

Putin's Pro-Israel Policy

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The Russian government remains the greatest facilitator for Iranian nuclear ambitions. It has had close ties to terror-sponsoring regimes such as Syria and Saddam's Iraq. Russian president Vladimir Putin has not hesitated to oppose U.S. foreign policy. Washington and Moscow have clashed frequently over the Iraq war and its aftermath. But, mostly unnoticed by foreign policy pundits and Middle East watchers, Russia's policy toward Israel has undergone a steady shift.

Under Putin, Russia has not only declined to adopt Western Europe's increasingly shrill anti-Israel posture, but in many ways he has actually tilted Russian policy in Israel's favor, at least with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret recent Russian shifts as due to a fundamental ideological shift. Putin neither seeks to please Washington nor to accommodate any domestic political imperative. Rather, Moscow's new Middle East policy results from Putin's personal calculation of Russian interests, one that does not find many other takers in his own government.

The Broader Russian-Israeli Relationship

While the Soviet Union was among the first states to recognize Israel in 1948, Moscow quickly changed course and aligned itself with Arab nationalist regimes. The USSR severed diplomatic relations with Israel following the 1967 Six-Day War and subsequently supported Palestinian nationalist and terrorist movements in the West Bank and Gaza.¹ Only in October 1991, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, did Moscow and Jerusalem again exchange ambassadors. During the Yeltsin years (1991-99), Russian-Israeli relations were relatively good, especially in terms of trade. But they again cooled during Yevgeny Primakov's tenure as foreign minister (1996-98) and prime minister (1998-99). Strongly pro-Arab, Primakov sought to shift Moscow's policy once more into the Palestinian camp.²

During his five years in power, Putin has worked to upgrade Russia's relations with Israel. Nevertheless, many differences remain. Jerusalem remains upset with Moscow's

¹ Galia Golan, *The Soviet Union and National Liberation Movements in the Third World* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 288-9; idem, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 110-23.

² Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and Israel under Yeltsin," *Israel Studies*, Mar. 1998, pp. 140-69; Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Sept. 16, 1998; Talal Nizameddin, *Russia and the Middle East: Towards a New Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 122-41.

continuing support for Iran's nuclear program. Russian companies remain the main contractors behind the Iranian nuclear reactor at Bushehr. In 1995, Tehran and Moscow signed a US\$800 million deal in which the Iranian government purchased a reactor and 2,000 tons of uranium.³ In March 2001, Iranian president Muhammad Khatami traveled to Moscow where he finalized a \$7 billion deal to purchase Russian military equipment. His defense minister, the force behind the agreement, returned to Moscow seven months later to seal the deal.⁴

Israeli policymakers view the Iranian nuclear program as posing a grave threat to Israeli security. When Ariel Sharon traveled to Moscow in October 2002, he raised the issue of Russian nuclear assistance to Iran.⁵ Putin again rebuffed Sharon's concerns about Russian support for Iran's nuclear program during Sharon's November 2003 visit to Moscow.⁶ In September 2004, the Israeli prime minister said, "there is no doubt" that Tehran is trying to acquire nuclear weapons and "that is a very big danger, especially since they succeeded in developing a rocket, the Shihab-3 that ... puts Israel in its range."⁷

Similarly, the Putin administration has refused to end Russian support for the Iranian atomic energy program despite U.S., Israeli, and even European expressions of concern that Russian support is facilitating the Islamic Republic's drive to acquire nuclear weapons. Russian commentators have argued that the sale of nuclear reactors to Iran is vital to the survival of the Russian atomic energy industry, which has few other domestic or foreign customers.⁸ The Russian government's reluctance to react to Israel's security concerns is no surprise. After all, the threat posed by a nuclear-armed Iran to Russia itself is not sufficient to affect a change in Russian policy.

