of Soviet politics, the Muslim community in the Soviet Union did not have significant relations with the Islamic countries and was encircled by political walls. However, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, these walls also collapsed.

After the breakout of the Muslim unrest in the Northern Caucasia and the escalation of Russia's conflict with Chechen separatists that led to two full-fledged wars, Russia began to treat its relations with the Islamic countries and Muslim movements not merely as a foreign policy issue but also as a matter of internal policy and national security, thereby attempting to take advantage of the United States' weakened, regional power or power vacuum to expand its influence sphere while playing the role of a peace-seeking mediator to improve its image among the Muslims inside and outside Russia.

It can be asserted that Russia's view generally divides the international system into three parts, including the Russian axis, the near-abroad axis, and the far-abroad axis, arranged based on the order of significance.



Source: the authors

It is ensured that Russia's national security and interests are at the center as the top priority of Russia's diplomatic movements. This significant position dramatically emanates from the transformation in the Soviets' ideological view of the world. In other words, unlike the Soviet Union, Russia does not define its national security and interests in an ideological framework. Thus, Russia never sacrifices its national interests to support foreign allies or deal with threats endangering its allies. In the post-Soviet era, especially Putin's age, the ideologically-driven view of the Soviets was replaced with an interest-centered view, an attitude putting Russia's national interests at the top of its priorities.

Accordingly, the Russian national security and interests are at the center, and Moscow's policies on the second and third axes are based on this centrality. The term "near-abroad" refers to a set of

former Soviet states in Central Asia and Caucasia or part of the Eastern Bloc (Eastern Europe). These countries declared independence following the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union, and all ceased their systematic relations with Moscow, except for Ukraine and Belarus. Russian under Boris Yelstin contributed to widening the distance between the near-abroad states and Moscow and approaching the West by adopting pro-Atlanticism policies while also acquiescing to the superiority of western democratic norms and market economy system (Koolae, 1383 [2004 A.D.], pp. 123-124).

In fact, Moscow intended to approach Washington and utilize their aids in advancing economic and political reforms and transform the bankrupt Soviet structures. However, the leaders of new Russia said goodbye to Westernism after observing the developments in Eastern Europe, Caucasia, and Central Asia, such as NATO's advances to the East and the expansion of the U.S. military bases abroad. Moreover, with Putin in power, the near-abroad states gained dramatic significance as unofficial spheres for Russia's influence.

The near-abroad states form the second axis of policymakers' priorities in Russia. The significance of these countries is influenced by their immediate geographical location and economic-security dependence on Russia. In fact, as the Kremlin holds, it is impossible to focus on the first axis and ensure Russia's security and national interests without considering the second axis. Thus, with the fading stance of the westophiles, especially after Putin's rise to power, the world has borne witness to Moscow's distancing from the West, thereby attempting to repress the Western influence in near-abroad countries.

The third axis in Russia's worldview consists of far-abroad states. This axis comprises all the states that are not on the second axis. These countries do not naturally have the same significance level; some are more significant thanks to their geographical links to states on the first and second axes, thus a higher security effect. Besides, some states' significance relies on their influence in the energy market or other issues intertwined with Russia's national interests. The significance of far-abroad states in Russia's worldview has to be explored in the context of the Russian Federation's security-oriented view of global threats after the Cold War.

The Russians' worldview comprises three major threats: the West, China, and the Muslims (Karami, 2010). The West's threat against Russia's security and national interests emanates from Russia's attempts to expand its security and economic influence in near-abroad countries. In the future, China's threat will be significantly more extensive and more effective than the threat of the West. This growing threat roots in the restoration of China's power and its rising as a two- or three-dimensional superpower. In this respect, China's ranking as the second threat is only a matter of time. The Muslims rank the third threat in Moscow's view. This threat is essentially multi-dimensional, arising first from the Muslim community in Russia and then from the religious movements in the Islamic world. In recent years, Russia has been dramatically concerned about the spread of insecurity in the Muslim world (Afghanistan and Iraq) to its Muslim-populated regions. Accordingly, Moscow has emphasized developing particular relations with Islamic countries and organizations, especially the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Malashenko, 2007), successfully becoming the observer state in OIC as well as improving its relations with Islamic countries.

