

The Future of Peace in the Middle East: Russia's Approach to Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Abstract

One of the most important conflicts in the Middle East, which has slowed down the peace process, is the tension between Israel and Palestine. Despite international efforts by various actors to resolve the crisis over the past few decades, the conflict continues. The purpose of this article is to examine the role of Russia as a major world power in the Middle East peace process, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The main question is what is Russia's role in the tensions between Israel and Palestine and whether the possibility of advancing peace in the Middle East is conceivable. Russia is in close contact and on good terms with all the key players and countries in the Middle East and playing broker or interlocutor when a crisis arises. That is why Russia's relations with Israel, as well as Palestine, have improved in recent years, with both sides citing Russia as an influential player in resolving the crisis. The results show Russia's approach to Palestine is determined by several factors, the most important of which are: First, Russia's effective role in the most important conflict in the Middle East, so that regional and supra-regional parties recognize Russia's position. Second, trying to maintain balance in Russian relations with the Israeli triangle; Palestinian Authority and Palestinian groups in the West Bank and their supporting Arab countries such as Egypt and Qatar, Hamas, and Iran. Third, Russia's involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict must have acceptable gains in the national interest.

Keywords: Israel, Palestine, Conflict Resolution, Russia, Middle East.

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Introduction

The Middle East conflict is the longest unresolved conflict in the world. Its beginning dates back to the 40s of the XX century and is connected with the problem of creating Jewish and Arab states in Palestine. This decision was adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 29, 1947. However, this decision was initially rejected by both neighboring Arab states and the Arab population of Palestine itself. The Arabs fundamentally did not recognize the idea of returning Jews to their historical hearth - Palestine, considering this territory their own.

By the end of the 19th century, i.e. by the time the Zionist movement was born, only 24,000 Jews and 426,000 Arabs lived in Palestine. As a result of the activities of the Zionists, the number of Jews here increased, but by 1947 there were half of them than Arabs. The proclamation of the State of Israel on May 15, 1948, led to the invasion of Palestinian territory by the armies of five Arab countries. The first Arab-Israeli war ended with the victory of Israel, which added the territory of Palestine to the territory designated by the UN for its creation. The second war - the triple aggression of Great Britain, France, and Israel against Egypt after the nationalization of the Suez Canal - did not significantly change the Palestinian problem. The third, "six-day" war of 1967 brought the remaining Palestinian territories under Israeli control: the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Ачкасов&Ланцов, 2019: 432).

To prevent war and make a permanent peace, Israel and Arab countries have sometimes negotiated with each other successfully, for more than the past 40 years. The U.S. has always had a key role in the negotiations between conflicting parties. However, the parties involved in the conflict are not restricted to the U.S., because the regional actors including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Turkey, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the transnational actors including the European Union (especially Great Britain, France, and Germany), Russia, and to some extent China have a crucial interest in the Palestinian territory and Israel.

Russia has been actively involved in the region to preserve its interests, namely ensuring stability in a region where jihadi terrorism

has run rampant. At the same time, Russia is constantly working with all the necessary partners to ensure stability there.

However, some prominent Russian figures including Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, the Russian deputy envoy to the United Nations Vladimir Safronkov, and scholar Vitaly Naumkin have suggested that Russia can play a crucial role in resolving the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the prospect for a solution to this conflict seems bleak, having a new player that can help is a positive sign. In fact, Russia has unique credentials to kick-start peace talks, since it is a veto-holding member of the UN Security Council and a member of the Middle East Quartet. In both international bodies, Washington has been mingling with far right-wing elements in Israel and stonewalling any potential peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians by vetoing key United Nations Security Council resolutions. A more reliable player who is active in the region, like Russia, would serve well as a broker to help the necessary parties come to an agreement (Battat, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to examine the role of Russia as a major world power in the Middle East peace process, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The main question is what is Russia's role in the tensions between Israel and Palestine and whether the possibility of advancing peace in the Middle East is conceivable. Russia is in close contact and on good terms with all the key players and countries in the Middle East and playing broker or interlocutor when a crisis arises. That is why Russia's relations with Israel, as well as Palestine, have improved in recent years, with both sides citing Russia as an influential player in resolving the crisis. The research method in this article is descriptive-analytical.

