

PolicyWatch: Moscow's Hopes for Hamas

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Shortly after the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections won by Hamas, Russian President Vladimir Putin surprised much of the international community by inviting its leadership to Moscow. What was especially surprising about this move was that Hamas had not agreed to recognize Israel, renounce violence, or adhere to previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements -- the conditions that the "Quartet" (the U.S., EU, UN, and Russia itself) had set for treating Hamas as a legitimate partner in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Moscow, though, seemed to hope that its willingness to talk with it would result in Hamas accepting the Quartet's conditions. A Hamas delegation did indeed visit Moscow in March 2006. However, the Putin administration's hopes were disappointed. Hamas did not accept the Quartet's conditions then. Nor has it as of yet.

Despite his lack of success so far, Putin continues to hope that Moscow can persuade Hamas to accept the Quartet's conditions. He believes that Russian diplomacy will reap important benefits if Moscow is seen as responsible for persuading Hamas to relent -- and that Moscow will incur few costs for failing to do so.

Putin's approach toward Hamas suggests that he hopes Russia now has the same advantage over the U.S. in the Arab-Israeli arena that Washington had over Moscow previously. Moscow broke diplomatic relations with Israel in the wake of the June 1967 War in a show of solidarity with the Arab states. This move, however, relegated Moscow to the sidelines of subsequent diplomacy over the Arab-Israeli conflict since Washington could talk to both sides while Moscow could not until it re-established diplomatic relations with Israel at the end of the Gorbachev era.

Russia's willingness to talk to Hamas after its January 2006 electoral victory when the U.S. and EU will not do so, Putin may hope, could allow Moscow to now play a more central role -- if not overshadow Washington altogether -- in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. For if Putin can "deliver" Hamas, he may expect that Russia's importance to Israel, the U.S., and others involved in the peace process to greatly increase. And as annoyed as Israel is about Russia talking to Hamas, Israel is not likely to cease its extensive trade and security cooperation with Moscow as long as Russia continues calling upon Hamas to accept the Quartet's three conditions.

Moscow, then, hopes to gain influence in the Middle East if it succeeds in persuading Hamas to accept the Quartet's conditions, but avoid paying any significant costs (especially in terms of relations with the U.S. and Israel) for trying but failing to do so. If this is indeed Putin's strategy, he may be right that trying and failing will not cost Moscow anything. But as long as Hamas refuses to accept the Quartet's conditions, the payoff Moscow hopes to receive from its doing so will not materialize. Nor does Moscow seem to be in a position to persuade Hamas to change its position. Indeed, it is not clear that Putin has anything to offer Hamas that would induce it to accept the Quartet's three conditions.

Yet even if Hamas does accept the Quartet's conditions, it is not clear that Moscow will benefit much. For if Hamas does this, the U.S., the EU, and probably even Israel will be willing to talk to it--and Russia will not be needed to facilitate dialogue among them.

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