Recognized as the fifth regional priority in the "Russian Foreign Policy Doctrine" document (Kremlin, 2016), the Middle East is on the third axis of the Russian worldview, drawing Russia's attention to various issues in addition to the Islamic threats. These issues include expanding Russia's international influence and utilizing it in bargaining with the West over critical issues, such as the deployment of a U.S. missile defense system to Eastern Europe. Other related issues will be discussed in the section on Russia's re-entry into the Middle East.

3. The Middle East Conflicts: from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation

The security and political equations in the international arena and the threats and opportunities associated with them influence the actions of the Russian Federation and, formerly, the Soviet Union in the Middle East. The Soviet Union's entry into the Middle East in the 1950s through Egypt and under the influence of the Baghdad Pact to complete the Soviet containment rings is an appropriate reflection of the effect of international developments on the Soviet entry into the Middle East. From the Soviet perspective, the Israeli-Arab conflict was regarded as a conspiracy of "imperialism and global capitalism" that had to be confronted almost immediately. This view regarded Israel as the tool in the hands of the West and its ally. This view became the prevailing thought among the Soviet and Arab politicians following the breakout of the 1956 Israeli-French-British war against Egypt¹.

¹ . Previously, the Soviet Union interpreted the establishment of Israel in the context of its fights against Britain as the eradication of one of its Middle Eastern strongholds. Thus, they voted in favor of the establishment of Israel. The Soviet Union was in fact the first country to recognize Israel.

In the first half of the 1990s, Russia withdrew from this international chess game. The first government of Boris Yeltsin did not pay much attention to the Middle East and primarily focused on the West and the US. However, the failure of pro-West policies finally altered Moscow's policy to interact with the West, including in the Middle East (Dannreuther, 2004). Russia attempted to expand its relations with the Arab countries in the region by pursuing various policies, such as clearing the debts of Arab countries, advocating the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the 1967 territories, and expanding energy cooperations. Kheiri Al-Aridi, the former Palestinian ambassador to Russia, states that Russia tries to cooperate with the Arab world as a regional entity. This view differs from that of other countries that do not construe the concept of the Arab world (Al-Aridi, 2009). Thus, in this period, unlike Yeltsin's first period, Moscow intended to adopt independent policies toward the Middle East conflict and engage more extensively in the attempts to resolve the conflict. Besides, the election of Primakov (a recognized, pro-Arab politician) to the Russian Foreign Ministry and his harsh criticism of Israel that effectively halted the Oslo Accord talks was welcomed by the Arabs who read it as an action by the Russian Federation to walk on the footsteps of Soviet Union with a view to playing a balancing role in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Moreover, whenever a right-wing government is in power in Israel, the Arabs begin to display a tendency to support Russia's return to the Middle East to somewhat balance the Israeli-American hegemony in the region (Dannreuther, 2004). Following the Madrid Conference and supporting the Oslo Peace Talks, Russia endorsed the Arab League's peace initiative (Beirut 2004), making extensive efforts to reach out to all conflict parties and participate in the

Quartet formation. However, in the case of Hamas, Russia played the most prominent role in 2006, when Hamas came to power in Palestine. From then onward, Moscow kept the door to dialogue open and received many Hamas leaders (Atwan, 2008).

Based on Russia's adopted regional policies, Russia's aims of returning to the Middle East and the determining components of Russia's Middle Eastern policy can be summarized as follows:

a) **Power restoration:** The Middle East was an exceptional opportunity for Russia to retrieve its international power and credibility, meaning Russia attempted to demonstrate that while its power and influence in the Middle East were ascending, the US was not only losing its regional influence, but Russia was also witnessing the actual defeat of U.S. policies in Iraq and Afghanistan (Freedman, 2007). The Middle East can thus be interpreted as part of Russia's general power restoration policy.

b) **Prioritizing national interests:** In contrast to the Soviet era, Russia's policy toward the Middle East is far from an ideology-oriented doctrine centering on the Cold War period zero-sum game (Bourtman, 2006). Instead of taking sides with either of the parties in the Middle East conflicts, Russia has extended its relations with all the actors.

c) **Economic interests:** Pursuing the interests of oil corporations has become one of the distinct features of Russia's Middle Eastern policy (Smith, 2005). Also, considering Russia's position as one of the largest exporters of oil and gas, cooperating with other major energy exporters is a vital strategy to prevent accelerated and unpredictable transformations in the global energy market.

d) **The threat of Islamic fundamentalism:** About 20% of the Russian population is Muslim. Moreover, the majority of people from near-

abroad counties (the second axis of the Russian worldview) are also Muslim. Moscow has always been attempting to display itself as the mediator between pro-Islamists on the one hand and the US and Europe on the other hand (Malashenko, 2007), aiming to improve its regional credibility and encourage Muslim counties to take a neutral position on Chechnya.

