

# **RUSSIAN-PALESTINIAN RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL ANALYSIS**

**Dr. Andrej Kreutz, University of Calgary**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The history of Russian-Palestinian (and between 1917-1991, Soviet-Palestinian) relations has been long and complex. For a number of historical and political reasons, it has been deeply interwoven with Russian (and between 1917-1991, Soviet) relations with the Zionist-Israeli enterprise, Arab nationalism, and Third World national liberation movements in general. However, at the same time, particularly between 1956 and 1990, Soviet-Palestinian relations were also part and parcel of the then ongoing Soviet-American confrontation, and even after the Cold War ended, the international and ideological role and importance of the Russian-Palestinian relationship always far exceeded its local and regional limitations. This paper focuses on three main issues:

- I. Historical background
- II. The origins and development of Russian-Palestinian relations
- III. Present Russian-Palestinian relations, and the chances for a more active Russian involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.
- IV. Conclusions

### **I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The presence of the considerable and well-settled Muslim and Christian Arab population in Palestine has always been well known by Russian (Soviet) policymakers. However, their attitude towards them has varied greatly, from time to time, depending on Russian (Soviet)-Zionist-Israeli relations and the broader international considerations.

Russia's relations with Palestine, the Holy Land of Christianity, can be traced back as far as the early medieval period of Kiev Rus, when numerous Russian pilgrims, merchants, and soldiers had already found their way to the country. One of them,

Father Superior (Igumen) Daniel, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1106-1108 and lit a lamp at the Holy Sepulchre in the name of all Russian lands.<sup>1</sup> According to Russian scholars, his description of the pilgrimage, and the religious meditations interspersed with it, would be read for several centuries and had a strong impact on the national consciousness of the Russian people.<sup>2</sup> Starting in the sixteenth century, Tsarist Russia established and developed strong links with the Middle Eastern Orthodox Christian communities, particularly in Palestine, and after the treaty of Kucuk Kaynarca in 1774, became their official protector.<sup>3</sup> Even putting aside diplomatic considerations, rulers of St. Petersburg generally supported the renewal of the local Christian Orthodox communities, always siding with the indigenous Arab elements against both the Turkish authorities and the upper clergy, who were predominantly of Greek origin and inclined to disregard the vital interests of their faithful.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the strictly religious activities and the organization of the Russian pilgrimages, the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, which was established in 1882, founded schools, hospitals, and hostels in Palestine, and provided substantial material aid to the indigenous population, thus earning their gratitude and sympathy.<sup>5</sup> According to the official report that was published on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Society at that time had six hospices, a hospital, six outpatient clinics, and more than 100 schools of a secular and religious nature.<sup>6</sup> By 1910, at the high point of its activity, the Society was spending most of its income on Syrian-Palestinian education, even to the detriment of its mission relating to the pilgrims.<sup>7</sup> Despite such deep involvement, the direct imperial expansion, and the territorial aspirations of the Russian Empire did not extend in to Syria-Palestine or even in to the Arab world as a whole. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Volkov A. and B. Yamiliev, "Ruskie v Sviatoi Zemle," *Asia I Afrika e Segodnia*, No. 5, 1999, pp. 60-61.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Hopwood, Derek, *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine 1843-1914: Church and Politics in the Near East*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, 1969, p. 5. See also *Rossiia v Sviatoi Zemle*, Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia, 2000, pp. 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Hopwood, pp. 29, 37-38 and *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Volkov, A. and B. Yamiliev, "Ruskie v Sviatoi Zemle," *Asia I Afrika Segodnia*, No. 5, 1999, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> *Rossiia v Sviatoi Zemle*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>7</sup> Hopwood, p. 153.

nineteenth century, and at the beginning of the twentieth, Russia was not involved in the colonial carve-up of the area and its “moral credentials among the Arabs on both an official and a popular level were considerably higher than that of the West.”<sup>8</sup> Russia's geopolitical interests have traditionally been concentrated on the Turkish and Persian provinces adjacent to its borders, where its long-range goal was to establish a belt of protective buffer areas extending to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, which would then serve to protect the industrial regions of southern Russia and Transcaucasia.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, however, it must be noted that it was the anti-Semitic policy of the Russian government that was one of the main causes of the development of the Zionist movement and the beginning of Jewish immigration to Palestine starting from the first wave of the Aliya, mainly from Eastern Ukraine in 1882.<sup>10</sup> According to Theodor Herzl, perhaps the most prominent founder of the Zionist movement, the Russian Minister of Interior, Vyacheslav Plehve, told him in August 1903, that because of the problems created by the poor Jewish population in the Russian Empire, “the creation of an independent Jewish state, capable of absorbing several million Jews, would suit us best of all.”<sup>11</sup> One of his colleagues, the Russian Minister of Finance, S.Y. Witte, even added that “the Jews are being given encouragement to emigrate—kicks for example.”<sup>12</sup>

The Bolshevik Revolution brought a new dimension to the traditional Russian goals and interests in the Arab world and the Middle East as a whole, and replaced some of them by a completely different set of values and priorities. Moscow, which had, after the revolution, become communist and officially atheistic, could not have cared less about the Christian minorities and the holy places, but in accordance with Lenin's

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<sup>8</sup> Yemelianova, G.M., “Russia and Islam: The History and Prospect of a Relationship,” *Asian Affairs*, Vol. XXVI, p. iii, October 1995, p. 284.

<sup>9</sup> Kirk, George, *Survey of International Affairs: The Middle East in the War, 1939-1946*, Arnold Toynbee, ed., London: R.I. of International Affairs, 1954, p. 449. See also Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire, 1801-1917*, Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 41-51, 289-311, 430-35.

<sup>10</sup> Tessler, Mark, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 42-43.

<sup>11</sup> *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, edited by Raphael Patai, New York: The Herzl Press, 1960, v. IV, p. 1535.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 1531.

“ideology tactics” on the nationality question, the Bolsheviks professed to support the colonial peoples’ national liberation struggle against imperial domination and considered it to be progressive and revolutionary. The Fourth Comintern Congress in November 1922 also included among the potential allies in the anti-imperialist struggle, the Third world feudal aristocracy and the pan-Islamic movement,<sup>13</sup> and despite the class origins of their leadership, Soviet Russia, from the very beginning, generally supported the Palestinian Arabs.<sup>14</sup> In 1930, the Executive Committee of the Communist International described Zionism as “the expression of the exploiting, and great power oppressive strivings, of the Jewish bourgeoisie.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the Communist Party of Palestine, founded by the Jewish immigrants in 1919, when it was admitted to the Comintern, was strongly advised to “support the national freedom of the Arab population against the British-Zionist occupation.”<sup>16</sup> After the August 1929 uprising, the secretariat of the Central Committee of that party presented a highly critical and well-documented analysis of the socio-political situation in Palestine.<sup>17</sup> It indicated that the goal of the second stage of Zionist occupation was the expropriation of the Arab peasants and the colonization of these regions with Jews, the crowding out of Arab workers, the crowding out of Arab small businessmen and artisans and the strengthening of the Jewish Capital.<sup>18</sup>

The Communist Party of Palestine, however, was divided among the Arab and Jewish factions, and was generally devoid of much political influence. In practice, because of the Soviet Union's domestic problems, and international isolation in the 1920s and 1930s, its support for Arab Palestinians was hardly of any practical help whatsoever, and, in addition, the destruction by the Communists of the earlier Tsarist

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<sup>13</sup> Page, Stephen, *The USSR and Arabia: The Development of Soviet Policies and Attitudes Towards the Countries of the Arabian Peninsula, 1955-1970*, London: The Central Asian Research Centre, 1971, pp. 15-16.

<sup>14</sup> Kramer, Arnold, *The Forgotten Friendship: Israel and the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1953*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Spector, Ivan, *The Soviet Union and the Muslim world, 1917-1958*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969, p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> Kramer, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Spector, pp. 160-78.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 143.

institutions and organizations, which included the Imperial Palestinian Society with its networks of schools and clinics, caused considerable damage to the local population.

World War II and its immediate aftermath deeply changed both the international status of the Soviet Union and the situation in the Middle East. Moscow emerged victorious in 1945 as one of the two new world superpowers, and acquired a power it had previously lacked to exercise real influence in adjacent areas. At the same time the war brought to an end the long-standing Middle Eastern stagnation, and relatively rapid economic and industrial development took place in the region, stimulating both social transformations and political movements of a nationalist and radical character.<sup>19</sup>

Further, immediately after the war, the Soviet Union, following its World War II policy of aggrandizement and support for national liberation movements, and wanting to find a common ground with the Arab national liberation movements, continued to support the Palestinians. As late as the spring of 1946, both the USSR and the Middle Eastern Communist parties denounced the partition of Palestine, and called instead for a unified Arab-Jewish state in the country.<sup>20</sup> However, this Soviet attitude was sharply reversed in 1947 when Moscow decided to recognize the Jewish rights to their own state in Palestine and finally voted for the partition of the country.

Concerning Soviet support for the partition of Palestine in the 1947-48 period, there is still some uncertainty regarding the political causes, and the historical debate is by no means concluded. However, several points need to be taken into account:

(1) The Soviets supported partition largely because they considered Arab governments and the Arab leaders in general to be tools of British imperialism. The anti-Soviet behaviour and statements of some Arab representatives certainly contributed to this Soviet opinion. According to the Arab-Palestinian Daily, *Filastin* (26 May 1947), "The [Arab] delegates, as well as the Arab High Executive representatives tried to avoid

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<sup>19</sup> Kramer, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 143.

Russia in the same way as a healthy person avoids an itchy one.... This made Soviet Russia believe that the Arabs were attendant on the British.”<sup>21</sup>

(2) Both the Jewish Holocaust in Eastern and Central Europe and the support that the Soviet Union received during the war against Nazism from the far-flung Jewish Diaspora, undoubtedly had an impact on the Soviet leaders. During the 125<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, A. Gromyko stressed that apart from the fact that “the Jewish people had been closely linked with Palestine for a considerable period in history...we must not overlook the position in which the Jewish people found themselves as a result of the recent world war.”<sup>22</sup> He went on to say: “The solution of the Palestinian problem into two separate states will be of profound historical significance, because this decision will meet the legitimate demands of the Jewish people.”<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, in the years to come, Soviet theoreticians always argued that “when the USSR voted in favour of the establishment of the State of Israel, it voted on the basis of the right to self-determination, not to implement a colonialist scheme.”<sup>24</sup>

(3) Supporting the partition of Palestine, right from the start the USSR wanted it to be fully implemented into its possible future development, including the creation of the Arab-Palestinian State and the internationalization of Jerusalem. In his famous speech on 26 November 1947, Gromyko indicated that “the USSR supported the partition as the only practical solution in view of the inability of the Jewish and Arab people to live together,” and that “although the partition solution seemed to favour the Jews...it neither contradicted Arab national interests, nor was it intended as an anti-Arab move.”<sup>25</sup> He also expressed the conviction that “Arabs and Arab states will still, on more than one

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<sup>21</sup> *Arab News Bulletin*, Washington, D.C., No. 6, June 21, 1947, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> General Assembly, Official Records, Second Session, 125<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting, 26 November 1947, pp. 1360-61.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Special Document: “The Soviet Attitude to the Palestine Problem,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. II, No. 1, August 1972, p. 200.

<sup>25</sup> General Assembly, Official Records, Second Session, 125<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting, 26 November 1947, pp. 1360-61.

occasion, be looking towards Moscow, and expecting the USSR to help them in the struggle for their lawful interests."<sup>26</sup>

On 3 December 1948, the Soviet representative to the UN Security Council, Yacob Malik, while supporting Israel's application for UN membership, stressed that the Soviet Union "would give the same attention to an application for admission to the UN, submitted by an Arab state set up on the territory of Palestine, as provided in the resolution of 29 November 1947."<sup>27</sup> He added, "unfortunately, owing to a series of circumstances, such a state has not yet been created."<sup>28</sup>

At least until the autumn of 1949, Moscow called for the creation of an Arab-Palestinian state and, in a strange alliance with the Vatican, continued to ask for the internationalization of Jerusalem.<sup>29</sup>

(4) The Soviet support for the Zionist cause was by no means unimportant, and certainly contributed substantially to the establishment of Israel as a state. Moscow was the first to grant Israeli *de jure* recognition on 18 May 1948, only three days after the proclamation of the state.<sup>30</sup> It also permitted the emigration of some 200,000 Eastern European Jews, even allowing them to organize and undergo military training by the Zionist (Israeli) envoys.<sup>31</sup> A very important role was also played by arms and munitions supplies for the Haganah, the military arm of the Jewish agency, by the Soviet-dominated countries, mainly Czechoslovakia. Significantly, no Arab country was able to get any military support from the Soviets at that time.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Roi, Yaacov, ed., *From Encroachment to Involvement: A Documentary Study of Soviet Policy in the Middle East, 1945-1973*, Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1974, pp. 65-66.

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>29</sup> Golan, Galia, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 42.

<sup>30</sup> The full text of the telegram by the Soviet Foreign Minister, V.M. Molotov, to the Israeli Foreign Minister, M. Shertok, is in *Mezhdunarodnaia Zhizn*, Fall 1998, p. 91.

<sup>31</sup> Golan, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

All those facts notwithstanding, Moscow's role in the creation of Israel, and the loss of predominantly Arab Palestine, were comparably smaller than that of the United States, and perhaps even some Western European countries. Even Arab diplomats who, at that time, followed the developments in the region were quick to note this disparity of roles. On 1 December 1947, an official spokesman of the Arab Information Office in Washington, D.C. told the press that "Russia's stand on Palestine was in no way as serious as American support for the same issue."<sup>33</sup> In addition, Moscow's active support for the Zionist cause was quite limited in time, and came to an end by the end of 1948,<sup>34</sup> even though Moscow has never withdrawn its recognition of Israel's statehood and its legitimacy.

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5) The Soviet Union co-authored and consistently supported the UN resolution 194(III) passed on 11 December 1948, and stated that:

The refugees wishing to return to their homes and live in peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for the loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law, or in equity, should be made by the governments or authorities responsible.<sup>35</sup>

Since the end of 1949, however, the Soviet advocacy of Palestinian rights to their lost land and properties has been made, on rather an individual basis and without mentioning the Palestinian's right to national self-determination. Following the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948, Moscow started to see Palestinian Arabs mainly as refugees, and the Arab-Israeli conflict was reduced to its interstate dimensions between the State of Israel and its Arab neighbours.<sup>36</sup> On 15 May 1958, at the end of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's visit to Moscow, a joint Soviet-UAR communiqué stated that:

The two governments examined the question of the rights of Palestinian Arabs and of their expulsion from their homes. They also examined the question of the

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<sup>33</sup> Kramer, *The Forgotten Friendship*, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> Golan, pp. 37-38.

<sup>35</sup> Khouri, Fred J., *The Arab Israel Dilemma*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1985, p. 126.