As with Iran, economic considerations guided Russian policy toward Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In return for Moscow's political support, Saddam's regime rewarded Russian firms with oil development and U.N.-sponsored Oil-for-Food program contracts. Bolstered economically, Saddam sheltered terrorists like Abu Abbas, mastermind of the 1985 *Achille Lauro* hijacking, sponsored the Arab Liberation Front, and spent millions of dollars to reward family members of suicide bombers and other terrorists. Saddam threatened to attack Israel on several occasions and did, indeed, launch Scud missiles at Tel Aviv in 1991.⁹ U.S.-led military action, rather than Russian or Israeli diplomacy, eliminated Iraq's threat to Israel.

The Putin administration has continued Russia's traditionally warm relationship with Syria. The Russian government continues to sell Syria arms. The Israeli security establishment fears that any weapons sold to Syria might fall into the hands of Hezbollah. During his October 2002 trip to Moscow, Sharon raised the issue with Putin but failed to get Moscow's commitment

³ Michael Eisenstadt, "[Russian Arms and Technology Transfers to Iran](#): Policy Challenges to the United States," *Arms Control Today*, Mar. 2001; idem, *Iranian Military Power: Capabilities and Intentions* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996), p. 11; *The Washington Post*, May 4, 1995.

⁴ Islamic Republic News Agency, Oct. 1, 2001.

⁵ *Vremya novostei*, Oct. 1, 2002, English translation in *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* (hereinafter, *CDPSP*), Oct. 30, 2002.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Nov. 4, 2003, in *CDPSP*, Dec. 3, 2003.

⁷ *Jerusalem Post* (Internet version), Sept. 8, 2004.

⁸ Ekho Moskvyy Radio, Dec. 27, 2002, in *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, Dec. 29, 2002.

⁹ Robert O. Freedman, "Moscow and the Gulf War," *Problems of Communism*, July-Aug. 1991, pp. 1-17; *The Moscow Times*, Oct. 25, 2004.

to halt these activities.¹⁰ Indeed, when Syrian vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam met Putin three months later, among the projects they discussed was Russian assistance in upgrading Syria's Soviet-era weaponry as well as construction of both a nuclear power plant and a nuclear-powered desalination plant for Syria.¹¹ While the Putin administration has emphasized the similarities in Russian and U.S. approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Moscow has distanced itself from the Bush administration's policy toward Syria.¹²

The Putin Doctrine

The last of former Russian president Boris Yeltsin's six prime ministers, Putin assumed the presidency upon Yeltsin's 1999 resignation. Soon after he became prime minister, Putin moved to crush Chechen separatism, sending the full force of the Russian military into the renegade province. Natan Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident turned Israeli politician, visited Moscow shortly after Putin became president. While the United States and other Western governments criticized Russian operations in Chechnya, the Israeli government did not. Rather, Sharansky offered strong support for Putin's hard-line policy of not negotiating with terrorists but defeating them militarily instead.¹³ Parallels between Russia's conflict with the Chechens and Israel's struggle with the Palestinians have resonated strongly with the Putin administration.

A year after the Russian army reentered Chechnya, peace talks aimed at settling the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian dispute collapsed. Active conflict was renewed as Yasir Arafat launched a new *intifada*. With the collapse of the Camp David II talks, the Russian Foreign Ministry appeared set to take on a major role as a mediator between Israel and the Palestinians. During Arafat's August 2000 visit to Moscow, Putin declared Russia's support for "the Palestinian people's right to self determination."¹⁴ Moscow, though, reacted coolly to Arafat's declaration that he would soon make a unilateral declaration of Palestinian independence. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov indicated that making such a declaration was the prerogative of the Palestinians but that Russian recognition might not be forthcoming, especially if a Palestinian declaration of independence would lead to more violence. "All circumstances and time frame must be weighed carefully," he said.¹⁵

Putin's decision not to attend or send Russian representatives to the October 2000 Sharm el-Sheikh summit had less to do with Russian disengagement than with a desire to avoid any process which the United States dominated. The center-right business daily *Kommersant* suggested that Putin did not want to be sidelined at the summit.¹⁶ At the same time, Ivanov made clear that the Russian government would oppose any U.N. Security Council resolution authorizing a U.N. peacekeeping force for the West Bank and Gaza so long as Israel opposed

¹⁰ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, Oct. 2, 2002, in *CDPSP*, Oct. 30, 2002.