Israeli and Palestinian Perspectives

Since 1948 the conflict between Arabs and Jews (or Zionists) called the Israel-Arab conflict, however, it is appropriate to describe it as the Israel-Palestine conflict in the 21st century. As Moshe Ya'alon, former Israeli defense minister, said, "Today, at the present moment, in the meantime, there is not an Israeli-Arab conflict: there is an Israeli-Palestinians conflict"(Keinon, 2019). Nevertheless, the key role of international actors can never be ignored. Before dealing with the

undeniable role of Russia, the leading role of Israel and Palestine in resolving the conflict has to be considered.

The current Israeli government's perspective on a peace agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis is nearly nonexistent. This is Israel's most far-right government coalition since it first became a state in 1948. Since becoming Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu has always found an excuse not to seek a peace agreement with the Palestinians (Jerusalem, 2013). For instance, in 2013, he outlined his so-called "vision" for a future Palestinian state. He stated that there would be no agreement unless the Palestinian leadership recognizes Israel as "the nation-state of the Jewish people." This is an ill-conceived approach as Israel's concern should be about creating a two-state solution (and future narrative) for its national security rather than ensuring that its future neighboring state recognizes the complexion of its statehood (Battat, 2018).

Under Netanyahu's leadership, he has always suggested that the Palestinians are divided and when they did unite, he suggested that they are aligning with Hamas—a "terrorist" organization—and, thus, Israel cannot negotiate with the Palestinians. In reality, Hamas conducted terrorist activities in the past, but today they are very popular with Gazans, East Jerusalemites, and West Bankers. If elections were held today in the Palestinian Territories, Hamas most likely would win in all three cities. For the last nine years, Prime Minister Netanyahu and his coalition governments have accused the Palestinian leadership of incitement. However, the blame should be put on Netanyahu's government for their incitement in the Occupied Territories (East Jerusalem and the West Bank), as it condones the daily activities of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and the settlers' mistreatment of the Palestinians on a day-to-day basis (Battat, 2018).

There is still some hope because there are a few party leaders that want to seek a two-state solution. However, the two main leaders—Avi Gabay ("Labor" Party) and Yair Lapid ("Yesh Atid" Party) — do not seem to indicate that they are genuine in seeking a two-state solution. Their statements about Jerusalem, and other issues for a future agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians, are disheartening. Both Gabay of the "Labor" Party (a central partner in the "Zionist Union" Party with Tzipi Livni's "Hatnuah" Party) and

Lapid of the “Yesh Atid” Party have shifted to the right of the Israeli political spectrum. However, their statements signal trouble for the two-state solution (Raphael, 2017). Lieberman, the Chairman of “Yisrael Beiteinu,” is a pragmatic leader who might be the only politician on the Israeli right that will change his view if he sees the security of his country at risk. His negative comments about Arabs, Palestinians, and a future peace agreement makes one wonder if his views will change when faced with any potential agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

It is still disheartening to hear the new “Meretz” Chairwoman make that promise to voters despite Lieberman’s rhetoric, which puts him in opposition to a fair peace treaty. Also, “Meretz’s” silence on Trump’s Jerusalem declaration, like other political parties on the left, except for the “Joint List,” is also demoralizing to those struggling to bring peace (Eldar, 2018).

Hamas is another faction within the PA and the largest faction within the PLC. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Mahmoud Zahar, and several others founded it in 1987, right after the beginning of the first intifada. Its current Chief of the Political Bureau is Ismail Haniyeh. He succeeded Khaled Mashal, who held on to the position from 1996 until 2017. Originally an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas was hostile to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)—the predecessor to the PA—and Israel. It has revamped its hostile charter, which recognizes Israel as a state along the 1967 borders—indicating the land that Israel obtained in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War when Israel took ownership of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

Hamas struggles to maintain legitimacy in the Gaza Strip, where it has governed since the power struggle between them and Fatah following the 2005 Disengagement. As the economic situation has deteriorated over the years, it has led to small divisions within the rank-and-file, but nothing noteworthy of any type of threat to their leadership in the Gaza Strip. For all intents and purposes, Hamas is a necessary partner in a future peace agreement as it is still popular with the majority of Palestinians.