<sup>36</sup> Golan, Galia, *The Soviet Union and the Palestine Liberation Organization*, New York: Praeger, 1988, p. 9.



violation of human rights, and the threats to peace and security in that area which this entails.<sup>37</sup>

According to this statement, "Both governments reaffirm their full support for the legitimate rights of the Palestinian Arabs."<sup>38</sup> Later, the joint Soviet-Algerian communiqué of 6 May 1964 called for particular attention to the "lawful and inalienable rights of Palestinian Arabs,"<sup>39</sup> and the same phrase was repeated in the official opening statement during Nikita S. Khrushchev's visit to Egypt a few weeks later,<sup>40</sup> as well as on several other occasions.<sup>41</sup> However, the Soviet reaction to the Palestinian movement, which emerged in the 1960s in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Fatah organizations,<sup>42</sup> for a relatively long time remained cool and cautious.<sup>43</sup> In this regard, Moscow condemned the use of terrorism, and the hijacking of civilian planes by the fedayees,<sup>44</sup> arguing that "Arab reactionaries and Israeli agents are deliberately pushing the Palestinians towards extremism, in order to create an international public perception that the Arab partisans are only fanatical terrorists."<sup>45</sup> It also criticized the unrealistic aims of these terrorist organizations, which amounted to the "liquidation of the State of Israel, and the creation of a Palestinian democratic state."<sup>46</sup> The Soviets believed that "The existence of Israel is a fact. The idea of annihilating it as a way of achieving self-determination for the Palestinian Arab people is self-contradictory; this can only cause a new world war."<sup>47</sup> In addition, Moscow was further discouraged by Palestinian

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<sup>37</sup> Roi, Yaacov, *From Encroachment to Involvement: A Documentary Study of Soviet Policy in the Middle East, 1945-1973*, Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1974, p. 252.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 374.

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 388.

<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 415, 422.

<sup>42</sup> R.D. McLaurin indicates that "the PLO must be viewed as having two origins" (The PLO and the Arab Fertile Crescent), in A.R. Norton and M.H. Greenberg, *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Golan, Galia, *The Soviet Union and the Palestine Liberation Organization: An Uneasy Alliance*, New York: Praeger, 1980, pp. 6-8.

<sup>44</sup> Norton, A.R., "Moscow and the Palestinians: A New Tool of Soviet Policy in the Middle East," in M. Curtis, J. Neyer, C.I. Waxman and A. Pollock (eds.), *The Palestinians: People, History, Politics*, New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1975, p. 237.

<sup>45</sup> *Pravda*, 10 September, 1972.

<sup>46</sup> *Sovetskaia Rossia*, 15 April 1969.

<sup>47</sup> Special Document, "The Soviet Attitude Toward the Palestine Problem," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. II, No. 1, August 1972, p. 200.

disunity<sup>48</sup> and the social conservatism of the PLO leadership.<sup>49</sup> The Soviets particularly disliked the first PLO leader, Ahmed Shuquairy, calling him “an extremist of extremists”<sup>50</sup> and an “unscrupulous politician,”<sup>51</sup> though after his removal from office in December 1967, George Habash and his Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) also became the object of strong Soviet criticism as “an extremist organization, which pursues mass terror tactics.”<sup>52</sup>

According to a Palestinian journalist, however, despite its negative opinions of the PLO apparatus and policy, from the very beginning in May 1964, Moscow had established secret contacts with the Palestinian leaders,<sup>53</sup> and since 1965 had developed an active cooperation with a number of Palestinian social organizations such as the General Union of Palestinian Students and the General Union of Palestinian Women.<sup>54</sup> Starting from this time, and for many years to come, all those organizations would receive generous Soviet assistance, especially in the form of scholarships for study in the Soviet Union.<sup>55</sup> Political understanding and cooperation between the Soviets and the Palestinian organizations were far more difficult to achieve. However, before the Six-Day War in June 1967, and in view of Israel's occupation of the rest of the Palestinian territories (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), and the increasing political importance of the Palestinian resistance, Soviet-Palestinian relations began to improve. Indeed, the turning point came after Yasser Arafat's secret visit to Moscow as part of Nasser's delegation in July 1968.<sup>56</sup> The most important outcome of this visit was the Soviet decision in June 1969 to recognize Palestinians as a nationality, with the consequent right to self-determination, and not just as the Arab inhabitants of Palestine,

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<sup>48</sup> Norton, pp. 235-36.

<sup>49</sup> Special Document, “The Soviet Attitude Toward the Palestine Problem,” p. 201. The Soviet leaders noticed that “The Palestinian resistance movement is not homogeneous, there is a leftist democratic wing and a rightist chauvinist wing, even if they are united at the moment.” In their view the important thing was that “the leftist wing and democratic elements should crystallize and come closer to their counterparts in Israel” (*Ibid.*).

<sup>50</sup> Radio Liberty Research Report No. CRD 46/70, Munich, 13 February 1970, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Cooley, John K. *Green March, Black September: The Story of the Palestinian Arabs*, London: Frank Cass, 1973, pp. 165-66.

<sup>53</sup> Farouq, M., “La Palestine et l'Union Sovietique,” *Palestine*, No. 3, January 1977, p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

as had been done before.<sup>57</sup> A Soviet telegram to the Arab summit in December 1969 concluded that any settlement in the Middle East would need to secure the legitimate rights and interests of the Arab people of Palestine.<sup>58</sup> Even after that, however, the Soviet experts admitted that: “The question of establishing a Palestinian state raises many problems—How big? Where? When? etc.”<sup>59</sup> Palestinian rights of self-determination seemed “difficult [for the Soviets] to define...in addition to what form they will actually take and the stages they will pass through.”<sup>60</sup> In fact, the Soviets considered the Palestinian state as an additional obstacle to what Moscow considered to be a just solution to the Palestinian Arab population’s problems, according to the UN resolutions, “to the effect that those who want to return should be allowed to do so and that those who do not return should be compensated”.<sup>61</sup>

A decisive shift in Soviet-Palestinian relations took place in the 1972-74 period, largely as a result of Moscow’s loss of its influence in Egypt, and the fact that the American role was growing in the region.<sup>62</sup> As an Israeli scholar pointed out, “the Palestinian issue, rather than the return of the Arab states’ territories, was the one about which the Americans might feel the most vulnerable, most restricted, and most frustrated, as well as being the one which, at least publicly, united the Arab world.”<sup>63</sup> For the Soviets, it provided a unique opportunity to increase their influence, not only in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but also in the whole region, perhaps even in the Third World in general.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the PLO needed Moscow’s recognition in order to move its struggle on to the international stage, enhance its own legitimacy, and last but not least to obtain further material support from Soviet and other Eastern Bloc countries.<sup>65</sup> By 1972, the Soviets were calling the Palestinian movement the vanguard

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* See also Golan, p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> Farouq, p. 25.

<sup>59</sup> “The Soviet Attitude to the Palestine Problem,” p. 190.

<sup>60</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>61</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>62</sup> Golan, Galia, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 111.

<sup>63</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 111-12.

<sup>64</sup> Reppert, John C., “The Soviets and the PLO: The Convenience of Politics,” in Augustus R. Norton and Martin H. Greenberg, *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, p. 111.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Arab liberation movement.<sup>66</sup> In the summer of 1974, the USSR announced its approval for the opening of the PLO office in Moscow,<sup>67</sup> and on 8 September 1974 of the same year, the Soviet President, Nicolai Podgorny, for the first time, publicly mentioned the Palestinians' "rights to establish their own statehood in one form or another."<sup>68</sup>

After the Camp David Accords in September 1978, the Soviet President, Leonid Brezhnev, declared that "there is only one road" to a real settlement, "the road of full liberation of all Arab lands occupied by Israel in 1967, of full and unambiguous respect for the lawful rights of the Arab people of Palestine, including the right to create their own independent state."<sup>69</sup> At the end of Arafat's visit to Moscow, 29 October 29 to 1 November 1978, the Soviet authorities finally recognized the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."<sup>70</sup>

However, the Soviet leaders and political scholars have never swerved from the recognition they adopted in 1947 regarding the newly reborn Israeli-Hebrew people and their national state. Even at the critical point of Soviet-Israeli tension in the early 1970s, the Soviets firmly indicated that:

the emergence of the Hebrew nation, just as any other, is a fact which is recognized by the international community and which has international legal protection. The question of the national self-determination of the Hebrews is for all intents and purposes settled. Any attempt to reopen the question without the agreement of the Hebrews or at their expense is in bad faith; moreover, the consequences will be disastrous.<sup>71</sup>

The latter part of the 1970s marked the high point of Soviet support for the Palestinians, contributing greatly to their diplomatic successes, which started with the granting of observer status in the UN to the PLO in 1974. At the same time, the USSR urged Palestinian leaders to accept resolution 242, which implied the recognition of

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<sup>66</sup> Golan, *The Soviet Union and the Palestine Liberation Organization*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>67</sup> Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev*, p. 112.

<sup>68</sup> *Pravda*, 9 September 1974.

<sup>69</sup> *Soviet World Outlook*, Vol. 3, No. 10, 15 October 1978, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Pravda*, 2 November 1978.

<sup>71</sup> Dimitriev Y. and V. Ladeikin, *Put k miru na Blizhnem Vostoke*, Moscow, 1974, p. 70.

Israel, and expressed a definite preference for political over military methods.<sup>72</sup> Its support for armed struggle, including that of the Palestinian guerillas, has always been cautious and limited, and Moscow has always been particularly critical of the use of terror.<sup>73</sup>

In March 1985, Gorbachev assumed power, and his “new thinking” brought about dramatic changes in Soviet foreign policy. Third World nations, including those in the Arab world, were only of peripheral interest and importance to him, and his Middle Eastern policy was now aimed towards the major goal of opening the Soviet Union to the West, especially to the U.S. Trying to bring about both an end to the Cold War with the American superpower and an alleviation of Soviet economic problems, Gorbachev and his advisors wanted to restore Soviet-Israeli relations, and limit previous Soviet support for Arab national causes.<sup>74</sup> However, the Soviet withdrawal from their previous pro-Palestinian positions was slow and complex. The Palestinians and the Arab peoples in general still had many influential friends in Moscow, and both Mikhail Gorbachev and his Foreign Minister, Edward Shevardnadze, initially needed to work in a very cautious and prudent way.<sup>75</sup> The first and more open decisive steps in the new direction took place during Arafat's visit to Moscow in April 1988. At that time, and in the following months before the Palestinian National Council (PNC) session in Algeria in November 1988, both Arafat and other more radical Palestinian leaders such as George Habash and Naif Hawatmeh, were subject to Soviet pressure and persuasion to accept Resolution 242 without any Israeli reward, including the provisions of Israel's right to recognition and security.<sup>76</sup> As an Israeli scholar mildly put it, “the PLO was subjected to a heavy dose of Soviet advice to generate a new peace process.”<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, however, the Soviets were reluctant to recognize the creation of a Palestinian state at

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<sup>72</sup> Golan, p. 117.

<sup>73</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 117-18. See also a. Vassiliev, *Rossija na Blizhnem I Srednem Vostoke: ot Messianstva k pragmatizmu*, Moskva: Nauka, 1993, pp. 328, 331-32.

<sup>74</sup> Sharipov, V.Z., *Persiskii j Zaliv: Neft-politika i voina*, Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Science, 2000, p. 107.

<sup>75</sup> Vassiliev, p. 396.

<sup>76</sup> Golan, Galia, “Moscow and the PLO: The Ups and Downs of a Complex Relationship,” in A. Sela and M. Ma'oz, *The PLO and Israel: From Armed Conflict to Political Solution, 1964-1994*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, pp. 126-27.

the November 1988 PNC session, and won the praise of the U.S. State Department and the Israeli government for their efforts “to prevent this new entity from joining the UN or the World Health Organization in 1989.”<sup>78</sup>

Moscow now started to follow the American line almost completely, advising the PLO to give up the quest for direct participation in the talks with Israel,<sup>79</sup> and even questioning the PLO's position as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.<sup>80</sup> A true bone of contention between the Soviets, the Palestinians and Arabs in general—and for a long time between the Soviets themselves and Israel—was the issue of Jewish immigration to Israel.<sup>81</sup> From the beginning of 1990 to the spring of 1992, about 400,000 immigrants had left the Soviet Union for Israel.<sup>82</sup> Such a massive influx of Jewish immigrants into the country greatly changed the demographic and political situation, and exacerbated the issue of the future of the Palestinians, both in the Occupied Territories and in exile. Gorbachev was unable or unwilling to prevent the new immigrants from settling in the Occupied Territories, or from taking more Palestinian land. These actions necessarily made the prospect of Palestinian political self-determination all the more difficult.<sup>83</sup> A Palestinian delegation visited Moscow in the spring of 1990 specifically to discuss the issue, and while there, the PLO asked Shevardnadze for a “neutral international supervisory committee to implement the international resolutions to halt settlement in the Occupied Territories, and to suspend intrusive Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union to the Occupied Territories.”<sup>84</sup> The Palestinians also wanted Moscow to link the problem of Jewish immigration with Palestinian rights, “including the expropriation of houses, land, and water resources.”<sup>85</sup> Even the Palestinian Israeli citizens were full of misgivings, and the Secretary-General

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<sup>77</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 126-27.

<sup>78</sup> *Op. cit.*, 127.

<sup>79</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 128-29.

<sup>80</sup> See particularly the article by the influential Soviet politician who would soon become the Soviet Ambassador to Israel, A.E. Bovin, in *Izvestia*, 20 March 1991.

<sup>81</sup> Vassiliev, p. 308.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* See also Golan, p. 131.

<sup>84</sup> *al Dustour* (Jordan), 2 July 1990.

<sup>85</sup> Golan, p. 131.

of one of their organizations, Abna al Balad, Raja Aghbariya, noticed that “adding one million Jews to Israel [the expected total of this immigration wave] forms an actual danger to the very fact of our existence. Transfer of the remaining Palestinians comes closer to realization than it had been before.”<sup>86</sup>

The fact that Gorbachev's team did not take all these fears into account roused growing disappointment and bitterness among the Palestinians. In September 1990, PLO executive member, Abdullah Hourani, expressed his opinion that Moscow was attempting to please the Zionist movement and obtain American money, and that “it [was] no longer possible to regard...[it] as a friend of world forces of liberation, including the Arab world and the Palestinian people and cause.”<sup>87</sup> The Gulf crisis and the pro-Iraqi sympathies of the Palestinians,<sup>88</sup> along with the express support of some Palestinian leaders—including the PLO “foreign minister,” Farouq Qaddoumi—for the Moscow coup attempt of August 1991,<sup>89</sup> worsened their relations with the Soviet authorities even more. Though the Palestinians still enjoyed the support of some in the Soviet media and the sphere of public opinion, as one Russian scholar indicated, relations with the Palestinians became relatively less important for Moscow than the Soviet links with Israel.<sup>90</sup>

On 8 December 1991, the USSR finally came to an end and the Palestinians' feelings towards Gorbachev's policy were clearly stated in an editorial in East Jerusalem's Arab daily *Al Nahar* when Gorbachev visited Israel in June 1992. The reason for the Palestinian people's disappointment with the old “friend” is that they were hoping that Gorbachev would alleviate their suffering and ease the hard conditions under which they are living.... There is no doubt that Gorbachev played an important role in all the crises that have hit the Middle East in the past eight years. Soviet immigrants are being settled on Palestinian lands. After those lands are planted by

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<sup>86</sup> *Haaretz*, 4 May 1990, quoted in Majid al Haj, “Soviet Immigration as Viewed by Jews and Arabs” in C. Goldscheider, ed., *Population and Change in Israel*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992, pp. 98-99.