"Furthermore, Russia has engaged in the Middle East conflict to show the Muslims in Russia and elsewhere its resolution to resolve the issue" (Katz, 2010, p. 9). From a broader perspective, Russia has entered the Middle East to prevent the spread of insecurity and instability in this chaotic region to Russia and its neighboring regions and stop the financial and promotional assistance of the Middle Eastern countries and Islamic movements to Chechen Muslims. Attempting to expand its credibility and influence in the Middle East, Russia managed to become an OIC observer state.

Putin's rise to power was accompanied by several domestic and international developments that intensified Russia's efforts to expand its influence: the Second Chechen War; the occupation of a school by Chechen insurgents in September 2004, which led to the killing of 300 Russian citizens (*RIA Novosti*, 2010); the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine and the election of the pro-Western candidate over the pro-Russian candidate; the U.S. conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq; the rise in oil prices in the global markets, which provided Russia with more revenue and a higher capability to play its desired roles. This capability was manifested in canceling the debts of the Arab countries to the Soviet Union. By canceling a greater portion of these debts, Moscow increased its influence in the Middle East. Another turning point in Russia's new Middle Eastern policy was the election of Hamas in the 2006 parliamentary elections.

4. The position of the relations with Hamas in Russia's calculations

Russia has consistently stressed its readiness to resolve the Middle East conflict, demonstrating its desire to restore stability in the Palestinian Autonomous Territories, establish unity among the Palestinians, and prepare the grounds for the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations (Athari & Bahaman, 1390 [2011 A.D.], p. 38). Moscow regarded Hamas' triumph in the parliamentary elections in Palestine and Washington's refusal to negotiate with Hamas as an opportunity to advance its diplomatic goals in the Middle East. Just as the US was able to negotiate with both Israelis and Arabs from 1973 to 1991, Russia initiated the talks with Hamas and Israel after the Russian election in 2006, thanks to having relations with both sides. The US held talks only with Israel (Katz, 2006).

The formation of the relations between Hamas and Russia has been influenced by the Russians' view of Hamas and its position in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Muslim world. As was mentioned earlier, Moscow's strategy to expand its influence in the region is centered on reinforcing and deepening its relations with all the involved parties in the Middle East conflict, which Russian authorities have repeatedly stated. For instance, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, states that Russia's policy does not aim to favor the Arabs or Israel; it seeks to work in favor of Russia's interests, including maintaining close and friendly ties with the Arab world and Israel (Boutman, 2006).

This policy of Russia has improved its Middle Eastern credibility and mobility in the Middle East. For instance, after Khaled Meshaal's visit to Moscow, Avigdor Lieberman, a radical politician of the "Israel Our Home" party and Israel's next foreign

minister, stated, after a visit to Moscow, that Russia and Israel had the same position on the Middle East conflict. Interestingly, several days earlier, Khalid Mashaal had made the same announcement in Moscow (Epestein, 2007). Moreover, Moscow's recent efforts in this regard have culminated in stronger relations with Arab countries and have extended ties with Israel (Katz, 2010), allowing Russia to play a more influential role in the Middle East conflict in recent years.

Although associated with the general framework of Moscow's Middle Eastern policy, Russia's interaction with Hamas is related to Hamas' nature and activities from Russia's perspective. Moscow holds that the victory of Hamas in the elections attests to its popularity, acceptance, and the potential role it can play in the future peace process of the Middle East. In February 2006, Sergei Ivanov stated that "sooner or later, the international community will have to start relations with Hamas" (Smith, 2006). Therefore, Russia contends that Hamas has become one of the main parties in the Middle East conflict following its victory in the election.