Suggesting that Hamas is solely a terrorist organization is a mistake. There are some elements within the organization that still

seek a hard line with Israel and want to have the entire state of Israel. However, this is not the official position of Hamas. This is the main argument that comes from the Israeli right and the naysayers to openly negotiate with Hamas. To those that feel that Hamas should never be trusted and dialogue with the organization is a non-starter: The only way to change Hamas' behavior for the better is to engage them in the process, rather than leave them as an outlier where their mischievous behavior will certainly continue. Engaging Hamas is necessary because, without Hamas, there is no peace agreement.

Russia and the Prospects of Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Russia, being a great Eurasian power, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and co-sponsor of the Middle East Peace process, has great potential to promote settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

In connection with the strengthening of the role of the Russian Federation in solving the most complex and pressing problems of the Middle East region, which is now in a zone of extremely dangerous turbulence, it seems that the policy of American diplomacy in the Palestinian-Israeli direction ended in complete failure. It is as a result of the collapse of the US mediation efforts that the peace process between the two sides of the conflict has found itself in a deep impasse (Крылов & Морозов, 2017: 207).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the drastic reduction in Russian economic and military power in the 1990s resulted in a Russian retreat from the Middle East, a region where the Soviet Union had been a significant player since the mid-1950s. The Russian leadership has long desired to return to the region. In November 1994, Yeltsin's then envoy to the Middle East, Viktor Posuvalyuk, outlined Russia's view on the Middle East. It is known that at all stages of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict the Soviet Union consistently and persistently defended the interests of the Palestinian people.

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, many Russian-Jews left the Russian Federation, because under former President Boris Yeltsin, life was tough and Israel offered better opportunities. Today, Israel has a significant population of Russian-Jews as well as other Jewish people from other countries of the former Soviet Union. Since President Putin

came to power, he has sought better relations with Israel. Over the years, there have been numerous state visits: many Israeli Prime Ministers visited Russia and President Putin and others have visited Israel on many occasions. Russia also has good ties with the Palestinians. This relationship predates the Russian Federation when the Soviet Union usually took the side of the Palestinians. Russia wants to ensure stability in this region because of its fears that the extremism can spread to its backyard and, potentially, into its own country. It also has the experience and the relevant expertise to make the two-state solution a reality. More importantly, Russia has been in the region for centuries.

Russia is a close neighbor of the Near East and Gulf region. Russia has built major power stations, plants, and dams – uniquely dams - in the region and there are many Russians there - there are 800,000 former Russians and former Soviet citizens in Israel. Over 100,000 families in the Arab world are related to families in Russia. Almost 20 million Russian Muslims regularly visit Mecca in their tens of thousands (A Smith, 2002: 1).

The Russian foreign policy community's sentiment that Russia should be recognized as a great power provides a further reason why Russia should play an active independent role in the Middle East. Russia has long advocated the creation of an OSCE type regional security system in the region. Her position as co-chairman (along with the USA) of the Madrid process, which began in 1991, gives her an official leading role in attempts to reach a settlement.

In 1993, in Oslo, with the mediation of Russia and the United States, an agreement was reached on the mutual recognition of the PLO and Israel as negotiating partners. The PLO leadership has officially announced its rejection of terrorism. In 1994, an agreement was signed on the first phase of establishing self-government in parts of the Palestinian territories. In 1999, new steps were taken to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, a Palestinian National Authority is being created, over part of which the Palestinians have gained complete control. This part was an armed Palestinian police corps and a Palestinian Authority has been formed. The Russian Federation has undertaken to train the necessary personnel for this. But on the way of creating a sovereign Palestinian

state and the establishment between it, other Arab countries and Israel stable good neighborly relationships are faced with a number of obstacles (Ачкасов&Ланцов, 2019: 434-435).

During the events of November 1992 in Lebanon, and the subsequent expulsion of 400 Hamas fighters from Israel, the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed its deep concern about the disruption of the peace process. During 1993, relations with Israel continued to improve, and the agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization on the principles of peace was signed on September 13, 1993, in the presence of Andrei Kozirov at the White House (Koolae, 2002: 23).