<sup>87</sup> Reuter, 27 September 1990.

<sup>88</sup> Vassiliev, p. 332.

<sup>89</sup> Golan, p. 132.

<sup>90</sup> Vassiliev, p. 332.

these immigrants [the Palestinians] will be expelled to Jordan, from where they will be dispersed all over the Arab world. All this is thanks to Gorbachev's policy. That is what you have done to the Palestinian people.<sup>91</sup>

While touring Israel, Gorbachev spoke harshly about the Palestinian leadership and without mentioning their critical situation, recommended that they seek peace and social harmony with the Israelis.<sup>92</sup> All Palestinian objections notwithstanding, Gorbachev's policy would be continued by the USSR's successor state, the Russian Federation, whose president, Yeltsin, and foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, did not want to endanger "their close relationship with the U.S. by adopting anything different from the positions advocated by Washington."<sup>93</sup>

## **II. RUSSIAN-PALESTINIAN RELATIONS FOLLOWING THE DEMISE OF THE USSR**

During the post-Soviet period, Russian-Palestinian relations have been a singular reflection of the evolution of Russian-Middle Eastern relations, and Moscow's foreign policy in general. If, in its policy towards some Middle Eastern countries including Iran and Iraq, Russia has already shown, and still continues to show a relatively high level of courage and independence, in the case of the Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict in general, its diplomacy has been conspicuously cautious and restrained. During this period, there have been at least three main causes for such caution and restraint:

(1) Russian relations with the U.S. are vital for post-Soviet Moscow. In order to cultivate this relationship, the Russian leaders need to keep in mind the American staunchly pro-Israel orientation, and avoid previous hostilities and confrontations. Even Russian scholars and politicians, who generally support and defend the Palestinians, suggest that "any confrontation with the U.S. is at that point unthinkable."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *Al Nahar*, (Jerusalem), 16 June 1992.

<sup>92</sup> *Christianity Today*, 8 July 1992, Vol. 36, No. 9, p. 52.

<sup>93</sup> Golan, Galia, "Moscow and the PLO: The Ups and Downs of a Complex Relationship," p. 133.

<sup>94</sup> Vassiliev, A.M., "Budushtieie Rossiiskoj Politiki na Blizhnem Vostoke," *Vestnik Rossiiskoj Akademii Nauk*, 1998, Vol. 68, No. 6, p. 497.



(2) After the USSR's collapse, and in view of its new boundaries, Russian geopolitical interest shifted more to the Northern Tier countries of the Middle East such as Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. According to many observers, "the most distant parts of the region, including the Levant, remain of considerably less strategic and economic interest for post-Soviet Russia."<sup>95</sup>

(3) Russian links with Israel have acquired a special strength and importance whose origins should be traced back to Gorbachev's perestroika period. However, these links have been greatly reinforced by the presence of a great number of Russian language immigrants in Israel, and the influence of the growing pro-Israeli media orientation in Russia.<sup>96</sup>

Despite all those problems, the post-Soviet Russian foreign policy elite have always wanted to preserve a modicum of Russian presence in Israeli-Palestinian relations. The very pro-Western Russian Foreign Minister, Andrei Kozyrev, still indicated that while Moscow wanted to cooperate closely with Washington, "it is now evident that the efforts by one co-sponsor are not enough to give dynamism to the process."<sup>97</sup> More than five years later, one of Kozyrev's successors, Igor Ivanov, added that "Russia, being a co-sponsor of a Middle East settlement, bears political, moral, and historical responsibility for the peace process in the Holy Land."<sup>98</sup> At the same time, "the Palestinian issue has been relegated to a peripheral status in Russian foreign policy thinking,"<sup>99</sup> even among centrist nationalist circles. Sergey Karaganov, the influential chairman of an institution of the Russian political elite—the Council of Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP)—has recently praised President Putin, saying that he "did not

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<sup>95</sup> Dannreuther, Roland, "Is Russia Returning to the Middle East?," *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 1998, p. 351.

<sup>96</sup> Vassiliev, p. 496.

<sup>97</sup> *Interfax* (Moscow), 28 March 1995.

<sup>98</sup> *Moscow News*, 16 August 2000.

<sup>99</sup> Nizameddin, Talal, *Russia and the Middle East: Towards a New Foreign Policy*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, p. 155.

get closely involved in a new Middle east settlement process—clearly counter-productive for Russia.”<sup>100</sup>

Moscow's extremely cautious policy, and its lack of effective support for Palestinians, even at the time of Primakov's leadership,<sup>101</sup> do not necessarily mean either a complete lack of genuine interest in the Arab-Israeli dilemma, or a frozen policy of continuing the same political behaviours and level of engagement.<sup>102</sup> In fact, during that period, Russian-Palestinian relations came through at least three important stages of transformation, with numerous international repercussions and implications.

(1) The first period after the USSR's dissolution between 1992-1994/5 was of almost total withdrawal, and passive acceptance of the U.S.-Israeli positions when Andrei Kozyrev was the Russian Foreign Minister.

(2) The second period was of a “national consensus”, led and symbolized by Yevgeny Primakov, the Russian Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister, which included some renewed but limited and mainly verbal support for the Palestinians.

(3) The third period, 2000-Present, is shown as Putin's period of increased cooperation with Israel and a new departure from Primakov's “pro-Arab” policy.

#### PART I - The Kozyrev Period, 1992-94/5

The period was characterized by President Yeltsin himself as a time of “extreme timidity towards the West, whilst allowing relations with the Third World to weaken.”<sup>103</sup> Relations with the Arab world were subsequently sharply reduced, and in the years 1992-1993, no single Arab head of state visited Moscow.<sup>104</sup> The new leaders particularly wanted to distance Russia from its previous support for the Palestinian

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<sup>100</sup> *Moscow News*, 10 January 2001.

<sup>101</sup> Nizameddin, p. 155.

<sup>102</sup> Naumkin, Vitaly, “La Russie et la Proche Orient,” *Revue Internationale et Strategique*, No. 38, 2000, p. 204.

<sup>103</sup> el-Doufani, Mohamed M., “Yeltsin's Foreign Policy: A Third World Critique,” *The World Today*, June 1993, p. 106.

<sup>104</sup> Brutens, Karen, “Vneshnaia Politika Rosii: novyi etap?,” *Svobodnaia Mysl.*, Vol. 21, No. 11, 2000, p. 70.

cause, and its involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although in order to assert Russia's persistent importance and influence, the new Russian leaders maintained official links with the PLO, they nevertheless fully supported American policy and usually defended Israeli interests.<sup>105</sup>

At the 28-29 January 1992 post-Madrid Arab-Israeli peace talks in Moscow, Yeltsin and his advisors allowed the Israelis to "control the entire agenda of the talks,"<sup>106</sup> and went as far as to accept the U.S.-Israeli request to exclude the PLO, the Palestinians from East Jerusalem, and the Palestinian Diaspora from the conference.<sup>107</sup> According to one Russian journalist, President Yeltsin "did not even pay any attention to it."<sup>108</sup> Less than a year later, in December 1992, Israel deported 416 Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip to the no-man's land of southern Lebanon. In response, Moscow was either unable or unwilling to provide the Palestinians with any kind of firm support, and did not even issue an unambiguous condemnation of the Israeli expulsions. The Russian Foreign Ministry simply stated that Russia was "counting on the sides to show maximum restraint in their actions, and hoped that the problem with the deportation of hundreds of Palestinians will be humanely settled very soon, taking into account the genuine interests of both the Israelis and the Palestinians."<sup>109</sup> As one Russian journalist then noted, the Ministry "limited itself to a trite declaration, even more toothless than the Security Council Resolution condemning Israel's action."<sup>110</sup>

The concept to guide Russia's relations with the Arab world, which President Yeltsin approved in the second part of 1992, did not mention either Palestinian rights or the Israeli occupation. Instead, Moscow's avowed goals were "to continue active efforts to promote the Mid-East Peace Process, and to make full use of our opportunities as

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<sup>105</sup> Golan, p. 133.

<sup>106</sup> el-Doufani, Mohamed M., "Futile Interventions: Russia's Disengagement from the Third World," *International Journal*, Vol. 44, Autumn 1994, p. 866.

<sup>107</sup> Golan, p. 133. See also "Inching Forward in Moscow," *Economist*, 1 February 1992.

<sup>108</sup> Filatov, Sergei, "Zero Option," *Pravda*, 30 January 1992, in *The Current Digest of the Post Soviet Press*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 1992, p. 18.

<sup>109</sup> *ITAR/TASS News Agency*, 18 December 1992. *FBIS-FSU*, 21 December 1992.

<sup>110</sup> Glukhov, Y., "Will we Long Remain Indifferent to the Drama of Deported Palestinians?", *Pravda*, 12 January 1992, in *the Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 1993, pp. 18-19.

co-sponsor to ensure a historic compromise between the Arabs and the Israelis.”<sup>111</sup> This policy was completely in accordance with American demands, and reduced Russia's role to one, which was purely formal and subservient.

However, the new Russian policy failed to gain general approval among the political class and public opinion in the country, and various political forces began to oppose the pro-Israel shift of Moscow's leaders. Shortly before the end of the Soviet Union, a Russian expert had, in fact, argued that the peace process which would be started at the Madrid Conference and would, in effect, “become an instrument to twist the Palestinian arm”,<sup>112</sup> would not prevent further Israeli expansion, and that the U.S.-orchestrated diplomatic activity in the Middle East “will also bring to an end the remainder of Moscow's influence there.”<sup>113</sup> Looking at Yeltsin's early diplomacy, a Russian journalist also noted that “since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the opinion of the Russian delegate at the UN concerning the Middle East situation has never diverged from the opinion of the U.S. delegate, however absurd it has been at times.”<sup>114</sup>

In the view of Yeltsin's political opponents, “for Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union, in foreign policy terms, this means a growing coolness in relations with the Arabs”, and “it will evoke the same sort of indifference to our problems and troubles.”<sup>115</sup> Their main and often repeated argument was that: Israel and its longstanding allies are trying to divert attention from the region's central political problem... The five million people of Palestine [who] do not have even one square meter of their own territory, even though the UN decisions require that their rightful lands be returned to them.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> *Pravda*, 14 November 1992, p. 3.

<sup>112</sup> Beliakov, V., *Pravda*, 28 September 1991.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Pravda*, 17 March 1993.

<sup>115</sup> Glukhov, Y., *Op. cit.*

<sup>116</sup> Filatov, Sergei, “Politics is a Subtle Business, But One Would Like Clarity,” *Pravda*, 14 November, 1992.

The call for the defence of Palestinian rights was motivated both by the concept of Russian national interest in the Arab world, and by the intrinsic sense of justice which is deeply rooted in Russian spiritual traditions, and which is opposed to a perceived Western materialism and U.S.-Israeli power politics.<sup>117</sup>

However, in various forms and to various degrees, similar feelings and opinions underlie the writings and arguments of some widely known and accepted Russian scholars and politicians.<sup>118</sup> In March 1994, Viktor Posuvalyuk, the Russian President's special envoy to the Middle East, and head of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the North Africa and Middle East Department, said that "Russia occupies its own broad niche in the Mid-East region, a niche owing to Russia's unique identity—primarily historical and spiritual—that no one else can lay claim to."<sup>119</sup>

After the PLO-Israel "Declaration of Principles" of 13 September 1993, Russian relations with the Palestinians again needed to be readjusted and reformulated. The ensuing changes and concomitant discussion about this direction were part and parcel of the much broader debate, which focused on the foreign policy and international status of post-Soviet Russia.<sup>120</sup> The struggle in Russia was between pro-Western neo-liberal Atlanticists and an informal coalition of more nationalist-minded political forces advocating Russian state interests and the independence of Russia foreign policy. The latter group complained bitterly that although, from a formal point of view, Russia still remained a co-sponsor of the Middle Eastern peace process, it in fact, has "been relegated to a supernumerary role, playing the part of a character who appears on stage when it is time to utter the historic phrase 'dinner is served'."<sup>121</sup> Even in private, Russian officials were admitting that regarding Arab-Israeli relations "their first instinct was to

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<sup>117</sup> Nizameddin, pp. 133-34.

<sup>118</sup> Vassiliev, A.M., "Budushtieie Rossiiskaj Politiki na Blizhnem Vostoke," *Vestnik Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk*, Vol. 38, No. 6, 1998, p. 497.

<sup>119</sup> *Sevodnya*, 12 March 1994, p. 5.

<sup>120</sup> Golan, Galia, "Moscow and the PLO: The Ups and Downs of a Complex Relationship," A. Sela and M. Ma'oz, eds., *The PLO and Israel: From Armed Conflict to Political Solution, 1964-1994*, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1997, p. 133.

<sup>121</sup> Glukhov, J., "Uroki vsedozvolennosti," *Pravda*, No. 147, 3 August 1993, p. 1.

look to the Americans for guidance,"<sup>122</sup> and it was "virtually impossible, from the publicly available data, to detect a single instance of discord in Russian and American attitudes towards the Arab-Israeli peace process."<sup>123</sup>

Although the Russian president's envoy to the Middle East, Victor Posuvalyuk, later claimed that "Russian diplomats not only knew about the secret meeting in Oslo, but also actively promoted its successful outcome,"<sup>124</sup> the true role of Russia was probably quite modest. After the PLO-Israel agreement was initialed on 20 August 1993, the PLO representative, Abu Mazen, left for Moscow in order to inform the Russian government of the important breakthrough and on 23 August, Posuvalyuk received him, assuring him of full Russian approval and cooperation.<sup>125</sup> On 6 September 1993, Posuvalyuk was sent from Moscow to Syria and Jordan in order to promote Palestinian-Israeli understanding in those countries.<sup>126</sup> However, in spite of this, the Russian daily, *Izvestia* admitted that Kozyrev's invitation for Washington to sign the Israeli-Palestinian accord on 13 September, 1993 "was more a gesture of one state's sympathy for another than an acknowledgement of the political realities."<sup>127</sup>

Nevertheless, Moscow would soon try to reassert its role in the peace process and its presence in the region. This new effort toward a more active Middle Eastern engagement was stimulated by both internal and external factors. On the domestic front, after the December 1993 parliamentary elections, President Yeltsin wanted to appease the outspoken critics of his pro-western and pro-Israeli policy and to "work out a *modus vivendi* with the new parliament."<sup>128</sup> To achieve this, he needed to adopt a much more independent and national line in his foreign policy. His Foreign Minister, Andrei Kozyrev, speaking after the signing of the PLO-Israel "Declaration of Principles" for the first time since the breakup of the Soviet Union, recalled in a positive light, the

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<sup>122</sup> Hannah, John, "Russia and the Middle East," *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, Vol. 16, 1992, p. 58.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Sevodnya*, 12 March 1994, p. 5.