¹¹ *Trud*, Jan. 17, 2003, in *CDPSP*, Feb. 5-12, 2003.

¹² *Kommersant*, May 13, 2004, in *CDPSP*, June 2-9, 2004.

¹³ *Izvestia*, Jan. 29, 2000, in *CDPSP*, Mar. 1, 2000.

¹⁴ *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, Aug. 12, 2000, in *CDPSP*, Sept. 13, 2000.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Kommersant*, Oct. 21, 2000, in *CDPSP*, Nov. 15, 2000.

it.¹⁷ In March 2001, Russia, nevertheless, voted in favor of a resolution to dispatch international observers to Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. *Kommersant* expressed surprise, noting that the Russian foreign ministry had rejected this proposal, apparently out of fear that if accepted here, it might also be applied to Chechnya. There was speculation that the Russian ministry of foreign affairs anticipated a U.S. veto and thus voted in favor in order to score points with the Arabs “without risking anything.”¹⁸ Russia repeated the pattern in September 2003 when the Security Council considered a resolution demanding that Israel not expel Arafat from the West Bank and Gaza. The United States vetoed the resolution while Russia voted in favor. However, Russia mitigated its traditional pro-Arab position with subsequent statements complaining that the Security Council vote had been “rushed.”¹⁹

In January 2001, Putin received Israel’s ceremonial president, Moshe Katzav. The two emphasized that “there can be no negotiations with terrorists.” According to the daily *Vremya MN*,²⁰ “This was essentially the first time that Putin, who has said on numerous occasions that there can be no dialogue with the Chechen rebels, expressed support for this basic Israeli principle as a whole.”²¹

Soon thereafter, Israeli voters gave Ehud Barak’s Labor Party a resounding defeat, and Sharon became the new prime minister. Vilified by many European governments, Sharon, nevertheless, enjoyed good relations not only with U.S. president George W. Bush but also with Putin. According to *Sevodnya*, “Sharon is impressed with Vladimir Putin and has spoken approvingly of Moscow’s Chechnya policy, saying that it is what the Israelis should have done in Lebanon.”²²

In the spring, when the new Bush administration indicated that it did not want to take as active a role as had the Clinton administration in negotiation of an Israeli-Palestinian peace, Moscow made clear that it would not seek to replace Washington in this role.²³ Putin expressed sympathy for Israel’s position, even telling Secretary of State Colin Powell that “there is absolutely no logic” to Arafat’s actions.²⁴ When Arafat again visited Moscow in May 2001, both Putin and Ivanov reiterated that “there were no differences between the Russian and the U.S. approaches” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²⁵ Arafat could not hope to exploit differences between former Cold War rivals. The following month, the Kremlin made clear its displeasure with former prime minister Primakov’s statement to a Jordanian paper in which he blamed Israel

¹⁷ *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, Nov. 17, 2000, in *CDPSP*, Dec. 13, 2000.

¹⁸ *Kommersant*, Mar. 29, 2001, in *CDPSP*, Apr. 25, 2001.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Sept. 18, 2003, in *CDPSP*, Oct. 15, 2003.

²⁰ *MN* is an abbreviation for *Moskovskiye novosti*.

²¹ *Vremya MN*, Jan. 24, 2001, in *CDPSP*, Feb. 21, 2001.

²² *Sevodnya*, Feb. 8, 2001, in *CDPSP*, Mar. 7, 2001.

²³ *Noviye Izvestia*, Apr. 18, 2001, in *CDPSP*, May 16, 2001; *idem*, May 23, 2001, in *CDPSP*, June 20, 2001.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Apr. 18, 2001, in *CDPSP*, May 16, 2001.