It should also be noted that Moscow does not regard Hamas as a terrorist organization. Russia's intelligence agency put seventeen pro-Islamist groups on the terrorist organizations' list in 2006; Hamas was not on the list. The head of Russia's counterterrorism committee in FSB named the following reasons for excluding Hamas from the list: "Hamas has not been engaged in any violent activity in Russia. Also, it has had no connections with the illegal, armed groups in Northern Caucasia" (Levitt, 2007). From the Russian perspective, it is of paramount importance that Hamas' activities are limited to Palestine and are unrelated to the Russian Muslims (Katz, 2010). Given Khaled Meshaal's statement in Moscow on Chechnya, "Chechnya is an internal matter of Russia"

(*REGNUM*, 2004), it seems that Russia's attention to Hamas and playing host to its leaders have been quite fruitful for Moscow –at least regarding the Chechnya crisis.

Another related aspect to this issue is the necessity of Russia's nonconfrontation with Hamas. After the assassination of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the founder and leader of Hamas, on March 22, 2004, Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi, his deputy and successor, stated that Hamas would seek bloodshed by attacking Israel and the US. He stated: "What is happening in Iraq is a war against Iraq. The same thing is happening in Palestine. Therefore, the Islamic Ummah should stand up and shake the ground under the feet of these Zionists and their American supporters" (Levitt, 2006, p. 203).

Moscow did not disregard the association of the US with Sheikh Ahmad Yassin's assassination and their support of Israel on several other occasions. One of Russia's incentives to approach Hamas has been to display its neutrality. The close Israeli-Russian relations have been a source of concern to the Russians, who worry they may be accused of supporting Israel. Therefore, as a solution to balance the warm Israeli-Russian relations and write off such accusations, Russia has resolved to establish links with Hamas. It should also be noted that Russia's moves in relation to Hamas have been aligned with Hamas' popularity in the Islamic world. These relations improve Russia's credibility and deepen ties with the Islamic countries. Preventing or stopping aids to Chechen Muslims by these countries has been one of Russia's main goals (Konstantinov, 2003).

A new issue was raised in Moscow in 2008 as new Russia directed its attention to Israel's movements in near-abroad states under the influence of Russia's war with Georgia. After the war, the

Russians began to view Israel's presence in Georgia as part of the US' efforts to encircle Russia in its vital space on the Asian front, following its siege from Eastern Europe. The exposure of Georgia-Israel military relations promoted this view (Saleh, 2009, p. 214). In that context, it seems that reinforcing the relations with Hamas has been another Russian strategy to deal with Israeli movements in the near-abroad states.

Given what has been mentioned so far, the developments in Russia-Hamas relations were not far-fetched. The nature of the Russia-Hamas relations is based on Russia's Middle Eastern policy, its view of the Middle East conflict, the identity and activities of Hamas, and Moscow's tools for action in this conflict.

5. Russian and Hamas: After winning the election

Following Hamas' victory in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, for the first time in the history of this parliament, the movement outstripped Fatah and formed the cabinet. The Quadripartite Committee stipulated three preconditions for Hamas' incorporation into the peace talks: recognition of Israel's right to exist, commitment to rejecting terrorism, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations between PLO and Israel (Zeidabadi, 1385 [2007 A.D.]). Meanwhile, despite being a member of the committee that confirmed the committee's position on Hamas, Russia took measures that can be interpreted, by some, as negating its commitments in the committee. That said, several Western countries endorsed this policy of Russia.

Moscow interpreted Hamas' victory in the parliamentary elections as a "serious opposition" to the U.S. Middle Eastern diplomacy (Freedman, 2007), justifying its policies toward the

regional conflicts at the behest of Palestinians. In March 2006, Russia invited a Hamas delegation to Moscow. Despite the failure of Khaled Mashaal, the chairman of its political bureau, to meet with Putin, hosting him and his entourage evoked bold controversy, opposition, and acceptance worldwide. Further, these political positions did not significantly affect Russia's policy on Hamas. In 2006, Hamas was still not listed as a terrorist group by FBS (*Lenta.ru*, 2006; Borisov, 2006). Moscow again played host to Hamas leaders, including Khaled Mashaal and Mahmoud al-Zahaar (*RIA Novosti*, 2006; *RIA Novosti*, 2007; *RIA Novosti*, 2011).