<sup>125</sup> Pankratiev, V.P., "Slozhnyi put'ot Madrite k Oslo: Evolucija Palestino-Israil'skikh otnoshenii" in *Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia na Blizhnem Vostoke I Politika na Rubezhe XXI veka*, Moscow: Nemykin Tsulek Co., 2001, p. 139.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Izvestia*, 19 March, 1994, p. 3.

previous Soviet support for the PLO and Arafat, and indicated the weakness of the U.S. position. According to his statement:

We have worked with Arafat earlier, and supported him. Today...he has been recognized in the West as well.... [However] it should not be forgotten that Arab world relations with the U.S. have not always been positive, and it is important for Moscow to also lend support to the new initiative.<sup>129</sup>

In the international arena Russian leaders felt deeply disappointed by the lack of expected Western economic assistance and political cooperation for their country, and began to look for new alternative economic and political partners. For a number of geopolitical and historical reasons, the Middle Eastern region, including the Arab world, once again became more important for Moscow. Although the post-Soviet leaders were both unable and unwilling to follow the previous Soviet path of pro-Palestinian policy on the Arab-Israeli issue, they still wished to use it to acquire a more important role towards the Arab states and the West.<sup>130</sup>

At the beginning of 1994, Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev promoted Arab-Israeli peace, stating that the “realization of Palestinian aspirations was among the three main goals of Russia's Middle Eastern policy.”<sup>131</sup>

The first practical example of this new Russian involvement came soon after the 25 February 1994 massacre of Palestinians while at prayer by an Israeli settler. The official Russian reaction to the massacre was cautious and balanced in tone.<sup>132</sup> It noted the condemnation of the mass killings by the Israeli establishment, but indicated that this did “not absolve the Israeli leadership from full responsibility.”<sup>133</sup> In addition, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on 2 March 1994, calling for a reconvening

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<sup>128</sup> Freedman, R.O., “Russia and the Middle East Under Yeltsin: Part II,” *Domes: Digest of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 111, 1997, p. 13.

<sup>129</sup> Golan, p. 135.

<sup>130</sup> Naumkin, Vitaly, “Le Russie et le Proche Orient,” *Revue Internationale et Strategique*, Vol. 38, 2000, p. 206. See Golan, p. 134.

<sup>131</sup> *Rossiiskije, Vesti*, 9 February 1994.

<sup>132</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 25 February 1994; *FBIS-SOV*, 4 March 1994, p. 9.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Madrid Peace Conference, in order to revive and save the Arab-Israeli peace process.<sup>134</sup> Moscow also supported the Palestinian request for international observers to be sent to the West Bank and Gaza, in order to protect the local population from further Israeli acts of violence.<sup>135</sup> Both Victor Posuvalyuk and the Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, were sent to the Middle East to mediate the crisis, and between 11-12 March 1994, Andrei Kozyrev visited Israel and Tunis to discuss the tragic events with Israeli and Palestinian officials.<sup>136</sup> However, the American and Israeli reactions to the independent Russian initiative were quite negative.<sup>137</sup> Although both the Russian opposition and the Arab world welcomed these initiatives, and Kozyrev himself still claimed that his Middle East diplomacy was “an example of the partnership between the two powers,”<sup>138</sup> the U.S. Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, sent a letter to Yasser Arafat warning him to “stop trying to make separate deals with Russian diplomats.”<sup>139</sup> As the Americans and Israelis had only “harsh words for Andrei Kozyrev's trip to Tunisia”, and disregarded “Russia's sudden claim to genuine, not pro-forma, equality,”<sup>140</sup> in the Middle East peace process, Moscow had to quickly abandon its proposals and realize its diminished role in the existing balance of power. However, this did not mean an end to its more activist foreign policy, or imply a total withdrawal from the Levant. In fact, just one month later, in April 1994, Moscow played host to both the PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin.

Arafat's visit, which took place between 18-20 April 1994, marked an important new turn in Russian-Palestinian relations.<sup>141</sup> Its first and perhaps most important aspect was the fact that it had taken place at all, after the Soviet turnabout on the Palestinian issue during Gorbachev's period of perestroika, and the persistent coolness of the early Yeltsin administration. Arafat was received by President Yeltsin himself and held

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<sup>134</sup> Moscow Radio Rossii, 2 March 1994, FBIS-SOV, 4 March 1994, p. 9.

<sup>135</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 25 February 1994.

<sup>136</sup> *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, April 1994, No. 7-8, pp. 23-24.

<sup>137</sup> Golan, p. 135.

<sup>138</sup> *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 15 March 1994, p. 1.

<sup>139</sup> *Izvestia*, 19 March 1994, p. 3.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*



meetings with Kozyrev and other officials, including the speaker of the Duma, Ivan Rybkin and Moscow's Orthodox Patriarch, Alexei II.<sup>142</sup> At these meetings, Arafat spoke highly of Russia's contribution to the Arab-Israeli dialogue, and expressed particular gratitude for its help in overcoming the results of the crisis that followed the Hebron tragedy two months earlier. He also repeated the previous PLO request, that Russian soldiers become part of an international force which, according to the UN resolution, should be sent to the Occupied Territories.<sup>143</sup>

The Russian reply was friendly but cautious. Arafat was promised some help to organize Palestinian police units, and Yeltsin stated that “establishment of a general and just peace in the Middle East...was and remains, a strategic priority for Russia in what is, for her, a vitally important region.”<sup>144</sup> The statement was probably stronger than any of Moscow's previous declarations on the region's importance since Gorbachev's rise to power, but it had few practical implications. Shortly after Yasser Arafat's departure, a Russian foreign ministry official informed the press that Moscow did not put any pressure on Israel to protect the Palestinians.<sup>145</sup> Arafat was apparently heard but not heeded.

However, this did not stop Arafat from further efforts to get Russian support. In September 1994 he was in Moscow, again seeing Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov.<sup>146</sup> Yeltsin and Kozyrev were, in fact, willing to support Arafat against Palestinian opposition to his relations with Israel. In May 1994, Kozyrev called him “a brave, decisive leader” and stressed that “the fact that we received him in Moscow, on his visit on the eve of the signing [of the Gaza-Jericho agreement] was not simply a gesture of protocol, but was in fact an expression of support for him as the

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<sup>141</sup> *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, April 1994, No. 7-8, p. 23-24.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Arafat Press Conference, Interfax, 20 April 1994.

<sup>144</sup> *RFE/RL Newslines*, No. 75, 20 April 1999.

<sup>145</sup> Interfax, 22 April 1994.

<sup>146</sup> *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, 17 September 1994, p. 1.

preeminent leader of the Palestinian people.”<sup>147</sup> The Russians, however, were apparently unable or unwilling to stand up against either the Americans or Israeli pressures and demands.

Between 24-27 April 1994, the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, visited Russia. This was the first official visit of an Israeli Prime Minister, and he was welcomed with ceremony and cordiality. Rabin held long talks with Yeltsin, Prime Minister Victor Chermomyrdin, Foreign Minister Kozyrev, and Minister of Defence Pavel Grachev. He also signed six agreements on further Israeli-Russian cooperation. Concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict, both parties stressed the need for further efforts towards a general and lasting settlement, and from the available documents there is nothing to indicate any differences of opinions on the Palestinian issue.<sup>148</sup> However, there were two points of potential disagreement. Rabin complained “about the involvement of Russia in the peace process without coordination with the Americans,”<sup>149</sup> and opposed Russian arms sales to the countries that were hostile to Israel, such as Syria and Iran. Although Kozyrev claimed in response “that we are in daily contact [with the U.S.], we are acting in unison and in complete accord”,<sup>150</sup> and Yeltsin promised Rabin that only defensive weapons and spare parts would be delivered to Syria.<sup>151</sup> The ambiguous situation persisted and would sour Russian-Israeli relations in the future. For the moment, however, Russian-Israeli economic and social relations developed quickly, and most of the Russian mass media shifted decisively to the pro-Israeli, and often openly anti-Palestinian position.<sup>152</sup> Kozyrev strongly supported the “peace process”, and after increased tension in the late spring of 1995, lamented that “opponents of the peace process still exist” and that resistance to the peace process was not on the wane.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> NTV Moscow, 8 May 1994; *BBC*, SWB SU/1993, 10 May 1994, B/4.

<sup>148</sup> *Diplometicheskij Vestnik*, 9-10 September/October 1994, pp. 24-25.

<sup>149</sup> Kozyrev interviewed by Ostankino TV on 1 March 1994, *BBC* SWB, SU/1937, 5 March 1994, B/15.

<sup>150</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency* (World Service, Moscow), 3 March 1994, *BBC* SWB SU/1939, 7 May 1994, B/2.

<sup>151</sup> *Voice of Israel*, 26 April 1994. FBIS-FSU, 26 April 1994, p. 12.

<sup>152</sup> Vassiliev, p. 496.

<sup>153</sup> *CIS and the Middle East*, Vol. 20, No. 6-7, 1995, p. 45.

Earlier, by end of 1994, in order to strengthen the peace process, Russian UN representative, Sergei Lavrov submitted a draft proposal to the UN General Assembly under the title “The Middle East Peace Process”,<sup>154</sup> whose goal was to secure the gains that had already been achieved, and to promote further practical progress on all tracks of the negotiations.<sup>155</sup> As Ambassador, Lavrov stressed, Russia stood for a “complete and just solution to all aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict, without prejudice to any of the sides.”<sup>156</sup> The proposal was accepted by the UN General Assembly on 16 December 1994, and the Russian delegation indicated that “the achievement of a full, just, and lasting settlement in the Middle East is one of the priorities of Russian foreign policy.”<sup>157</sup>

In August 1995, Aliza Shenhar, Israel's ambassador to Russia, was “fully satisfied with Moscow's policy in the Middle East.”<sup>158</sup> After Rabin's assassination in November 1995, Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin indeed expressed his grief, saying that Russia had “lost a friend, a real one.”<sup>159</sup>

At the same time, domestic opposition to Yeltsin's regime and his pro-Western advisors was increasing, and Yeltsin's foreign policy was being strongly criticized by the communist, nationalist, and other political forces. Consequently, after the December 1995 Duma elections that brought a major victory to the opposition, Yeltsin decided to dismiss his foreign minister, who was very unpopular in the country, and replace him with Yevgeny Primakov, a trained Arabist, and a man widely considered to be a friend to the Arab world and the Palestinians.

## **II. THE PRIMAKOV PERIOD**

Primakov, who was Foreign Minister from January 1996 to September 1998 and Prime Minister from then until May 1998, was probably the most knowledgeable international statesman of the period to be personally involved in the Palestinian

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<sup>154</sup> D.V 9-10, 1994, p. 56.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Interfax, 8 February 1995.

<sup>159</sup> Freedman, p. 5.

question. Both his academic and journalistic backgrounds, and his numerous trips to the region, provided him with deep theoretical and first hand knowledge of the area and its painful problems. He was also a man with a sharp, critical mind, and possessed a personal empathy, which was rather uncommon among politicians, towards the common people and underdogs of the region, including the Palestinians. He had an intimate knowledge of their history and political dilemmas and had long personal links with Yasser Arafat and many other Palestinians.

Shortly after Primakov's appointment as Russian Foreign Minister, Aliza Shenhar, Israeli Ambassador to Russia, welcomed his nomination, saying that: "even though Primakov was part of Soviet foreign policy, he now sees Middle Eastern problems in a different light."<sup>160</sup> In her opinion, after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Moscow's policy in the Middle East changed "from support of Arab extremists to a constructive dialogue with all parties in the conflict."<sup>161</sup> In fact, her assessment was strikingly balanced and probably accurate, but Primakov's diplomacy was still not going to bring him approval and gratitude from the many Israeli and American political forces.

When assuming his new office, he clearly expressed the view that up until that time, Russia had been playing in the Middle Eastern peace process "a minimal part, inadequate to its potential" and that he intended to make her role more active.<sup>162</sup> As a consequence, in April 1996, he visited Israel, Lebanon, and Syria in an effort to moderate the Israeli-Lebanese crisis.<sup>163</sup> In that endeavour, according to Russian diplomatic sources, he acted "in cooperation with France, Italy, the European Union, though regrettably with less cooperation from the U.S."<sup>164</sup> His meeting on 22 April 1996 with Shimon Peres, who was then the Israeli Prime Minister, was particularly difficult, and according to Primakov, Peres told him that Israel needed only one intermediary with

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<sup>160</sup> Blank, Stephen J., "Russia's Return to Mideast Diplomacy: How New the New Russia?" *Orbis*, Fall 1996, Vol. 40, p. 8 out of 17. Expanded Academic ASAP.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, Moskow, May 1996, p. 24.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Primakov, p. 378.

the Arabs and that only the U.S. should play that role.<sup>165</sup> The Russian foreign minister was very disappointed, and perhaps because of that turned his political advances and sympathies toward other Israeli political forces which, according to him, held very different views about the potential role of Russia in the Arab-Israeli settlement from those of Peres.

It was only to be expected that his rise to power was warmly welcomed by both Palestinians and other Arab leaders. Osama El Baz, Chief of the Egyptian President's Bureau for Political Affairs, called him "the most suitable man for the job at the opportune moment."<sup>166</sup> Yasser Arafat, when interviewed in June 1996, stressed that he had known Primakov "for twenty years", that "he speaks Arabic fluently, and is familiar with all the Palestinian leadership."<sup>167</sup> Arab reactions contrasted sharply with Western, particularly American and Israeli opinions, which had been predominantly critical, or even outwardly hostile, to Primakov's appointment, and his role in "high politics."<sup>168</sup>

Although Primakov's formal tenure at the foreign ministry and prime ministerial offices covered less than three and a half years, his name might be used as a label for the period between 1995 and 2000 which was the period between the apparent bankruptcy of Russian Atlanticism, and the advent of Putin who sought to radically redirect Russian foreign policy.

Primakov came to power on a wave of nationalist and leftist reaction against the depth of Russian misery and humiliation following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. President Yeltsin was in effect forced to accept his candidature for the Foreign Minister's post, and later, that of Prime Minister in order to placate both the angry Russian Duma (Parliament) and the hostile public opinion in the country. Primakov was, at least temporarily, perceived as both a symbol and a leader of a new foreign policy

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<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> el Baz, Osama, "The Right Man for the Job, *al-Ahram Weekly* (on line), issue No. 395, September 1998, pp. 17-23.

<sup>167</sup> Nizameddin, Talal, *Russia and the Middle East: Towards a New Foreign Policy*, New York: St.Martin's press, 1999, p. 154.

<sup>168</sup> Primakov himself admitted that in his book: Y. Primakov, *Gody v Bolshoi Politike* Moscow: Sovershenno Sekretno, 1999, p. 217 and *passim*.

consensus that was then emerging among the Russian political class, as one who intended to stress both the greatness and political interests of Russia, and whose foreign policy would consequently correspond to Russia's great power status, and be active "in all azimuths."<sup>169</sup> This obviously included the Middle East. In fact, in October 1997, one senior Israeli official after his meeting with Primakov said, "he made [it] clear that he wants Russia to demonstrate its sense of being a power in the region."<sup>170</sup>

Despite his goal to prove that Russia was once more a factor in Middle Eastern and global politics, Primakov operated against a background of a very weak Russian State and civil society, and without the necessary military and economic muscle to support his diplomatic efforts.<sup>171</sup> As a result, his policies, mediation and appeals were more often than not, "toothless" and more verbal than real. In addition, after the Israeli elections and Prime Minister Netanyahu's rise to power in May 1996, the Arab-Israeli peace process—particularly on the Palestinian track—seemed to be blocked.