²⁵ *Izvestia*, May 30, 2001, in *CDPSP*, June 27, 2001.

for the violence.²⁶ Ivanov reiterated that “Russia had no disagreements with the U.S. regarding the Palestinian-Israeli settlement process.”²⁷

In September, Sharon traveled to Moscow and met Putin. Putin referred to the fact that many Israelis originally came from Russia and other ex-Soviet republics, stating that he wanted them to “live in peace and security,” and denounced terrorism, even as he also referred to Russia’s “traditionally good” relations with the Arab world and the Palestinian Authority.²⁸

As the Palestinian *intifada* continued, the White House and international community moved to reinvigorate diplomacy. The United States joined with Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations to form the Quartet. In January 2002, Andrei Vdovin, the Russian foreign ministry’s special representative for Middle East peace, told the Russian government-owned daily *Rossiiskaya gazeta* that “there aren’t any significant differences” between the approach taken by Russia and the three other cosponsors of the Middle East peace process.²⁹

When Arafat, confined to his headquarters in Ramallah, appealed to Russia for assistance in pressuring Sharon to back off his hard-line policies, Putin told Arafat that “combating terrorism and extremism is the most urgent task facing the world community today.”³⁰ *Izvestia* observed that, “The Kremlin’s assessment of the situation could hardly have encouraged Arafat.”³¹

During a March 2002 visit to Israel, Sergei Mironov, the speaker of Russia’s Federation Council, the Russian parliament’s upper house, canceled a meeting with his Palestinian counterpart as a result of “a ‘personal decision’ not to ‘show politeness’ to the Palestinians and not to visit the Palestinian Authority because ‘the terrorist acts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Israel have the same roots, mainly financial ones.’”³² While the Russian foreign minister disavowed Mironov’s remarks, the sentiment reflected Putin’s thinking on Israel. In a statement suggesting that the Palestinian leadership knew this, Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi told *Vremya novostei* that, “We became disillusioned with Russia’s position a long time ago ... Russia is following the U.S. lead more and more.”³³

The Putin administration may have become disillusioned with Arafat’s leadership, but it was not willing to follow the Bush administration’s position blindly. When Bush argued that Arafat was no longer a legitimate partner and needed to be replaced as Palestinian leader, Putin emphasized that Arafat was the elected Palestinian leader, and therefore talks must be held with him.³⁴ Nevertheless, Moscow played down its differences with Washington. In response to Bush’s statement calling for the replacement of the Palestinian leadership, Aleksandr Yakovenko, official spokesman of the Russian foreign ministry, stated that, “[W]e read the

²⁶ *Kommersant*, May 30, 2001, in *CDPSP*, June 27, 2001; *idem*, June 20, 2001, in *CDPSP*, July 18, 2001.

²⁷ *Izvestia*, June 29, 2001, in *CDPSP*, July 25, 2001.

²⁸ *Kommersant*, Sept. 5, 2001, in *CDPSP*, Oct. 3, 2001.

²⁹ *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, Jan. 22, 2002, in *CDPSP*, Feb. 20, 2002.

³⁰ *Izvestia*, Jan. 23, 2002, in *CDPSP*, Feb. 20, 2002.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Vremya novostei*, Mar. 13, 2002, in *CDPSP*, Apr. 10, 2002.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Vremya MN*, Mar. 30, 2002, in *CDPSP*, Apr. 24, 2002; *idem*, June 26, 2002, in *CDPSP*, July 24, 2002; *idem*, July 18, 2002, in *CDPSP*, Aug. 14, 2002.

president's speech carefully, and I want to point out that it makes no mention of Yasir Arafat personally."³⁵

In December 2002, Israeli foreign minister Benjamin Netanyahu received a much friendlier reception in Moscow than he had in London or Paris. When Netanyahu raised the issue of Russia supporting pro-Arab resolutions at the U.N., Ivanov was conciliatory, even suggesting the time was near for Russia to "reassess its position and perhaps revise it."³⁶ While a brief diplomatic spat erupted between Jerusalem and Moscow in July 2003 over Ivanov's decision to meet with Arafat, the dispute did not last long. The Israeli government wanted to marginalize Arafat in order to bolster the position of the newly appointed Palestinian Authority prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). His resignation in September 2003 in the face of Arafat's obstructionism made moot the dispute.