Disagreements exist between Palestinians and Israelis over the issue of the status of Jerusalem, the problems of refugees, and Jewish settlements. Both sides believe that Jerusalem should be their capital, and both claim the Temple Mount and other sacred sites.

Russia has sought to play an active role in attempts to promote a settlement of the dispute. Moscow's position is in broad harmony with the USA, arguing that both Israel and the Palestinian authority should abide by the recommendations of the Mitchell Committee and Tenet plan. In March 2002, foreign minister Igor Ivanov confirmed that Russian policy was acting in coordination with the USA, the EU, and the UN, aiming at stepping up efforts to overcome the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation and resuming the progress towards an all-inclusive Arab-Israeli settlement based on the Madrid principles, UN Security Council Resolutions 242, 338 and 1397, and the existing agreements and deals. To this can now be added UN Security Council resolutions 1402 and 1403, passed in March-April 2002. This is the officially declared Russian policy (A Smith, 2002: 2).

The recognition by the American side of the legitimacy of individual settlement enclaves in the West Bank meant de facto abandonment of resolutions 242 and 338, previously supported by the UN Security Council, demanding that Israel withdraw its troops from the territories occupied in the 1967 war, i.e. those territories in which a Palestinian state is to be created. It is clear that such an "initiative" would not have been approved by the member states of the UN Security Council. Russia, China, England, and France are known to strongly oppose the policy of developing the Israeli settlement sector

in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. In contrast, the US is demanding "that Israel freeze all settlement activities, but this should not be a precondition for the resumption of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians" (Крылов&Морозов, 2017: 209).

Unlike the Soviet Union, modern Russia has great opportunities to play the role of a mediator in the settlement of the Middle East conflict. On the one hand, the Russian Federation's good contacts have been maintained with representatives of various political forces within the Palestinian national authority. Russia always advocated the creation of an independent Palestinian Arab state. On the other hand, Russia has developed constructive relations with Israel in recent years. A large number of immigrants from Russia and other CIS countries live in Israel today. Unlike Soviet times, they maintain close ties with the historical homeland. There are political parties in Israel that protect the interests of the Russian-speaking population of the country. Representatives of these parties are part of the Israeli government. This circumstance helps to conduct a dialogue between Moscow and Tel Aviv.

In March 2010, a regular meeting of the Quartet took place in Moscow with mediators for a Middle East settlement. It adopted the participation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S. Lavrov, Secretary of State of the USA H. Clinton, UN Secretary-General Park Ki-moon, US Special Envoy for the Middle East Settlement J. Mitchell and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy K. Ashton. The final document approved at the Moscow meeting of the "Quartet", was prepared with the leading role of Russian diplomacy. This document covers all the main aspects of the Middle East settlement, provides an objective characteristic of the situation in the region, goals are outlined, which must be achieved at all stages of negotiations between the parties involved in the conflict. Positions of the Quartet members on the issue of East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and other sensitive issues have become significantly closer. It is especially important that in Moscow the meeting developed a common view on the specific time frame for the proclamation of a Palestinian state (Ачкасов&Ланцов, 2019: 436).

In such conditions, new diplomatic efforts are required from the states interested in the final settlement of the Middle East conflict, including Russia. And this, in turn, presupposes the intensification of relations with all countries of the region and before just with Arab countries.

Israel is perhaps the most significant US ally in the region, which is also developed relations with Russia. Over the past five years, Moscow has become an irreplaceable advisor Jerusalem on security issues, primarily due to Russia's role in the Syrian conflict. Like Turkey, Israel needs cooperation with Russia to protect its interests in Syria, in particular, to prevent Iran from establishing a permanent military presence there and to interfere with the supply of the latest types of weapons and military equipment from Iran to Hezbollah. It requires constant diplomatic dialogue at the highest level, as well as military interaction in the field. After Russia intervened in 2015, the Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu and President Putin met eleven times and often spoke on the phone (A. Kyk, 2021: 7).

Much later E.M. Primakov wrote in his book *The Middle East on the Stage and Behind the Scenes* about Russia's policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: support. I was convinced of this, including by taking part in such a representative forum as the Interaction Council. My interlocutors said that Russia did the right thing by inviting the leader of Hamas to Moscow, that Russia's positive influence on this organization could acquire special significance. But Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni does not think so. In response to her expression, which was expressed in criticism of the invitation to Moscow of Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, I told her: "Allow Russia to remain as a sovereign, independent state and make decisions that, in her opinion, strengthen the trends leading to peace in the Middle East" (Taxep, 2018: 81).