Indeed, there was a regress and further deterioration in the Palestinian situation, and their relations with the Israelis. On numerous occasions, Primakov expressed his sympathy and support for the Palestinians, and urged the Israelis to fulfill the obligations to them, which the Israelis had already promised. Nevertheless, Primakov lacked the real levers of power to exercise pressure on them, and bearing in mind Russia's state interests, Primakov tried to follow a fine line of compromise and accommodation, in order to avoid a deterioration in Russian-Israeli cooperation.

Primakov, however, rejected the American-Israeli opinion that in the Middle East, it is possible to endlessly continue the existing "no war, no peace" situation as a means of consolidating the existing territorial status quo.<sup>172</sup> He also repudiated the opinion, widely shared by many Western—especially American—politicians, that Israeli military

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<sup>169</sup> "Russia's New Middle East Policy" by Middle East Briefing, *MERIA*, 11 December 1997.

<sup>170</sup> Makovsky, David, "Primakov Made Clear Russia Cannot be Ignored in the Middle East," *Haaretz*, 31 October 1997.

<sup>171</sup> Freedman, Robert O., "Russia and the Middle East: The Primakov Era," *MERIA*, Vol. 2, No. 2, May 1998, p. 7.

<sup>172</sup> Primakov, p. 359.

superiority, and its victories over the Arabs force them to submit to Israeli dictate.<sup>173</sup> Having excellent knowledge of the region, and especially the Arab- (Palestinian) Israeli conflict, Primakov was prone to think that because of the deep antagonism between the parties involved, without an active intervention from outside, no Middle Eastern settlement would be possible.<sup>174</sup> At the same time, he staunchly rejected previous Soviet ideological premises regarding Third World peoples' support, and argued that "the illusory character of the ideological approaches to both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict was fully revealed at the beginning of the 1990s."<sup>175</sup> In his view, the only way out of the crisis was compromise, achieved by an Israeli withdrawal from Arab territories which had been occupied after the Six Day War, in exchange for peace with these Arab countries, and a mutual establishment of full diplomatic and other relations.<sup>176</sup> According to Primakov, the former USSR had always supported this kind of solution, and its acceptance by the Madrid Conference in 1991 was just a delayed recognition of what "we had considered, since the very beginning, to be an indisputable truth."<sup>177</sup>

Primakov later admitted, however, that the formula recommended by him up to then had not proved to be workable, and did not bring about the hoped-for results. The lack of progress in the peace process was attributed both to the mentality of the antagonists and the tactics of the U.S., which actually wanted to avoid a comprehensive peace settlement, and to replace it by an approach of slow moving bilateral treaties between Israel and isolated Arab partners.<sup>178</sup> Primakov also blamed U.S. diplomacy for its monopolistic practices in the Middle Eastern peace process, and for its lack of coordination with Russia and the European Union.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 362.

<sup>174</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 365.

<sup>175</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 367. Primakov also stressed that the concept of Russia's national interests "has changed fundamentally" after the USSR's collapse. *Obshchaya Gazeta*, No. 32, pp. 14-20, August 1997, in FBIS-SOV-97-227.

<sup>176</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 367-68.

<sup>177</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 368.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Interfax in English, 22 January 1996, in FBIS-SOV-96-015.

Shortly after Primakov's visit to Jerusalem in May 1996, Shimon Peres and the Labor Party lost the election to the leader of the Likud Block, Benjamin Netanyahu, who replaced him as Prime Minister of Israel. The well-known anti-Arab and "hawkish" attitude of the new Prime Minister caused understandable fears and misgivings in many political circles in the Middle East and Europe. However, the Russian official position was still rather optimistic and Russian Federation Deputy Foreign Minister, Victor Posuvalyuk, while being interviewed after the elections, expected that Russian-Israeli "ties will not suffer but, on the contrary, will develop more smoothly and dynamically."<sup>180</sup> He recalled that "Mr. Netanyahu and his closest associates...repeatedly criticized the previous government for not paying enough attention to the development of relations with Russia, and that they promised to rectify this situation if they came to power."<sup>181</sup> Asked about some Russian-Israeli frictions that had then arisen, Posuvalyuk replied that "the honeymoon in our relations with Israel is over, and now they have entered a time of maturity. I hope that we will be able to deal with all the problems that arise between us, in a way befitting mature partners."<sup>182</sup> Concerning the Arab-Israeli peace process, and Israeli relations with the Palestinians, the Russian official was nevertheless much more cautious in his optimism. He thought that "the peace process will probably continue," but predicted that "the talks on a peace settlement will certainly proceed much more slowly, with setbacks and great difficulties."<sup>183</sup> In order to overcome and prevent these difficulties from increasing, Russian diplomacy was prepared to "pursue a more active policy."<sup>184</sup>

After the opening of the controversial tunnel near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in September 1996 by Netanyahu, and following the subsequent bloody events in Israel/Palestine, the Russian reaction was initially quite mild and far less "pro-Arab" than that of the E.U. countries. The E.U. urged that the tunnel be closed immediately, and

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<sup>180</sup> *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 48, No. 23, 1996, p. 20.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*



that Palestinian-Israeli talks be resumed at the highest level.<sup>185</sup> As a Russian journalist noted, "Russia is continuing to try to take a position equidistant from the parties to the conflict; in other words, it is essentially trying to sit on the fence."<sup>186</sup> At the same time, it was getting "increasingly obvious that Russia's role as a co-sponsor had become purely ceremonial,"<sup>187</sup> due to "its lack of financial capabilities for sponsoring the peace process."<sup>188</sup> As a Russian diplomat admitted, their country's regional role was "based on prestige accumulated over many years and traditional ties, not on the spending of money. Indeed, Russia has not invested a kopeck in the peace process."<sup>189</sup> However, in reality, this did not give it the necessary authority to balance Washington, or provide for cooperation with the European Union.<sup>190</sup>

The American failure to mediate the situation was received in Moscow "with great regret," but Victor Posuvalyuk commented that this failure "graphically illustrates that the joint efforts of both cosponsors are needed in order to make progress in the negotiations."<sup>191</sup> Incidental American lack of success and the temporary cooling of U.S. relations with Israel because of the Netanyahu policy, provided a chance for Primakov's next Middle Eastern tour in late October 1996. This time he visited both Israel and the Gaza Strip residence of the head of the Palestinian autonomous entity, talking with both the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Yasser Arafat. On 31 October 1996, he met Netanyahu in Tel Aviv and their "personal chemistry" appeared to work surprisingly well during the ensuing period.<sup>192</sup> In spite of their sharply different views on the Palestinian question and the Middle Eastern peace process, Netanyahu apparently liked Primakov, and did not consider him to be "an enemy of Israel", as depicted by some politicians and the media in the U.S. and Israel.<sup>193</sup> Primakov expressed his opinions forthrightly, and as he described while in Jerusalem, he "categorically insisted on the Israelis respecting the

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<sup>185</sup> *Kommersant-Daily*, 2 October 1996, p. 4.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> Blank, "Russia Returns to Mideast Diplomacy," *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> *Kommersant-Daily*, 8 October 1996, p. 4.

<sup>192</sup> Primakov, p. 379.

Madrid 'land for peace formula' and came out against any effort by the Israeli leadership to depart from the obligations they had undertaken."<sup>194</sup> After his meetings in Israel which also included Israeli President Ezer Weizman, Israeli Foreign Minister David Levi, and the former Russian-Jewish dissident—now Israeli Minister of Industry and Trade—Nathan Sharansky,<sup>195</sup> he left for Gaza where he was warmly received by Yasser Arafat and other Palestinian leaders.<sup>196</sup> Primakov believed that despite the negative views of Arab and European politicians, Netanyahu was nevertheless still a man to do business with, and that he might be persuaded to moderate his policies in the future.<sup>197</sup>

In fact, Netanyahu, as Prime Minister of Israel, apparently wanted to show some gesture of goodwill and accommodation with Russia, and at the end of Primakov's visit, he was given documents on the transfer of ownership to the Russian Federation of a number of Jerusalem-based real estate facilities that previously had belonged to the former Soviet Union and the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>198</sup> During Netanyahu's subsequent state visit to Russia in March 1997, he surprised his hosts by stating that "his country will henceforth consider Russia a friendly state, and will strive to establish with Russia relations that are as close as Israel's ties with its number one partner, the U.S."<sup>199</sup> However, this did not make him any more moderate on the Palestinian issue. When President Yeltsin expressed his concern over the Israeli settlement policy, Netanyahu categorically replied that "Jerusalem would remain under Israeli sovereignty forever,"<sup>200</sup> though this openly contradicted the official and frequently repeated Russian position. As early as November 1996, the Russian foreign ministry expressed its concern about the Netanyahu pro-settlement anti-Palestinian policy, and Russian foreign ministry spokesman, Gennady Tarasov, stressed that "in effect, another key problem in getting a final settlement with the Palestinians has been exacerbated."<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency* (in English), 20 September 1998, in FBIS-SOV-98-263.

<sup>194</sup> Primakov, pp. 378-79.

<sup>195</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 1 November 1996, FBIS-SOV-96-213.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.* See also Primakov, p. 378.

<sup>197</sup> Primakov, p. 379.

<sup>198</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 1 November 1996, FBIS-SOV-96-213.

<sup>199</sup> *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 49, No. 11, 1997, p.26.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

For Palestinian leaders, post-Soviet Moscow continued to be seen as a port of hope and a point of support. In September 1997 the PLO Political Department Head, Faruq Quaddumi, indicated that although Russia, a co-sponsor of the Middle Eastern peace process, does not have the political might to exert pressure on Israel, it “will still play an important role in the Middle East region, and international politics in general.”<sup>202</sup> He went on to state that “since the appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as Foreign Minister and the departure of Kozyrev, Russian policy is beginning to become invigorated and more balanced in terms of its decisions, compared with the past.”<sup>203</sup> Secretary General of the PLO, Abu Mazin, was even more optimistic, asserting that “relations between the Palestinians and Russians are very friendly and close” and that “it is very important for us [the Palestinians] to have Russia's co-sponsorship, since only it can say a firm 'no' to the Israeli policy of occupation at the negotiating table.”<sup>204</sup> Similar expectations probably underlay Yasser Arafat's first official visit to Moscow as the elected head of the Palestinian National Authority in February 1997. His talks there apparently proved to be quite promising and both he and Primakov agreed that “the present moment is a very auspicious one for expanding Russian-Palestinian ties”. Primakov expressed “full support for the Palestinian leadership's policy on developing the negotiating process with Israel” by calling for the “immediate and consistent implementation of all the provisions of the Palestinian-Israeli agreement.”<sup>205</sup> Primakov also stressed the need to hold “constructive” talks on the final status of the Palestinian territories as “scheduled”, and expressed “unconditional support” for Arafat's request that the Israeli economic embargo on the Occupied Territories should be completely lifted.<sup>206</sup> The subsequent joint Russian-Palestinian statement stressed three common points:

- Talks on final status under the formula adopted at the Madrid Conference on the Middle East should assume top priority.

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<sup>201</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vol. 48, No. 48, 1996, p. 22.

<sup>202</sup> *al-Sharq-al-Awsad*, 29 September 1997, p. 3, FBIS-NES-97-273.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 25 August 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-237.

<sup>205</sup> *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 49, No. 8, 1997, p. 20.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

- The Palestinians' aspirations, supported by the Russian cosponsor, to achieve realization of their national rights within the framework of these talks, including their right to self-determination, do not harm Israel's legitimate interests.
- The problems of Jerusalem and the settlements must be resolved through negotiation on a mutually acceptable basis. Whatever the outcome of the talks on Jerusalem, it must not infringe on the rights of all religious faiths, or restrict believers' free access to the holy sites.<sup>207</sup>
- Further consultations between both parties continued at various levels, including a drafting of a framework for a joint Russian-Palestinian Working Committee.<sup>208</sup>

In view of the crisis in Middle Eastern peace process, and the deterioration of the Palestinian situation, Primakov received PLO leader Yasser Arafat's special envoy, Nabil 'Amr, on 9 July 1997. After their meeting, Foreign Ministry spokesman, Gennady Tarasov told a media briefing that "Russia and Palestine have joined efforts to resume Palestinian-Israeli talks on the basis of the principles of the Madrid conference, and in compliance with the agreements signed between the PLO and Israel."<sup>209</sup> These same ideas were repeated after the ensuing meeting of the joint Russian-Palestinian working committee on 19 September 1997 at which the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that: The exchange of views on the causes of the crisis situation in the Middle East peace settlement, and ways to overcome it, has confirmed the identity or significant similarity of approaches used by the Russian co-sponsor and the Palestinian leadership. On the one hand, the two sides agree on the exceptional importance of effective steps to fight terrorism for both Palestinians and Israelis. All sides must honor their commitments both in providing security, and in other aspects of Palestinian-Israeli relations and the creation of Palestinian self-government.

On the other hand, both sides are convinced that negotiations on the steps to be taken during the transition period, and on a final status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, must be resumed in line with the Declaration of Principles and Provisional Agreement signed by the PLO and Israel.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>208</sup> See for instance *Interfax* in English, 19 September 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-262. See also Jalal Nizameddin, pp. 154-155.

<sup>209</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 9 July 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-190.

<sup>210</sup> *Interfax* in English, 19 September 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-262.

Russia strongly condemned all terrorist acts against the Israeli population and after the suicide bombing attack in July 1997, Primakov addressed a telegram of condolence to the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, David Levi, calling the attack “an inhumane and unjustifiable act against civilian Israeli citizens.”<sup>211</sup> Predicting the forthcoming Israeli punitive repression, he also indicated that it “simultaneously undermines the Palestinians' hopes for a better life.”<sup>212</sup> According to Primakov, the solution “lies in redoubled efforts by the Palestinian and Israeli sides to resume the negotiation process as soon as possible.”<sup>213</sup>

Primakov's policy towards Israel was undoubtedly generally cautious and prudent. When on 15 July 1997, the General Assembly, by an overwhelming majority of 131 in favour to 3 opposed (Israel, the U.S., and Micronesia), condemned the Israeli actions against the Palestinians, and appealed to UN members “to actively oppose Israel's construction of settlements in occupied Palestinian Territories, including Jerusalem,”<sup>214</sup> Russia abstained. In April 1997, Moscow had supported a similar resolution “condemning the Israeli violations of International Law” and in July, it upheld its previous position.<sup>215</sup> However, Russian diplomats had wanted to condemn the Israeli actions in principle, but opposed the inclusion of a threat of sanctions into the resolution. In their view, such a threat could only hinder the creation of premises for the renewal of the peace talks.<sup>216</sup>

Although, in Primakov's words, Russia resolutely opposed “any form of terrorism,”<sup>217</sup> it also did not accept the Israeli anti-Palestinian repression, and its stalling of the negotiations. Primakov considered the Israeli position of “it is first necessary to win a complete victory over terrorism, then start moving toward peace” as “an

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<sup>211</sup> *Interfax* in English, 31 July 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-212.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 49, No. 29, 1997, p. 19.