In November 2003, Sharon and Putin once again met in the Kremlin. While Sharon expressed dislike for the Russian-drafted U.N. Security Council Resolution 1515 endorsing the U.S.-sponsored "road map,"³⁷ he called Putin "a true friend of Israel." For his part, Putin reiterated his concern about the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on migrants from Russia to Israel and proposed that Russia open an exhibit "devoted to the tragedy of the Holocaust."³⁸

In January 2004, Russia, along with seventy-three other countries (including all those from the European Union), abstained from a U.N. General Assembly resolution asking the International Court of Justice to rule on the legality of the security barrier that the Israeli government was constructing to protect Israeli communities from Palestinian terrorism. Russian diplomats had tried to persuade the Palestinians and others not to put this resolution to a vote. Again, Russian concerns about its own Chechnya problem mitigated its historically pro-Palestinian position. This was because, as two *Kommersant* journalists noted, the resolution "sets a precedent in which an international organization ... is asking the court to provide an expert assessment of the legality of actions by a country that is not prepared to accept its verdict. If the hearings go forward and the court decides in favor of the Palestinians, in the future nothing will prevent the European Union or the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] from asking The Hague to assess, for example, the actions of the Russian authorities in Chechnya."³⁹ Nevertheless, after the International Court of Justice ruling, Russia voted in July 2004 to condemn the wall's construction.⁴⁰

Also in January 2004, the Palestinians witnessed eroding Russian support when Nabil Shaath, the Palestinian Authority's chief foreign representative, met with Ivanov in Moscow to discuss the impasse in road map talks. Shaath blamed the Israelis, but Ivanov would have none of that. Ivanov reportedly told Shaath that, "the only person who can take the terrorist groups in hand is Yasir Arafat. But the Palestinian leader, who remains firmly in control of the situation ... doesn't want to lift a finger to rein in the terror." The clear implication was that Russia

³⁵ *Izvestia*, June 27, 2002, in *CDPSP*, July 24, 2002.

³⁶ *Kommersant*, Dec. 24, 2002, in *CDPSP*, Jan. 22, 2003.

³⁷ "[Security Council Adopts Resolution Endorsing Road Map](#) Leading towards Two-state Resolution of Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," U.N. news release, Nov. 19, 2003.

³⁸ *Vremya novostei*, Nov. 4, 2003, in *CDPSP*, Dec. 3, 2003.

³⁹ *Kommersant*, Jan. 20, 2004, in *CDPSP*, Feb. 18, 2004.

⁴⁰ *Vremya novostei*, July 22, 2004, in *CDPSP*, Aug. 18, 2004.

considered Arafat the main obstacle and might even withdraw their diplomatic support for Arafat's continued leadership. Ivanov further chided Shaath for the claim that the Palestinian Authority's and Russia's positions coincided, insisting that the Palestinian Authority not seek to use Shaath's visit to Moscow for propaganda purposes.⁴¹

In April 2004, the Russian foreign ministry condemned the Israeli killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. But according to *Vremya novostei*, it only did so "cautiously."⁴² By contrast, Mikhail Margelov, chairman of the Federation Council's international affairs committee, spoke positively of Israeli actions: "The killing of Yassin by the Israeli military means that Israeli special forces are essentially doing the job of eliminating terrorist groups for the Palestinian security organs."⁴³

Later that month, *Kommersant* reported on the Bush administration's support for and EU opposition to Sharon's plan to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza and build a fence inside the West Bank. Shaath called on Russia and others to persuade Washington to abandon its support for this plan. But as *Kommersant* noted, the Palestinians should not pin their hopes on Russia: "As Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday, 'A withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza is a step in the direction indicated in the road map.' True, he qualified his statement by saying that such a step could be useful 'provided that it is not the last.'"⁴⁴ In a subsequent meeting with Shaath at the Russian foreign ministry, Lavrov offered Shaath no recourse as he repeated almost verbatim the words of George Bush.⁴⁵

Where Goes Russia's Middle East Policy?