Russia's approach to Palestine is determined by several factors, the most important of which are: First; Russia's effective role in the most important conflict in the Middle East, so that Russia's position is recognized by regional and Trans-regional parties. Second; trying to maintain balance in Russian relations with the Israeli triangle; Palestinian Authority and Palestinian groups in the West Bank and their supporting Arab countries such as Egypt and Qatar, Hamas, and

Iran. Third; Russia's involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict must have acceptable gains in the national interest. Based on these cases, although Russia wants to play a mediating role concerning Israel and Palestine, it does not consider it in its interests to rush into this space.

The “deal of the century,” as it is being called in Washington, on the settlement of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict effectively eliminates key elements of the peace process (the establishment of the Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem and the return of Palestinian refugees), which leaves the State of Palestine with no choice but to search for new allies. Naturally, President of the State of Palestine Mahmoud Abbas sees Moscow as a force that can return the processes that have taken shape in recent months into the framework of the existing negotiating track, which the PNA has openly said to the Russian side (Tass, 2018).

Russia first offered to host negotiations between Israel and Palestine in Moscow in 2005. The idea of holding direct talks between Mahmoud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu was brought up at the meeting between President of the Arab Republic of Egypt Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Vladimir Putin in August 2016. The first direct meeting between the Palestinian and Israeli leaders since 2010 was supposed to take place in Moscow in September 2016, but the parties blamed each other for it never happening. According to Mahmoud Abbas, the Israeli side unilaterally canceled to the meeting. Meanwhile, the Israeli leadership stated that the pre-conditions set by the Palestinian representatives were unacceptable (Barmin, 2018).

For Mahmoud Abbas, getting Russia involved in the peaceful settlement serves both foreign and domestic policy goals. The Palestinian authorities, headed by Abbas, have been unable to form a sense of national cohesion for the people, while the administration is deeply localized and territorially fragmented. Russia's attempts to take a more active role in the peace process serve to reboot, in a sense, the internal Palestinian discourse and give additional internal political support to Mahmoud Abbas.

Even though Israel most likely does not see Russia's role as a mediator outside of international initiatives, Benjamin Netanyahu needs to give at least some leeway to Vladimir Putin's mediation

initiatives. It is extremely important for the Israeli side to preserve its fragile partnership with Russia, as this partnership is closely linked with cooperation in Syria, while the deterioration in relations against the backdrop of disagreements on Palestine could very well undermine the dialogue on Syria. The issue of Israel's recognition as a Jewish state in the Middle East remains and, in light of Iran's growing role in Syria, the peace process becomes even more dependent on the regional context. This is another reason why the Israeli leadership may value Moscow's support (Barmin, 2018).

Not until almost one full week (May 2021) had passed from the time Hamas began shelling Israeli cities from the Gaza Strip and Israel launched retaliatory airstrikes on Palestinian territory did President Putin address the permanent members of the Russian Security Council. "I would like to ask our colleagues to speak about the situation in the Middle East", he said, "namely, about the aggravation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is taking place in close proximity to our borders and directly concerns our security interests." Many Israelis were surprised to hear of this expanded definition of Russia's borders, but Moscow had previously noted that the escalation of hostilities in the Middle East was taking place in proximity to Russia, particularly regarding Syria and "the spread of the terrorist threat from there". Explaining what Putin meant by the proximity of the region to Russia's borders, Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov said, "Many countries [there] have difficult relations. The region has a somewhat fragile system of security and a huge lack of mutual trust. The potential for conflict does not contribute to the stabilization of the region. The Middle East is not on another continent, it is a region adjacent to us. Were this conflict to continue and spread uncontrollably, it would obviously pose a danger" to Russia, he added (Belenkaya, 2021).