<sup>215</sup> *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, August 1997, p. 55.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

unproductive point of view.”<sup>218</sup> In early September 1997, both he and French Foreign Minister, Hubert Vedrine concluded that the situation in the Middle East had reached a critical point, after which the peace settlement process will “either move forward or drop to zero,” and that their respective countries should be involved in the search for peaceful solutions in the region.<sup>219</sup> Primakov did not want to oppose Netanyahu's new request that talks should be started about the final status of the Occupied Territories. However he indicated, at the same time, that they should be “organically dove-tailed” to the decisions adopted in Madrid and Oslo, as well as to the results of the previous interim talks with regard to “the occupied territories”.<sup>220</sup>

In the meantime, Moscow was continually being urged by the Palestinians to “exert active efforts to extricate the peace process from its deadlock and forestall the possibility of its collapse.”<sup>221</sup> The Palestinian leaders continued to believe in the similarity of the Palestinian-Russian positions,<sup>222</sup> and at that time their belief was not completely unfounded. On 3 September 1997, during his talks with the Crown Prince of Jordan, Hassan Bin Talal, Primakov pointed out “a certain toughening as regards the process of political settlement in the Middle East,” and yet he stressed “that interruption of this process, or a step back, could lead to very negative results” and that “much now depends on Israel, which should renounce its settlement policy that is leading the Middle East peace process to an impasse.”<sup>223</sup> Primakov again raised the Palestinian issue in an address to the participants in a plenary meeting of foreign ministers of largely Muslim ASEAN countries, in Kuala Lumpur in July 1997.<sup>224</sup> At this meeting, the Russian foreign minister spoke on “the need to continue with measures to persuade the Israeli side to desist from unilateral actions, including those affecting the religious

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<sup>217</sup> *Interfax* in English, 9 September 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-252.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> *al-Quds* (Jerusalem), 10 July 1997, FBIS-NES-97-191.

<sup>222</sup> *Interfax* in English, 19 September 1997, FBIS-SOV-262.

<sup>223</sup> *Interfax* in English, 3 September 1997, FBIS-SOV-246.

<sup>224</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency* (World Service), 28 July 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-209.

feelings of Muslims” and added that “it is important to do everything possible to see that the pause in the regional settlement process was not protracted.”<sup>225</sup>

In late September 1997, experts started to prepare for Primakov's next visit to the Middle East to meet the region's political leaders in view of the “not entirely satisfactory situation in the peace process.”<sup>226</sup> The spokesman for the Russian foreign ministry, Valerii Nesterushkin, anticipated that “it would have been hard to reach an agreement on the resumption of Palestinian-Israeli peace talks without Russia's active assistance and participation,”<sup>227</sup> and recalled that an agreement which had just been concluded between Israeli Foreign Minister David Levi and PLO representative Mahmoud Abbas, “had taken almost six months of minute political and diplomatic work, first of all by co-sponsors of the Middle East [peace] process, Russia and the U.S.”<sup>228</sup>

However, the Russian leaders had few illusions about any rapid positive results from their efforts. On 23 September 1997, President Yeltsin admitted that the Middle East crisis was continuing, and it would be “very difficult to settle it.”<sup>229</sup> He attributed this difficulty “mainly to Israel's rigid stance”, and expressed the opinion that to accuse Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, of staging acts of terrorism “is ridiculous.”<sup>230</sup> In practice, Moscow had to recognize the major American role in Arab-Israeli relations, but was determined not to be completely excluded, and to retain for itself a meaningful role in the peace process.<sup>231</sup> President Yeltsin urged the U.S. “to be more active” in the region,<sup>232</sup> and Primakov went on to emphasize that Russia and the U.S. could work together in the interests of peace and stability in many regions of the world, including the Middle East. In September 1997, he stressed “we could do more by working jointly, to stabilize the situation in the Middle East” and expressed his hope that the forthcoming

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<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> *Interfax* in English, 19 September 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-262.

<sup>227</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 30 September 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-273.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> *Interfax*, 23 September 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-266.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> Blank, p. 102.

<sup>232</sup> *Interfax*, 8 September 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-252.

visit of the U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, to the region would “ bring positive results.”<sup>233</sup>

After Albright's unsuccessful Middle East tour in the fall of 1997, Primakov commented that her trip “showed once again, in the Middle East peace process, the need for broader participation of other countries that are currently less involved in this process than the U.S.,” particularly Russia, a co-sponsor of the peace process in the region.<sup>234</sup>

On 24 October 1997, Primakov left for his third Middle Eastern visit as a Russian Foreign Minister;<sup>235</sup> however, his week-long tour of the region apparently produced no concrete results.<sup>236</sup> According to the Russian press, although the official goal of his trip was to promote the Middle East peace process, the unofficial goal was to “lay the groundwork for Russia's return to the region by securing the support of new friends without losing old ones.”<sup>237</sup> According to the Russian press, he also intended to act in accordance with his agreement with U.S. State Secretary Albright on the Middle East settlement, which had been reached during her visit to St. Petersburg in July 1997,<sup>238</sup> and Primakov's stay in New York which followed in September.<sup>239</sup> The Russian side then reiterated that “Russia and the U.S. will use their influence on the opposing sides, and act as co-sponsors of the peace process that began in Madrid.”<sup>240</sup>

Later, on this trip, Primakov and Netanyahu met as “old friends” and at Netanyahu's request, Primakov visited Damascus twice in order to reassure the Israelis of Syrian intentions.<sup>241</sup> During his ensuing meeting with Arafat in Ramallah, he promised that “Russia would recognize a Palestinian state as soon as it was

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<sup>233</sup> “Primakov on Peace: “I do not envy Madeleine,” *Newsweek*, 29 September 1997, p. 43.

<sup>234</sup> *Interfax*, 15 September 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-258.

<sup>235</sup> *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 49, No. 43, 1997, p. 21.

<sup>236</sup> *Middle East International*, 7 November 1997, p. 6.

<sup>237</sup> *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 49, No. 43, 1997, p. 21.

<sup>238</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency (World Service)*, 13 July 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-194.

<sup>239</sup> *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 49, No. 43, 1997, p. 21.

<sup>240</sup> *ITAR/TASS News Agency (World Service)*, 13 July 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-194.



proclaimed.”<sup>242</sup> Later, while in Cairo he asserted that “the present deadlock [in the Middle East peace process] is a result of the fact that the Israeli government has deviated from the agreements and understandings concluded by its previous government.”<sup>243</sup> Blaming Netanyahu's policies, Primakov issued a 12-point draft, Code of Peace and Security in the Middle East,<sup>244</sup> whose two most important points claimed that “there can be no forward movement towards a Middle East peace settlement unless each country complies with the agreements it has concluded with its neighbours” and that “the peace process makes progress only on condition that there is movement on all three tracks.” namely Israeli-Palestinian, Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese.<sup>245</sup>

Both proposals were highly advantageous to Palestinians and other Arabs, especially considering that, according to Primakov, “the decisions of the Madrid Conference seemed to be a bone of contention for many Israeli politicians, and they started to seek their revisions.”<sup>246</sup> However, after meetings with the Syrian and Israeli leaders, Primakov was forced to admit that the “Code of Peace” he had proposed had no chance of being formally approved.<sup>247</sup>

Primakov's third trip probably served Russian national interests well and because of that it was highly appreciated by the very pro-Israeli Russian journalist and politician, Aleksandr Bovin.<sup>248</sup> However, it did not bring any real help to Palestinians, and it did not prevent any further deterioration of the situation in the region. As the Russian press argued, the “lack of [Russian] political might and financial resources were the main causes of this failure.”<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Primakov, pp. 381-82.

<sup>242</sup> *Middle East International*, 7 November 1997, p. 6.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> *The Current Digest* . . . , Vol. 49, No. 45, 1997, p. 8.

<sup>245</sup> Primakov, p. 379.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 380.

<sup>248</sup> *The Current Digest* . . . , Vol. 49, No. 45, 1997, p. 8.

<sup>249</sup> *The Current Digest* . . . , Vol. 49, No. 43, 1997, p. 22.

Official support for the Palestinian cause nevertheless continued, and when in January 1998 the Israeli government announced that it ultimately intended to maintain under its control between 60-75% of the territories it had occupied in 1967, Russia officially condemned this decision.<sup>250</sup> Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Valeriy Nesterushkin, stated that Russia “understands the reaction of Palestine and other Arab states,”<sup>251</sup> and that Israel's decision is not compatible with the spirit of the 1991 Madrid peace conference, and the subsequent agreements between Israel and the Palestinians.<sup>252</sup> He also urged Israel to “conduct a balanced policy in order to achieve peace and stability in the region.”<sup>253</sup>

However, Nesterushkin's call was apparently not heard by the Israeli authorities. During the following months the situation in the Occupied Territories deteriorated further and the Middle Eastern peace process came to a virtual standstill. In Deputy Foreign Minister Victor Posuvalyuk's view, “a kind of vicious circle has been created between the protagonists of the conflict.”<sup>254</sup> According to him, they were themselves convinced and wanted to convince others about the righteousness of their causes, but were very unwilling to meet each other half way. Although the Cold War was over, and both the U.S. and Russia were working for peace, Posuvalyuk, quoting Primakov's statement, reiterated that the Arab-Israeli conflict had taken on “an autonomous character” and “autonomous dynamics”, largely independent of outsiders, but no less threatening for international security.<sup>255</sup> He indicated that regardless of widely held opinions, the Middle East peace process was not irreversible, and regretted that the Madrid Conference, which had provided a new form for the process, was nevertheless unable in many fields, to provide it with a new content and dynamism.<sup>256</sup> According to Posuvalyuk, Netanyahu's government did not believe in any Arab or other international assurances and guarantees, and only trusted in the power of the Israeli army and skillful

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<sup>250</sup> *Agence France-Press*, 15 January 1998.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.* See also *The Current Digest . . .*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (1998), pp. 20-21.

<sup>253</sup> *Agence France-Press*, 15 January 1998.

<sup>254</sup> Posuvalyuk, V., “Mir i Bezopastnost' na Blizhnem Vostoke-Dostizhima li tsel',” *Mezhdunarodnaia Zhizn'*, No. 10, 1998, p. 4.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

diplomacy, to enable it to “lay down the law” in the region,<sup>257</sup> and as a result of this, the Netanyahu government had refused to implement the previous Israeli government’s obligations to re-deploy Israeli troops from the Occupied Territories. Also the “red lines” of the final settlement established by it, in fact precluded any chance for the creation of a Palestinian state in the future.<sup>258</sup>

Posuvalyuk further suggested that the critical situation that arose would almost certainly require innovative steps and decisions concerning the Arab-Israeli peace talks.<sup>259</sup> In addition, he did not believe in the effectiveness of the Israeli and American policy to continue the appearance of the peace process, with the expectation that time and the growing imbalance of power would finally force the Arabs to submit to Israeli conditions. Instead, he urged Israel to return to the peace talks with the Palestinians “in the spirit and letter of the 1995 Temporary Agreement,”<sup>260</sup> and offered all possible Russian help and support in order to achieve a compromise which was acceptable to both parties and conducive to a stable final settlement in the region. According to him, Russia, which enjoyed great prestige in the Arab World and had a deep knowledge of the region, had now acquired an additional dynamic, because of the Russian-Jewish diaspora. As a result of these “unique” links with both Israel and the Arabs, Russia had an enormous potential to bring a valuable contribution to the peace process.<sup>261</sup>

In practice, Russian policy towards the Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict in general was quite cautious, as it did not want to antagonize either Israel or the U.S. The continuous official verbal support for Palestinian rights was not, in most cases, followed by any real action. Russia’s political and economic crisis continued and consequently, its Middle Eastern policy reflected the growing weakness of the country. In August 1998, the economic situation in Russia once again sharply deteriorated, and

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<sup>256</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

Yeltsin was compelled to ask Primakov to form a new government. Nevertheless, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's reaction to the Russian predicament was quiet and rather sympathetic. The Israeli Prime Minister expressed his "sincere hope that Russia will overcome the crisis" and felt that, as the new Russian Prime Minister had been foreign minister before, it was highly unlikely that Moscow's policy towards the region would change.<sup>262</sup> He even commended Primakov, saying: "I know this man. We held several good and efficient talks."<sup>263</sup>

In early October 1998, shortly after Primakov's promotion, Yasser Arafat came to Moscow. While there, Arafat was assured by the new Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, of Moscow's support for achieving Palestinian independent statehood, though this should not compromise the national interests of Israel, particularly in the realm of security.<sup>264</sup> Arafat lobbied for Russia's more active involvement in the region, and asked Moscow to take part in the trilateral American-Palestinian-Israeli meeting that was then set for 15 October 1998, in Washington, DC. The Russian leaders, however, were not in a position to give him a positive answer. A weak Russia was obviously unable and unwilling to challenge the American superpower, and the most the Russian leaders could do was to wish Arafat a "successful visit", and reappoint a permanent envoy to deal with Middle Eastern issues and pay regular visits to the region.<sup>265</sup> Nevertheless, after the Palestinian-Israeli agreement was signed on 23 October 1998, at Wye Plantation (Maryland), under American sponsorship, Moscow reacted in a favourable and supportive manner, and indicated the importance of Israeli army redeployment from the parts of the Occupied Territories mentioned in the accord, and the need to follow up on negotiations until a final settlement could be reached.<sup>266</sup> Russia could not compete with the U.S. primacy in the region, though it insisted that its voice be heard and its interests respected.

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<sup>262</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency* (in English), 20 September 1998, FBIS-SOV-98-263.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>264</sup> *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, No. 11, 1998, p. 7.

<sup>265</sup> *The Current Digest* . . . , Vol. 50, No. 41, 1998, p. 21.

<sup>266</sup> Khalil, Abdel-Malek, "View from the Kremlin," *al-Ahram Weekly* online, 29 October-4 November 1998, No. 401.

Between 19-21 January 1999, the Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon, visited Russia. Primakov reminded him of Moscow's official position—that “the way to a comprehensive and stable settlement ran through a constant and simultaneous progress on all the tracks of the negotiations, on the basis of Resolutions 242 and 338 of the UN Security Council and the land for peace formula.”<sup>267</sup> Sharon's reply was polite but evasive. He stated that Israel highly appreciated Russian input into the Middle Eastern peace process, and wanted to increase its political cooperation with Moscow. At the same time, however, he indicated that the Israeli government would implement its already signed agreements with the Palestinians, depending on their fulfillment of the obligations undertaken by them.<sup>268</sup> Nevertheless, because the Israeli authorities considered themselves the only judges of the situation, such a position left open the possibility for an unending procrastination of the implementation of the treaties, and a further stagnation of the Middle East peace process.

In the spring of 1999 serious tensions arose because of the approaching 4 May 1999 date which, according to the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian Agreement, the intermediary period would come to an end, and the final status of the Occupied Territories would be determined. As the PNA Secretary Ahmed 'Abd-al-Rahman indicated, the Palestinians were deeply concerned “about an Israeli freezing of the peace process at a time when the validity of the bilateral intermediary agreements had nearly expired.”<sup>269</sup> The Palestinian leaders wanted to proclaim independence on May 4, and wanted to know the Russian position on this. They believed that “it was Russia, and before that the Soviet Union, that always firmly remained on the Palestinian side,”<sup>270</sup> and looked for Moscow's advice and support. On 5 April 1999, Arafat arrived in Moscow to discuss the issue with the Russian leaders.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, No. 2, 1999, p. 10.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency (World Service)*, 4 April 1999, FBIS-SOV-1999-0404.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

The Russian position as presented by the Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, was that although his country recognized the “inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and the creation of the independent nation, it nevertheless advised the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) to extend the duration of the transition period in its relations with Israel, and not to proclaim the Palestinian state now.”<sup>272</sup> Such a position fitted well with Israeli interests, and was gladly accepted by the Israeli Foreign Minister A. Sharon, who came to Moscow soon afterwards on 12 April 1999. Sharon welcomed the idea of the prolongation, and even added that, according to Israeli views, it was not necessary to impose any time framework and datelines on Palestinian-Israeli talks. According to Sharon, the existing situation should last as long as it would be needed, to conclude a final settlement.<sup>273</sup> After his talks with Igor Ivanov, Sharon was received by Russian Prime Minister Primakov and at this meeting the importance of Russian-Israeli relations was stressed. In addition, Primakov attempted to placate those Israelis and Americans who still accused him of an anti-Israeli, and pro-Arab bias.