Under Putin, concern over Chechnya and renewed anxiety about terrorism has led Russian policy to tilt toward Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Still, although Russian-Israeli relations have become close under Putin, he is not willing to forego for the sake of Russian-Israeli friendship strong ties with Middle Eastern regimes that Jerusalem considers threatening. But at the same time, Putin has not been willing to forego strong ties to Israel—now worth more than \$1 billion annually—for the sake of friendship with Iran and rejectionist Arab regimes. In this sense, Putin has pursued an "evenhanded" policy toward Israel on the one hand and radical regimes in Iraq, Iran, and Syria on the other. This makes Putin's "tilt" toward Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians all the more remarkable. What explains it?

One possible explanation is that Putin does not want, as Ashrawi suggested, to oppose U.S. foreign policy on an issue that is so important to Washington.⁴⁶ The fact that Moscow has opposed the United States on so many other issues may make Putin's support for Washington on this one issue more important. This is unlikely, though. Putin, after all, has opposed the United States on issues of key importance for Washington, such as both the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq and Russian support for the Iranian nuclear program. Despite this, Russian-U.S. relations remain relatively good. It is difficult to imagine, then, that the prospect of annoying Washington is

⁴¹ *Kommersant*, Jan. 22, 2004, in *CDPSP*, Feb. 18, 2004.

⁴² *Vremya novostei*, Mar. 23, 2004, in *CDPSP*, Apr. 21, 2004.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Kommersant*, Apr. 16, 2004, in *CDPSP*, May 19, 2004.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Apr. 17, 2004, in *CDPSP*, May 19, 2004.

⁴⁶ *Vremya novostei*, Mar. 13, 2002, in *CDPSP*, Apr. 10, 2002.

preventing Moscow from pursuing a more pro-Palestinian policy. Russian foreign policy observers acknowledge that much of Russian foreign policy is actually predicated on a desire to spite the Americans.⁴⁷ The Putin administration has clearly not feared negative U.S. reaction to Russian votes for pro-Palestinian U.N. resolutions.⁴⁸ Pleasing the United States, then, cannot explain Putin's pro-Israeli tilt.

Russian domestic politics—specifically, concern over Chechnya—may play an important role in shaping Putin's policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Officials and commentators in both Russia and Israel have frequently pointed out the similarities of the fight against the Chechens and the Palestinians. Like Palestinian terrorists, Chechen rebels have launched a number of attacks on civilian targets in Russia, including attacks on hospitals in southern Russia during the first Chechen war (1994-96), the seizure of a Moscow theater in 2002, and a series of attacks in the summer of 2004 that culminated in the death of hundreds of school children in Beslan.⁴⁹ This similarity in predicament seems to have increased sympathy for Israel in Russia. But the translation of domestic concern about Chechnya on Russian policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complicated. A succinct description of the contradictory Russian domestic political factors affecting this appeared in the liberal daily *Sevodnya*, which, under Kremlin pressure, ceased publication in 2001:

Russia is on very delicate ground. On the one hand, our people account for one-quarter of Israel's population, and the violence in the Middle East is being incited by the same people who are inciting it in the North Caucasus ... On the other hand, Moscow would offend Russia's millions of Muslims and the numerous "friends of the Palestinians" among the political elite if it took an openly pro-Israeli position.⁵⁰

Indeed, as Konstantin Kosachov, vice-chairman of the Duma's International Affairs Committee, pointed out, the Duma has no shortage of either pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian deputies.⁵¹

There are limits to how the Russian public's increasing awareness of terrorism and sympathy toward its victims can translate into support for Israel. According to the 2002 Russian census, there are 14.5 million Muslims in Russia, or about 10 percent of the population, compared to just 230,000 Jews.⁵² Anti-Semitism still persists. The combination of a large Muslim population, a small Jewish one, and the persistence of anti-Semitism among ethnic Russians would seem to militate in favor of a pro-Palestinian foreign policy instead of a pro-Israeli one. Being similarly besieged in the war on terrorism, then, is not the only factor driving the Russian tilt toward Israel.