Russia takes a neutral position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict while insisting on addressing the root causes of the conflict. Russia argues that the lack of a direct negotiation process is the main reason for the current escalation. The Russian Foreign Ministry has repeatedly stressed the necessity of observing the status quo set forth in the Israel-Jordan peace treaty regarding the Holy Sites in Jerusalem and all UN Security Council resolutions concerning the city, as well as

attempts to change the geographical, demographic, and historical character and status of East Jerusalem. Moscow also considers the expansion of Israeli settlement activity to be harmful in general.

In fact, Moscow focuses on reviving a long-forgotten mechanism for settling the conflict, the so-called Middle East “quartet” of mediators: Russia and the U.S., EU, and UN.

Russia and the EU had begun attempts to revive the “quartet” after the change of the presidential administration in Washington. Under former U.S. President Donald Trump, Washington ignored UN Security Council resolutions and collective settlement mechanisms with respect to the Middle East and elsewhere. The Arab countries themselves support this position. Russia will do everything it can to help. In fact, Russia is the only non-Arab mediator that maintains communication with Hamas, a strongpoint among the members of the “quartet”.

In 2002, the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the UN proposed a new plan for resolving the Palestinian conflict, called “the Road Map”. It provided for the resumption of negotiations and a phased resolution of the problem up to the creation of an independent Palestinian Arab state alongside the Israeli one. Despite the fact that the plan was formally adopted by both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides, already at the moment of its proclamation, a number of analysts had time to assess it as “impracticable.” The Palestinians and a number of countries did not accept the “deal of the century”, since, in their opinion, it deprives the Palestinians of the right to those territories that are provided for by UN resolutions. The head of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, also rejected the new plan, saying that the Palestinians insist on the recognition of their state within the 1967 borders with the capital in Jerusalem. On January 26, 2021, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki expressed hope that the new US administration would reverse the illegal and hostile steps of Donald Trump's team and play an important role in multilateral efforts to bring peace to the Middle East (Ria, 2021).

Mahmoud Abbas sees Moscow as a force that can return the processes that have emerged in the last months, in the mainstream of the existing negotiation process, as presented PNA bodies speak openly to the Russian side (Бармин, 2018: 17).

For Russia, a more prominent role in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement is a unique opportunity to consolidate authority in the Middle East outside the Syrian, and therefore outside the military context. Moscow's attempts at this front are partly due to its positioning as a vis-à-vis the United States, Europe, and Israel, and many experts agree that Vladimir Putin's very participation in the peace process can be more important than the final point of settlement between Palestine and Israel. In this regard, the PNA should not expect that Moscow will become an exception. As a conductor of the Palestinian position in negotiations with Israel, although the positions of the two sides are quite close (Freedman, 2010 and Krasna, 2018).

Russia was consistent in the years of the Donald Trump administration in criticizing Washington's approach to marginalizing the Palestinian problem. It called for renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, suggested Moscow as a meeting place, and tried to bring unity between the Palestinian factions by keeping open communication channels with the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. Russia reacted with skepticism to the Abraham Accords and claimed that, despite being a positive development, it could not circumvent the solution to the Palestinian question—considered one of the core destabilizing problems of the Middle East. Moscow instead called to convene a Middle East Peace Process ministerial-level conference with the Quartet, Egypt, Jordan, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, the Israelis, and the Palestinians. In Russia's eyes, the present crisis proves they were right, as the Palestinian problem is again high on the agenda of the region and the international community (LeBaron and others, 2021).

In some analyses of the change in Russia's Middle East policy, the establishment of relations between Moscow and Hamas is considered as one of the symbols of change. The importance of Russia's policy towards Hamas is due to several reasons: First, in the past, Russia's relations with Palestine were based on its relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (Fatah). Moreover, official relations between Russia and Hamas show a clear difference in policy between the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations in the Middle East (Koolae, 2013:327).

New President Joe Biden wanted to shelve the Trump administration's proposal for Middle East peace and refocus from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific, but the recent Israel-Palestine escalation has messed up that plan. In response to the escalating violence, Biden highlighted U.S. support for Israel's security and "legitimate right to defend itself," adding later that he saw no "overreaction" by Israeli forces in Gaza. Moscow's position on facilitating U.N. leadership in solving global disputes is exemplified by an attempt to bring the Israel-Palestine confrontation to the U.N. Security Council (UNSC). Russia continues to promote a "two-state system" as the best option for a peace settlement, which has also been supported by the United Nations. On May 13, Putin, together with U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, called for an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict via a "two-state solution," implying the establishment of Palestine as an independent state alongside Israel. Russia and the U.N. have been promoting the resumption of talks within the framework of the Middle East Quartet (Bochkov, 2021).