The “4<sup>th</sup> of May problem” was further discussed by Foreign Minister Ivanov during his next trip to the Middle East between 22-24 April 1999, in which he suggested that the PLO and Israel extend the intermediary regime for a fixed period, and use this extended time for intensive talks on the final status of the Occupied Territories and implementing all temporary agreements. Moreover, during this period, all unilateral actions, including further expansion of the Israeli settlements, would be inadmissible.<sup>274</sup> After his talks with Arafat, the Russian Foreign Minister stated Moscow's “strong support for the inalienable right of Palestinian people to have their own state.” However, he also suggested that because of the long-term interests of both the Palestinians and the Middle East peace process as a whole, it was better to postpone the proclamation of Palestinian independence.<sup>275</sup> President Yeltsin's letter, which Ivanov delivered to the Palestinian leaders, also appealed to them to prolong the intermediary period.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, No. 5, 1999, p. 44.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, No. 5, 1999, p. 47.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

According to Russian sources, this advice made a great impression on the Palestinian leaders, including Arafat, who called it “a concrete and important contribution of the Russian co-sponsor to the solution of the problem.”<sup>277</sup>

In fact, on 4 May 1999, Palestinian independence was not proclaimed. However, Israeli domination and further settlement activity did not diminish. On 12 May 1999, Yeltsin dismissed Primakov from the prime ministerial post, and his formal role in high politics came to an end. His foreign policy line was nevertheless still largely continued for about one more year until the time when President Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, began to introduce his own ideas. Concerning the Palestinian issue, Primakov combined principled and often even outspoken verbal support for Palestinian and Arab rights with very mild and cautious practical steps, always bearing in mind the importance of Russian-Israeli and even more, Russian-American relations. For that reason he sought to coordinate his own diplomacy and peacemaking efforts with those of the European states—especially France and the E.U., and as far as possible, the U.S. On 29 September 1999, when Putin had already become the Prime Minister, Deputy Foreign Minister and special envoy to the Middle East, Vasily Sredin, fully confirmed the continuity of Primakov's line, stressing that his country “still continues to support the unquestionable right of the Palestinians to their own state.”<sup>278</sup> Moscow's policy was to overcome the existing crisis in Arab-Israeli relations by the further continuation of the peace process which was initiated by the Madrid Conference, and on the basis of UN Resolutions 242 and 338, and the “land for peace formula.”<sup>279</sup> According to Sredin, “the necessary goal of that—the achievement of the final settlement—was completely realistic, and it was important only to reinforce mutual confidence between the two sides and to make them equal in rights as reliable partners.”<sup>280</sup> By the end of 1999, Vladimir Putin, who was then officially Yeltsin's designated successor, celebrated Palestinian Solidarity Day in Moscow by playing host

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<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, No. 10, 1999, p. 57.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

to the visiting Arafat.<sup>281</sup> This role was useful to him because of international and domestic problems, particularly the war in Chechenya, and the need to show himself to the West and to the Muslim World, as a peacemaker.<sup>282</sup> According to the Russian press, "Moscow has decided to turn its beaten Middle Eastern card into a trump, and respond to the barrage of criticism of its actions in Chechenya."<sup>283</sup> For the same purpose, Moscow then launched a proposal for a new Middle Eastern Summit in Moscow that might uphold its right to claim superpower status.<sup>284</sup>

The project had little chance of success, and both international realities and the changing domestic situation would soon persuade Putin to look for new approaches and adjustments to the policy that he had inherited.

### **III. PRESENT RUSSIAN-PALESTINIAN RELATIONS: THE PUTIN PERIOD**

During his first months in office, Vladimir Putin, who became the Russian President in the New Year of 2000, largely followed the direction of Moscow's previous foreign policy, including its relations with the Middle East and the Palestinians. From the beginning, however, there were some new factors that had a great potential impact on the future.

(1) Putin represented a new generation of Russian leaders. Almost 30 years younger than Primakov, he had never been a high-ranking official in the Soviet State-Party's apparatus, and consequently was not so personally affected by the demise of the Soviet government. For this reason, he was far more capable of adjusting to the new circumstances, and of playing the game under far more modest conditions. In marked contrast to Primakov, Putin also had little personal knowledge of, and links with, the Arab world and the Middle East region. From what is known, he had never visited

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<sup>281</sup> *The Current Digest* . . . , Vol. 51, No. 48, 1999, p. 24.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*



the region himself, and his former intelligence work was focussed solely on Western Europe—especially Germany. In addition, Putin came to power largely due to a skilful manipulation of popular reactions to the alleged Muslim Chechens' terrorist attacks in Russia, and the ensuing Second Chechen War. Many times he had expressed his condemnation of, and hostility towards, what he called Islamic terrorists and fundamentalists, calling them ordinary “bandits.” Although the situation in Israel-Palestine is very different from the one in Russia-Chechenia,<sup>285</sup> such an orientation probably made it more difficult for him to grasp the real plight and struggle of the Palestinians.

(2) Putin also had to work in a new and rapidly changing political environment on both the domestic and international levels. Russia was becoming a poorer and more capitalist country, with growing socio-economic disparities and a media controlled by the new financial elite with strong links to Israel. At the same time, Russia's military and political power in the international arena was declining. According to a German scholar, in 2000, Russia lacked the economic and financial means to confront the West, and its lack of economic and financial status deprived it of the possibility of being an attractive coalition partner in the international system.<sup>286</sup> Although since 1999 the economic situation in Russia markedly improved and its GDP grew, according to the experts the economic upswing did not have a solid basis as the “once cheap ruble has been steadily appreciating, and oil prices have declined.”<sup>287</sup>

On 22 August 2000, Putin, speaking to the families of the sailors of the submarine Kursk, described the present situation in the Russian Navy, saying “it has

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<sup>285</sup> As the Jordanian ambassador to Russia has argued: “To all intents and purposes, the Chechen and Palestinian conflicts have totally different roots. Unlike the Chechen militants, the Palestinians are by no means separatists who are unlawfully fighting for the secession of their country. From a legal point of view, a Palestinian state has the right to exist, as does the Jewish state.” *Moscow News*, 29 August 2001. In addition as Y. Primakov reminded us: “the Chechens were deported back under Stalin. Now they can return to their native land without hindrance. Palestinian refugees cannot; Israel won't let them.” *Kommersant*, Moscow, 20 June, 2001, p. 8. However, for some still persisting similarities see Boris Kagarlitsky, “Chechenya and the Mideast are Both Results of a Bad Peace,” *The St. Petersburg Times*, 31 October, 2001.

<sup>286</sup> Mangott, Gerard, “A Giant on Its Knees: Structural Constraints on Russia's Global Role,” *International Politics*, 37, December 2000, p. 485.

<sup>287</sup> Gaddy, C. and F. Hill, “Putin's Agenda, America's Choice,” *Policy Brief*, The Brookings Institute, No. 99, May 2002.

been ruined and there isn't a fig left."<sup>288</sup> In the view of the well-known Russian scholar and politician, Alexei Arbatov, "not since June 1941, has the Russian military stood as perilously close to ruin as it does now,"<sup>289</sup> and even the CIS is "nothing more than an organizational structure without any significant impact on politics."<sup>290</sup> The concept of the multipolar world order, which had been much touted during Primakov's period, and which implied that Russia and some other states might balance U.S. hegemony, now began to be seen by many as unrealistic, and even dangerous for the country's national interests.<sup>291</sup> The "national consensus" of the mid-1990s, which had replaced the Atlanticism of the early Yeltsin-Kozyrev era, is now being replaced by a "cooperative realist approach," which would be, at least partly, ready to submit to U.S. hegemony and Israel's Middle Eastern priorities in order to protect the national interests of the new Russian state and its ruling elites.<sup>292</sup>

In January, when Putin was still only acting President, and before the 26 March 2000, Presidential elections, he responded affirmatively to Arafat's invitation to visit Palestine. Putin expressed his readiness to travel "as soon as the circumstances allow him to make use of Arafat's kind invitation."<sup>293</sup> At the same time, he also assured Arafat that under his leadership, "Russia will continue to work invariably for the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, which can be achieved only through the restoration of the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people."<sup>294</sup>

His letter was released on the eve of the Moscow meeting of the Group of Assistance to Multipolar Talks on the Middle East Peace Process, that had been

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<sup>288</sup> *RFE/RL Newslines*, Part I, 29 August 2000.

<sup>289</sup> Arbatov, Alexei, "Military Reform in Russia: Dilemma, Obstacles and Prospects," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 1998, p. 83.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>291</sup> Trenin, Dimitri, *The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002, p. 308. As Sergei Markov, Director, Institute of Political Research, (known for his close links with Putin's Kremlin) noted: "the U.S. is the center of the world power and strength; the closer Russia is to it, the stronger Russia is." *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 21 March 2002.

<sup>292</sup> Mangott, p. 500.

<sup>293</sup> *Agence France Press*, 2 February 2000.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

established following the Madrid Conference in October 1991, but whose activities had been effectively paralyzed from the time of Netanyahu's rise to power in 1996. The Group, which worked in five sections dealing with the issues of regional economic development, refugees, arms control, regional security, and environment, included—in addition to the U.S. and Russia as the co-presidents—Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the Palestinian Authority, Israel, the E.U., Norway, Canada, Japan, China, and Switzerland. Syria and Lebanon boycotted the Moscow gathering, which started on 1 February 2000. Addressing the plenary meeting, Putin stated that:

Russia is linked by historic, spiritual, commercial, and economic ties with the Middle East region. First of all, there exists geographic proximity. We are, consequently, sincerely interested in the establishment of international legal norms of interaction in settlement. We are not waging the struggle for spheres of influence.<sup>295</sup>

Putin asserted that he was mainly concerned with the possibility that if the Arab-Israeli confrontation continued unabated, Islamic militancy may spread to the former Soviet Muslim Republics, and even to some parts of Russia itself, particularly the Northern Caucasus.<sup>296</sup> Although Palestinian and other Arab leaders looked with great hope for a new Russian initiative,<sup>297</sup> these expectations proved to be premature, and the Moscow meeting again ended in a deadlock.<sup>298</sup> Arab states were hesitant to develop their cooperation with Israel before the settlement of the Palestinian question, though Israel wanted to obtain the benefits of normalization of its links with the Arab countries, even if the peace process did not progress.<sup>299</sup>

All those obstacles notwithstanding, in a joint statement released at the end of the Moscow session of the Group, Russia and the U.S. “confirmed their adherence to the establishment of peace among the countries of the region on the principles of

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<sup>295</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 1 February 2000.

<sup>296</sup> *APS Diplomat Strategic Balance in the Middle East*, 21 February 2000, Vol. 39, Issue 2.

<sup>297</sup> Their feelings were expressed by the Palestinian ambassador in Moscow, Khair al-Oridi, who assured them that “the entire Arab world welcomes Russia's return to the Middle East arena and its active participation in the peace process.” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 12 January 2000.

<sup>298</sup> *Agence France Press*, 1 February 2000.

<sup>299</sup> *Agence France Press*, 31 January 2000.

mutual trust, security, and cooperation.”<sup>300</sup> The unity of broader political goals and aspirations of both states was thus reiterated and Moscow was not deterred from further involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli entanglement.

In addition to the need for security in the region, which, as Putin stressed, is close to its borders, there was the real or imagined threat of Islamic fundamentalism, and the expected economic gains if peace were established.<sup>301</sup> Moscow sees the Arab-Israeli conflict as one of the main channels of its influence in the region.<sup>302</sup> The role of co-sponsor of the “peace process” initiated by the Madrid Conference has provided Russia with an opportunity to cooperate with the most important states and forces involved in a region that is crucial for both economic and geopolitical reasons. As a well-informed Russian scholar pointed out, the preservation of a mechanism to give Moscow easy access to the region is no less important than is a final peaceful settlement in the region,<sup>303</sup> and being pragmatic, Vladimir Putin has tried to exploit this mechanism for his own purposes.

If, indeed, ideological considerations, including the need to help the national liberation movements in the developing countries, and the struggle for social and ethnic justice in the world provided some inspiration for the Soviet Union's international behaviour, post-Soviet Russia's foreign policy is, instead, avowedly motivated by the principle of defending its own national interests.<sup>304</sup> Putin's diplomacy, while declaring “political, moral, and historical responsibility for the peace process in the Holy Land,”<sup>305</sup> has, in fact, attempted to free itself from the traditional Russian “moral approach” and sympathy towards the Palestinians. Instead, he attempts to preserve a studious equi-

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<sup>300</sup> *Xinhua News Agency*, 3 February 2000.

<sup>301</sup> According to Nikonov, President of Policy Foundation for Russia, economic interests in the Middle East are no less important for Moscow than political interests. In his view: “if peace is established in the Middle East one may well expect an economic boom there, and in this case, the Middle East will become one of the world markets with an especially high development rate,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 1 November 2000.

<sup>302</sup> Malygin, A., “Novaia Situatsija na Blizhnem i Srednem Vostoke,” *Mezhdunarodnaia Zhizn*, No. 10, 2000, p. 85.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> It was openly admitted by Y. Primakov in his interview with the Egyptian paper *Al Mussawar* on 8 June 2000, in *FBIS-NES-2001-0609*.

<sup>305</sup> Yershov, Yuri, “Kremlin Accepts Responsibility for Holy Land Peace,” *Moscow News*, 16 August 2000.

distance from both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and as far as possible, to reap benefits from both relationships.<sup>306</sup> As a well-known Russian journalist noted, although the influence of a strong pro-Israeli lobby began to be felt in Russia, “by far the most important thing is that Moscow has neither the strength nor the desire to compete with the United States in the Third world, as was the case in the era of global confrontation between the two superpowers.”<sup>307</sup>

For the present-day Russian ruling elite, Israel is the most strategically desired ally in the region. According to Artem V. Malygin, who teaches at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are no objectively contradictory interests between Russia and Israel, and their cooperation is further promoted by both a large Russian diaspora in Israel and the commonly perceived threat of Islamic extremism. In addition, cooperation with Israel seems more profitable to the Russians than cooperation with any other country in the Middle East. Only Israel has such access to modern Western technology, and both the Israeli and the Jewish diaspora have international influences that are incomparably stronger than those of any other state in the region.<sup>308</sup>

However, on the other hand, traditional links with the Arab world and the Palestinians are still of considerable importance to Moscow, as they provide Russia with unique access to a region that otherwise would be completely dominated by the American superpower, and, in addition, increase Russia’s international prestige and political importance, regardless of its economic weakness and internal crises. As an inevitable outcome of these factors, Putin's relations with the Palestinians follow a very fine line of compromise and evasion, in an effort to please both parties and avoid any harmful confrontations.