In 2007, Moscow's stance on Hamas somehow changed, making Russia's policy closer to that of the Quadripartite Committee. The first reason was the developments in Gaza following the expansion of Hamas' influence and the escape of PLO security forces from the strait. Many analysts believe that Hamas' movements against Fatah and uprooting the PLO's security structure in the Gaza Strip have been a coup against the law, the very law that had allowed Hamas to run for the election and win (Wittes, 2008). Hence, Russia reduced its relations with Hamas after this transformation in Palestine; Andrei Denisov, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, announced: "Russia has reduced the level of its relations with Hamas" (*The New York Times*, 2007). During Mahmoud Abbas' visit to Moscow in the following month, Putin told him, "You will have our support as the legitimate leader of the Palestinians" (*The New York Times*, 2007).

The second issue concerns the probable expectations of Moscow regarding relations with Hamas. Russia intended to enter the Middle East conflict strongly and improve its international credibility through seizing the opportunity provided by Hamas. Moscow, in fact, established relations with Hamas and then

attempted to alter Hamas' positions on Israel as they were aligned with the Quadripartite Committee's preconditions. If made possible by Russia's mediatory role, these changes would obviously fulfill Moscow's goals. However, "Hamas leaders demonstrated that they did not find their friendship with Moscow worthy enough to change their positions" (Katz, 2006).

Accordingly, affected by these two factors mentioned above, the Russia-Hamas relations have been showing a descending trend since 2007, although the relations never came to a full stop. The descending trend lasted until late 2008 and early 2009. However, since then, many factors have improved and contributed to intensifying the Russia-Hamas relations: the siege of the Gaza Strip, Israel's 2008-9 war against Hamas, Israel's attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, and Russia's middle stand against the war in Gaza (Al-Kiyali, 2009, pp. 235-236) compared to the U.S. position, which Hamas believed was pro-Israel.

Medvedev met with Khaled Mashaal during his visit to Damascus in May 2010. In the meeting, Medvedev called on Hamas to accelerate the release of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier imprisoned in Gaza. In return, Khaled Mashaal called on Israel to reduce the siege of Gaza for humanitarian assistance (Haaretz, 2010). Vehemently protesting this meeting, Israel called it very "disappointing." However, a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman supported the meeting, saying, "Hamas is a movement supported and trusted by a major portion of Palestinians" (*Aljazeera*, 2010).

In 2018, Russia repeatedly proposed holding a summit for the Palestinian National Reconciliation. In February 2019, this summit took place in Moscow. Various Palestinian political movements sent their representatives to the summit: Hamas, Fatah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

(PFLP), Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), Palestinian National Initiative, the Lightning Movement, the Palestinian Democratic Union, and the Palestine Liberation Front (Lavrov, 2019). At the end of the summit, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, announced to the Palestinian representatives: "We [Russia] cannot impose anything on you. However, we would like to tell you, as a friend, that resuming negotiations will be our priority; we would like to receive all of you under a single group in the upcoming talks with our Israeli colleagues. We have this understanding that this is something that should be realized within the PLO's framework" (Lavrov, 2019).

In an interview in March 2017, Ismail Haniyeh, the chairman of Hamas's political bureau, described Russia's role in the Palestinian issue as "distinct and decisive" and "different" from other Middle East Quartet members, admiring Russia's actions concerning this issue (*RIA Novosti*, 2020).

It should be noted that Russia has been seeking close relations with all sides of the Middle East conflict, including Hamas, under the influence of their particular view of the region, rationalizing its relations with the movement based on acceptability and popularity of Hamas among the Palestinian society. "Russia's aim of establishing relations with Hamas's political side is to encourage its leaders to accept the conditions of the international community so that this organization can gain international legitimacy and make realistic decisions regarding the Palestinian union, which, in the view of Moscow, is necessary for the advances in the peaceful settlement of this issue (Nosenko, Isaev & Melkumyan, 2017, p. 120).

Mikhail Bogdanov, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister and

Special Envoy for the Middle East and Africa, had announced Russia's willingness and readiness to hold a meeting between Mahmoud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu in Moscow over a telephone call with Fatah representatives on June 23, 2016. In an interview with the Al-Ahram, he noted that Russia seeks to resume direct talks between the conflict parties while describing Israel's plan to occupy parts of the West Bank as "dangerous" (TASS, 2020a, TASS, 2020b).