Representatives of the pro-Israeli group oppose the peace process, trying to persuade others that it is an unrealistic undertaking. They discredit any political talks with the Palestinians, claiming that there is no partner among them that deserves to be trusted and is genuinely interested in peace. They insist that the establishment of the Palestinian state has nothing to do with Russian national interests. According to this logic, Russia is interested in developing diverse economic relations with Israel while there is no ground for any fruitful economic cooperation with the Palestinians. The strong influence of these views is felt in the main Jewish organizations in Russia, where the expression of even mild criticism toward Israel is not welcome. There is also a trend in the most liberal circles of the Russian intellectual community to idealize Israel as a "kind, clever, civilized state in the desert" and to castigate Palestinians who are not able to create their own state and are continuously producing only suicide terrorists (Nosenko, 2015: 54).

On the other side of this discussion are those who favor the Palestinian discourse on the conflict. Among them, there are proponents of the so-called Eurasian ideology, which proclaims Russian particularism based on special values and traditions. Their

severe criticism of Zionism often borders on anti-Semitism. Jews are condemned for the dissemination of the terrorist image of Arabs and Muslims in general with the alleged aim to destroy Russia and to break its traditional ties with the world of Islam. According to the holders of these views, the instigators of national and religious conflicts want to put an end to a unique inter-civilization project that has been historically realized in Russia and “to make our country fully dependent on the racist part of the Israeli political establishment and its Western masters (Shevchenko, 2011).

From Moscow’s point of view, holding a quadripartite meeting at the ministerial level is crucial in resuming efforts to implement decisions related to the two-state principle. Russia, which has ideas for resuming the Middle East peace talks, is concerned about the lack of lasting agreement on how to resume the peace process and the peace talks. Russia believes that the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions after the Madrid Conference, the Oslo Accords (Oslo-1 and Oslo-2) is highly essential. This requires a direct dialogue and resumption of the negotiation process.

Konstantin Kosachev, the vice-speaker of the Federation Council believes, Russia traditionally acts as a mediator between the parties and "a lot depends on its voice." “The most important thing is to stop the escalation of hostilities at any cost since civilians are dying on both sides. What exactly the decision-making mechanism will be and who will stop first is not so important (Газеталз, 2021).

Russia emphasizes in Article 92 of its foreign policy strategy document, will pursue the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of international law. Russia does not want to lose its pivotal opportunity on the Palestinian issue after the United States took unilateral action in Israel’s interests. It appears that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has said he will not work under the US peace process after Trump announced the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem, and has called on Russia and several organizations to accept a role in the peace process. Russia knows that the issue of Palestine is always of concern to Muslims. On the one hand, Russia will take advantage of its presence in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation as an observer member to develop relations with

Islamic countries, and on the other hand, Russia's orientation in favor of Israel will break this bond (Fazeli, 2021).

While Russia is the only major international actor able to communicate directly with all the sides and factions, Moscow lacks the levers to pressure Israel or the Palestinians to change their positions. Therefore, its proactive multilateral diplomacy is meant to prove to the West that it is a responsible global power. The Russians are content that the crisis reinvigorated the Quartet envoys' meetings and that the UNSC will deal with the situation.

Behind the scenes, the Russians are quite pessimistic about the possibility of moving Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation forward. In recent months we have witnessed a growing group of senior Russian Middle East experts probing the "track-2" channels and seeking ideas to promote peacebuilding through a small-steps-strategy of regional cooperation on economic and environmental issues. They hope that solving concrete problems will build confidence for dealing with bigger problems. This approach is not embraced yet as Moscow's official position (LeBaron, 2021).

More importantly, Russia can play a constructive role and be a dependable broker because it has close ties with all the necessary parties needed for any agreement. It is more of an honest broker than Washington for a variety of reasons. Chiefly among them, if for no other reason, is the fact that Russia can play a fair interlocutor given its presence in the region. If we look at Donald Trump's ill-advised decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, it not only reignited violence between the Israelis and the Palestinians but also revealed that Washington had never been an honest broker in resolving the age-old conflict.