Economic concerns, of course, are among Putin's priorities. It is not clear, however, whether a pro-Palestinian tilt in Russian foreign policy would harm the Russian-Israeli economic

⁴⁷ *Kommersant*, Mar. 29, 2001, in *CDPSP*, Apr. 25, 2001.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Nabi Abdullaev, "Chechnya Ten Years Later," *Current History*, Oct. 2004, pp. 332-6.

⁵⁰ Valerya Sychova, "Who Are You for, the Israelis or the Palestinians?" *Sevodnya*, Oct. 14, 2000, in *CDPSP*, Nov. 15, 2000.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, Nov. 11, 2003, in *CDPSP*, Dec. 10, 2003.

relationship. The relatively pro-Palestinian tilt in Russian foreign policy during Primakov's tenure as foreign and prime minister did not prevent growth in the Russian-Israeli economic relationship.

What, then, explains Putin's pro-Israeli tilt vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? In a Russia where Putin increasingly dominates domestic and foreign policies, the pro-Israel tilt must be a result of Putin's personal choice. Sympathy for Israel's position is something Putin maintains despite the traditional preference of the Russian foreign ministry and most of the foreign policy elite. It is true that other Russian politicians have voiced pro-Israeli sentiments. Many of these, however, may simply be parroting Putin's position instead of actually agreeing with it. If Putin is followed by a pro-Palestinian president, they would probably change their tune accordingly.

But what has motivated Putin to make this choice? Putin's history indicates a deep, emotional commitment to defeating the Chechen rebellion. He denies that the Chechen rebels have any legitimate basis for complaint against Moscow and refuses to negotiate with them. Putin does not appear to doubt the rightness of his hard-line policy toward Chechnya, even in the face of international outrage. Sunni Islamists see Russia as being as much of an enemy as the United States and Israel. European leaders criticize Russian human rights abuses in Chechnya. Even at the height of Russian collaboration with "Old Europe" to block United Nations approval for the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq, French president Jacques Chirac raised the issue of Russian human rights violations in Chechnya while hosting Putin at a Paris banquet.⁵³ After the September 2004 Beslan tragedy, the Russian foreign ministry "reacted with outrage" at the implied criticism of Moscow's policy in an EU statement asking "the Russian authorities how this tragedy could have happened."⁵⁴ Very few have given the unequivocal support for Putin's Chechnya policy that Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon has.

Sharon, who is fluent in Russian, has established a genuine bond with Putin. Both share a similar mindset about their Muslim opponents: they are terrorists with whom there can be no negotiation. Both Putin and Sharon use force against opponents they believe undeserving of sympathy, and both share a bond formed by their resulting vilification in the West.

While Sharon is not the first or only Israeli official to express sympathy for Russia's Chechnya policy, Sharon's key role in the improvement of bilateral relations is suggested by the improvement under his watch. Prior to Sharon's accession, Putin was content to leave the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the hands of the strongly pro-Palestinian Russian foreign ministry. Only after his first meeting with Sharon in September 2001 did Putin's pro-Israel tilt emerge.

Could this change? A more leftist government in Israel would probably be less sympathetic toward Putin's hard-line policy in Chechnya. By the same token, a Russian government willing to negotiate with the Chechens would probably not be as sympathetic as Putin now is to the current hard-line Israeli approach toward the Palestinians. Sharon would have had less reason to value relations with a Moscow willing to accommodate the Chechens. But so long as Putin remains Russia's president and Sharon (or someone like him) Israel's prime minister, the close Israeli-Russian relationship will probably continue to develop, especially if Sharon's successor is also a Russian-speaker. The strong Russian-Israeli trade relationship alone provides an incentive for Moscow and Jerusalem to maintain good working relations to some

⁵³ *Izvestia*, Feb. 12, 2003, in *CDPSP*, Mar. 12, 2003.

⁵⁴ *The Moscow Times*, Sept. 6, 2004.

degree. The Russian foreign policy elite's pro-Palestinian sympathies might emerge again, though, with Putin's successor.

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