In July 2016, over a telephone call with Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, Mahmoud Abbas, "stressed Russia's principled stance in support of a long-term settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on international law and standards" (Kremlin, 2020b). In February 2017, during Putin's visit to Bethlehem, he met with Mahmoud Abbas. In response to Mahmoud Abbas' appreciation of Putin for Russia's "political, economic, cultural, financial, and security support to the Palestinians," Putin stressed that Russia fully supported Palestinians. He announced his country's readiness to reinforce and develop economic and humanitarian relations with Palestine and to assist in reaching a compromise between Palestine and Israel while referring to the ancient roots of the relations between Russia and Palestine (Kremlin, 2020a). The developments in Syria and Iraq and the fading U.S. presence in the region have led to the higher activity of Russia's general foreign policy on the Middle East and the Palestine-Israel conflict in recent years. Over the course of these years, Russia has "both highlighted the necessity of ensuring Israel's security and Palestinians' legitimate right to establish an independent state" (Dolgov, 2019).

Besides political tools, Russia also uses economic and cultural tools to reinforce its role and position in Palestine. Russia also

expands the relations between the two countries in various fields within the framework of the Russian-Palestinian Intergovernmental Cooperation Commission. In an interview with *Izvestia* in summer 2018, the Palestinian ambassador to Russia stated that around 25 Russian companies in Palestine were investing in tourism, industry, pharmacy, and agriculture. Abdul Hafez Nawfal talks about 500 thousand Russian citizens who travel to Palestine for recreation or pilgrimage every year. In this context, Vladimir Putin has announced his country's readiness to raise this number to one million (Gulov, 2018).

6. Conclusion

Many components and factors in the 2000s drew Russia's attention to the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially after the decline of Russia's influence in the region: the risk of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism to Russia's Muslim community, who make up about 20% of Russia's total population, threatens Russia's national security. Other factors include President Putin's effort to restore Russia's global power, which deems it necessary to play a constructive role in lingering crises around the globe, including one of the oldest ones in the Middle East. Putin also strives for a refocus in foreign policy to prioritize Russia's interests as opposed to the Soviet ideological drive, as well as its economic and security interests in the Middle East. These interests can be well served through a more substantial footprint that signals commitment and a mediating position that can have main parties to the conflict bank on the Russian role.

Understanding Hamas' position in the Palestinian political equation, particularly after its victory in the 2006 parliamentary

elections, Russia aimed to develop relations with Hamas leaders with the primary goal of elevating its position as a vital partner in the region by cozying up to the winner along with the strong ties it already enjoyed with the PLO. This strategy gives Russia the capability to play a role in both the Palestinian national reconciliation process and the Israeli-Palestinian stand-off. Russia is thereby put in a unique position, considering that neither the US nor the EU enjoyed functional relations with Hamas that could consequently translate into a mediating role as envisaged by the Kremlin. Hamas' victory represented an opportunity beyond Palestine as well, with Russia positioning itself as a significant power with a more balanced stance compared to that of the US by demonstrating a willingness to engage with and settle the crises of the region. Another important aspect is the substantial power rivalry over influence in the Middle East. A more active multilateral approach could give Russia an advantage over the US, which might be viewed as partial and less trustworthy by many Arab and Muslim nations in the region.

Overall, establishing relations with the popular Hamas Movement is part of Russia's general policy toward the major crisis in the Middle East. Although undergoing fluctuations due to intra-Palestinian differences, Moscow's relations with Hamas were never severed as Moscow foresees the potentially decisive influence of Hamas in the future of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as in the intra-Palestinian differences. Hence, it is necessary for Russia to maintain a close relationship with Hamas in order for the country to have a role to play in the future of the crisis. It is also of paramount importance for Russian Middle Eastern influence to keep a public picture of a more balanced, less partial global power with an inherent interest in pushing the peace process forward. In

addition to the Palestinian as well as the Palestinian-Israeli equation, this can elevate Moscow's influence in other parts of the Middle East—a region home to great power politics that is experiencing US retrenchment as an ongoing process and has recently witnessed U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

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