Moscow and Tel Aviv have been "neighbors" to the Levant since 2015, and the Kremlin is increasingly acting as a security actor for the Hebrew state. Russia also intends to play a role in the Israeli-Palestinian issue but has so far failed to convince Tel Aviv of its centrality, despite its military successes in Syria (Bijan b, 2020: 91). It is noteworthy that as a result of the efforts of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin, relations between Tel Aviv and Moscow have expanded dramatically over the past decade, although the two countries share a common position on

the Syrian crisis and the presence of about two million Russian-Israeli citizens in the country has played an important role in strengthening relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, Moscow does not see Palestine and Syria as related contexts in its relations with Israel. What is more, Russia sees the prospect of Palestinian settlements as a logical continuation of its role in the region, the process that was set in motion by the country's military campaign in Syria. At the same time, however, policy toolkits for Palestine and Syria files will remain different.

Nevertheless, what is important for Russia is to expand its role as a peacemaker and a fundamental actor in the Middle East settlement. Furthermore, Russia has struggled for several years to achieve a regional role in regional crises and to present its plans as a counterpart to the U.S. approach. Nonetheless, the important issue is Israel's great influence in Russia. On the one hand, the issue of the role of the powerful Jewish lobby and investors in Russia, which makes Russia, worried about the pressure of the lobby. On the other hand, the Russians living in Israel, who are a great concern to Putin especially respecting their safety. Russia's approach to the conflict is to prevent conflict again and achieve peace in the Middle East in which everyone wins. Israelis and Palestinians should seek Russian support if they want to resolve their age-old conflict. Russia seems to be a willing partner to promote a new deal that will end life with conflict in the Middle East (Bijan a, 2020).

Conclusion

A lot of efforts have been made to bring peace to the Middle East by using different methods such as negotiation and mediation. In addition to Israel and Palestine as two main parties involved in the conflict, various regional and international actors have been playing a major role in the long-running dispute between Israelis and Palestinians. There is no doubt that a high number of parties and seemingly intractable problems made peace a more difficult and onerous task. Indeed, every actor has adopted divergent views towards the issues playing a role in the conflict, in a wayfinding a peace plan is becoming an extremely daunting task.

Russia, as an important global player, has tried to play a mediating role. Russia's relations with the Middle East have a long history. Russia and the nations of the region have long had various economic, cultural, and emotional ties. Those ties have made Russia one of the key players in the Middle East, especially in resolving the region's conflicts and challenges. Middle Eastern countries, on the other hand, have always had relative confidence in Russia and its foreign policy. Russia's neutral and prudent stance, which seeks to resolve the Middle East issues in accordance with the principles of international law, is of particular value to countries of the region, including Palestine. Russia supports the creation of an independent Palestinian state, which is not to the satisfaction of the Israelis.

On one hand, Russia believes that Jerusalem should be divided into eastern and western parts, with Israel ruling in the western part and Palestine in the eastern part. After the Trump administration called Jerusalem the capital of Israel, Russia explicitly declared East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. Moscow has always emphasized its position on the illegality of the Israeli regime's settlement in the Palestinian territories, stating that those illegal actions reduce the possibility of a just peace and establishment of a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Russia is committed to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state based on UN Security Council resolutions and the principle of the creation of two independent states and emphasizes the parties' respect for the UN General Assembly resolutions and the international community's efforts for the establishment of the two states. Russia supports the dialogue of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan with Israel for the direct negotiations between Palestine and Israel.

On the other hand, Russia has always been sensitive to the Russians outside its borders. Russia cannot be indifferent to this population. Israel has expanded its relations with Moscow in recent years. Russia, which has been sanctioned by the West, is trying to use its role as mediator and more explicit support for Palestine, if necessary, by moving closer to the Middle East and Israel. Of course, Russia-Israel relations will continue with a dual friendly (not strategic) relationship with serious differences on some regional issues. Perhaps the best

option is Russia's presence as a neutral mediator. Israel, still America's main ally, will never allow those relations to reach a level that worries Washington, but it wants to build diverse regional and international relations but has no interest in replacing its core strategic partner.

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