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<sup>306</sup> See for instance the article by V. Sychova, “Who Are You For, the Israelis or the Palestinians?” *Sevodnya*, 14 October 2000, p. 2 and numerous personal meetings and interviews in Moscow in November 2000 to January 2001.

<sup>307</sup> Kondrashov, Stanislav, “50 Years Plus,” *Moscow News*, 6 June 2001.

<sup>308</sup> Malygin, p. 85.

All these ambiguities notwithstanding, on 3 March 2000, the Chairman of the Committee for International Affairs of the Russian State Duma Lower House, Dimitry Rogozin, stated that: "Relations with Arab countries must be one of the most important directions in Russian foreign policy,"<sup>309</sup> and the Arab ambassadors in Moscow praised Russia's role in the Middle East peace process, urging it to step up its efforts.<sup>310</sup>

On 9 March 2000, the Russian ambassador to Israel, Mikhail Bikdanov, visited Orient House in Jerusalem, which was then the headquarters of the Palestinian movement, once again stating that the Russian government and people would continue to support the Palestinians regarding their legitimate right to self-determination. He also indicated that the Jerusalem issue should be solved by Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and "any unilateral actions in the city must be stopped."<sup>311</sup>

By the end of June 2000, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Vasily Sredin, who was also the Russian President's special envoy to the Middle East, visited Israel and the Palestinian territories.<sup>312</sup> During his meeting with Arafat in Ramallah, he confirmed Moscow's "unchanging support for the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people, including their rights to self-determination and creation of a state of their own."<sup>313</sup> At the same time, Russia, though it wished to promote its links with Israel as much as possible,<sup>314</sup> was nevertheless excluded from high level Palestinian-Israeli negotiations organized and largely influenced by the Clinton administration.

At the beginning of July 2000, Moscow officially expressed great optimism about prospects for a peace settlement. Following his talks with the Israeli and Palestinian leaders, Vasily Sredin told the press that "there is a real possibility, if you want a unique

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<sup>309</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 3 March 2000.

<sup>310</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 24 February 2000.

<sup>311</sup> *Xinhua News Agency*, 10 March 2000.

<sup>312</sup> *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, Moscow, July 2000, p. 33.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>314</sup> For instance, in May 2000 the Moscow Mayor and President of the Moscow International Business Association, Yuri Luzkhov, went to Tel Aviv in order to open an international business forum "Moscow Invest 2000," *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 16 May 2000.

chance, to attain a final settlement of conflict between Palestine and Israel before the end of this year.”<sup>315</sup> According to Sredin, both sides were “determined to achieve this goal and have made noticeable progress in dealing with the permanent status of the Palestinian territories, primarily with the Palestinian State system, borders and settlements.”<sup>316</sup> Disregarding the lack of an invitation, Russia hailed the U.S. initiative to convene the Clinton, Barak, and Arafat summit, on the Israeli-Palestinian settlement at Camp David.<sup>317</sup> Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, when asked why Russia had not participated in the summit, asserted that: “We welcome any initiative, which would promote a firm and comprehensive Middle East settlement. There should not be any competition in this case. We act in close cooperation with the American co-sponsor, with European partners, with the E.U., and many Arab countries.”<sup>318</sup>

In the aftermath of the unsuccessful summit, and the apparent failure of the American initiative, Moscow again found itself in the middle of the Arab-Israeli maelstrom. On 26 July 2000, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement that Moscow was “convinced that now the peace process has entered a crucial stage, all political forces and public circles in Israel and Palestine should show pragmatism and great responsibility.”<sup>319</sup>

In practice, the predominant Russian efforts—as in 1999—were focussed on dissuading Arafat from going ahead with his plan to proclaim an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital on 13 September 2000.<sup>320</sup> When, on 10 August 2000, Arafat came to Moscow on a working visit, he was told by the Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, that although “Russia has no problems with recognizing Palestinian statehood...as for the timing of the proclamation...all possible

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<sup>315</sup> Interfax, 3 July 2000, in *FBIS-SOV-2000-0703*.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>317</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 10 July 2000.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 27 July 2000.

<sup>320</sup> Yershov, Yuri, “Kremlin Accepts Responsibility for Holy Land Peace,” *Moscow News*, 16 August 2000. See also, “Putin, Barak Discuss Middle East Ahead of Arafat’s Visit,” *VPI*, 11 August 2000.

courses of further developments should first be carefully weighed.”<sup>321</sup> In fact, Ivanov asked Arafat to exercise “extreme caution” on the timing of his decision to declare independence.<sup>322</sup> President Putin's spokesman also stated that “the only way for a Palestinian state to emerge is through peace talks.”<sup>323</sup> During their talks, the Russians wanted Arafat to postpone the declaration of Palestinian independence, promising him in exchange, Moscow's assistance in negotiations with Israel.<sup>324</sup> As President Putin once more assured him, Russia's attitude was “distinguished by respect for the legal rights of the Palestinian people, including their right for a state of their own, and it was ready for further involvement in this cause.”<sup>325</sup>

The Russian stance was highly appreciated by the Israelis, who considered it “of great importance, in view of the pro-Arab position the Russians had traditionally taken” and a proof that “Israel's world-wide diplomatic efforts aimed at explaining the country's stance on the peace talks were successful.”<sup>326</sup> Moscow naturally welcomed the decision taken by the Executive Council of the PLO to put off the declaration of an independent Palestinian state.<sup>327</sup> The Russian leaders, though they at least officially believed there was still a chance to reach a Palestinian-Israeli agreement, regretted that Palestinians and Israelis still had “serious differences over the entire spectrum of a permanent settlement.”<sup>328</sup> In order to bridge the gap between the parties and to prevent further deterioration of the situation, Russia, sometimes acting with the E.U., urged both parties to exercise maximum restraint and compromise on the disputed issues.<sup>329</sup>

Russia's evolving Middle Eastern policy under Putin elicited Israeli satisfaction, and Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, describing the Russian position as “constructive

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<sup>321</sup> *Xinhua News Agency*, 11 August 2000.

<sup>322</sup> *APS Diplomatic Recorder*, 12 August 2000, Vol. 53, Issue 6, p. N.A.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>324</sup> Yershov, “Kremlin Accepts Responsibility for Holy Land Peace,” *Moscow News*, 16 August 2000.

<sup>325</sup> “Putin Calls for Creation of Palestinian State,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 11 August 2000.

<sup>326</sup> “Barak Pledges Further Peace Efforts, Calls Russian President,” *Xinhua News Agency*, 15 August 2000.

<sup>327</sup> “Russia Welcomes Postponement of Palestinian Independence,” *Xinhua News Agency*, 12 September 2000.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>329</sup> “Russia, E.U. Urge Israel and Palestinians for Restraint,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 21 August 2000.



and realistic,”<sup>330</sup> asked Moscow to “continue to play its role in the process of the Middle East settlement.”<sup>331</sup> Despite these assurances and numerous appeals by the Palestinians and other Arabs for more active Russian involvement,<sup>332</sup> Putin, claiming the lack of a formal Israeli invitation,<sup>333</sup> decided to stay away from a new Middle East Summit at Sharm el Sheikh in Egypt in October 2000.<sup>334</sup>

The Russian absence at Sharm al Sheikh caused several apparently contradictory reactions among Russian commentators. While some (for example, Professor V. Kremnyuk, Deputy Director of the Institute for U.S. and Canada Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences) were deeply concerned, arguing that the Summit not only pushed Russia aside from the Middle East negotiating process, but also “began the process of isolating it in that region,”<sup>335</sup> others accepted it as an inevitable outcome of the shifting balance at regional and global levels of power and were willing to admit that: “It has been a long time since we had any real levers of influence on the situation, and attempts to pretend that we continue to influence it have looked rather odd.”<sup>336</sup> Certain analysts in fact perceived Putin's decision in a positive light as the beginning of a search for a clear and definite concept of Russian national interests and a relinquishing of the previous imperial traditions.<sup>337</sup> Moscow's choice did indeed reflect its weakness and loss of superpower status, but it was also motivated by a wish to avoid any possible confrontation with the U.S. and Israel, while simultaneously not alienating the Palestinians and other Arabs.

Although Russian officials have frequently visited the region, and have occasionally played host to Palestinian leaders, including Arafat who, after the breakdown of the Clinton-sponsored negotiations, visited Moscow at least three times

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<sup>330</sup> “Israel Would Like Russia to Continue Role in [the] Middle East,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 8 September 2000.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>332</sup> See also “Palestine Wants Russia to Take Part in Each Mideast Meet,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 11 August 2000, and “IAE Foreign Minister Urges Russia to Intervene in Palestine,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 5 October 2000.

<sup>333</sup> *Kommersant*, Moscow, 21 October 2000, p. 2.

<sup>334</sup> Interfax, 17 October 2000, in *FBIS-NES-2000-1017*.

<sup>335</sup> *Vremija Novostej*, Moscow, 18 October 2000, p. 1.

<sup>336</sup> Albots, Yevgenia, “Russia's New, Very Foreign, Foreign Policy,” *The St. Petersburg Times*, 20 October 2000.

(in August 2000, November 2000, and May 2001), only very seldom have the Russians submitted any suggestions that significantly differed from American proposals. Even when such suggestions have been made, as in November 2000 when Russia backed a Palestinian proposal to send 2,000 UN observers to the Occupied Territories,<sup>338</sup> and in May 2001, when it supported a new international conference in order to stop violence and bloodshed in Israel/Palestine,<sup>339</sup> the proposals have been quickly abandoned in the face of American and/or Israeli rejection.

During Putin's meeting with Arafat in November 2000, Putin recognized Arafat's peacemaking efforts, but also quickly mentioned "the great contribution to the settlement process made by the Israeli leaders" with whom Moscow was "in constant contact."<sup>340</sup> In fact, Putin, at this meeting, arranged an Israeli-Palestinian "virtual summit" in his office<sup>341</sup> when, during his talks with Arafat, he telephoned the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and handed the receiver to Arafat. After a relatively long silence, both protagonists spoke directly to each other. The Russians considered their successful mediation to be a great political success, but in a sober assessment by Andrei Piontkovsky, Director of the Center for Strategic Studies in Moscow, the importance of the event was described as mainly symbolic and without any real consequences.<sup>342</sup>

During the next visit by Arafat in May 2001, both President Putin and Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, observed the principle of "equal proximity to the two parties to the conflict."<sup>343</sup> Arafat requested from Russia a deeper involvement as co-sponsor of the Middle East peace process, but the only practical outcome was Moscow's decision to send its special envoy, Andrei Vdovin, back to the region.<sup>344</sup> The Russian leaders also

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<sup>337</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 November 2000.

<sup>338</sup> *Izvestia*, Moscow, 25 November 2000, p. 1.

<sup>339</sup> *Agence France Press*, 28 May 2001.

<sup>340</sup> *Izvestia*, 25 November 2000, p. 1.

<sup>341</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 November 2000.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>343</sup> *Izvestia*, 30 May 2001, p. 3.

<sup>344</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 29 May 2001.

stressed as much as possible that the Russian and U.S. stands on the Middle East settlement were “close or identical.”<sup>345</sup> When Yevgeny Primakov, the former Russian Prime Minister (and then Leader of the Fatherland-All Russia parliamentary group at the State Duma), blamed Israel for the tragic situation in the Occupied Territories, the Kremlin stated that it considered that Russia, in aspiring to the role of intermediary in settling the conflict, should not take sides.<sup>346</sup> Primakov was also harshly attacked for these comments by the pro-Israeli Russian media.<sup>347</sup>

Putin's policies won the approval of the Israeli leaders, and while visiting Russia in May 2001, Israeli Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, informed Putin that: “Your policies meet our expectations.”<sup>348</sup> The Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, later confirmed Peres’ opinion, saying after his meeting with Putin in September 2001, that “the Russians have no desire to replace the United States as mediators. Their position is much closer to the American one than the European one—the Russians are not pressuring us to bring international observers.”<sup>349</sup>

Since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in the fall of 2000, resulting in an increased threat of Palestinian terrorists attacks on the Israelis, one of the declared concerns of Moscow's Middle Eastern policy has been the safety of the Russian language diaspora in Israel. On 27 November 2000, Putin, in a widely televised interview, repeated his concern about the spread of violence in the Middle East stating that:

...nearly one third of the Israeli population has come from the USSR.... We cannot be indifferent to their fate. Many of them have found themselves in the center of the conflict. This arouses Russia's concern and largely explains its interests in the Middle East.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 30 May 2001.

<sup>346</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 27 May 2001.

<sup>347</sup> *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 53, No. 25, 2001, p. 18.

<sup>348</sup> Interfax in Russian, 21 May 2001, in *FBIS-SOV-2001-0521*.

<sup>349</sup> Safire, William, “Sharon in Moscow: Israel Needs Russia to Help Combat the Very Worst Terrorism,” *Pittsburg Post-Gazette*, 7 September 2001.

<sup>350</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 27 November 2000.

During his talks with Shimon Peres in May 2001, President Putin reiterated the same concern and conveyed his condolences and sympathy to those in Israel who had lost family members because of “the latest terrorist acts.”<sup>351</sup> According to popular Russian expectations, Russian and/or Soviet Jews in Israel could serve as a bridge between both countries, and Israel could become a “unique bridge, linking Russia and the West in science and technology.”<sup>352</sup>

In fact, there have been numerous examples of Russian-Israeli business and technological joint ventures and cooperation. Russian launch vehicles were employed on two Israeli satellites in 1998 and 2000. In addition, between 1995 and 2000, the trade turnover between both countries rose by 50 percent, amounting to over one billion US dollars.<sup>353</sup> Israel has also become a centre for many Russian and Ukrainian crime syndicates, which, according to Israeli law-enforcement officials, had invested between \$4 billion and \$20 billion US in the Israeli economy since the 1970s.<sup>354</sup> There have already been many Russian efforts to persuade the U.S. Congress to repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which was greatly harming Moscow's trade with the U.S., by stressing the importance of good relations with Israel and the American Jewish community.

After Israel initiated one of its early operations against the Palestinians on 18 October 2001, the Israeli cabinet minister and well-known Russian-Israeli politician, Nathan Sharansky, visited Moscow, finding in Russia “an absolute understanding, even though not complete solidarity for the operation.”<sup>355</sup> Moreover, during a visit to Russia in January 2001, the President of Israel, Moshe Katzav, also got “remarkable impressions from the talks with the Russian leaders, whose attitude to the State of Israel is friendly, and who have a great potential for exerting a favourable influence on

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<sup>351</sup> Interfax in Russian, 21 May 2001, in *FBIS-SOV-2001-0521*.

<sup>352</sup> A thesis often reiterated by the well-known Russian-Israeli politician, Nathan Sharansky. See also *ITAR-TASS News Agency* 16 March 1999, in *FBIS-NES-1999-0316*.

<sup>353</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 24 January 2001.

<sup>354</sup> “Russian, Ukrainian Crime Groups Set to Corner Global Drug Market,” *Stratfor* com, 8 April 2002.

<sup>355</sup> *Agence France Press*, 24 October 2001.

the Middle East peace process.”<sup>356</sup> According to Katzav, there are “immense prospects” for Israeli cooperation with Russia, and also for both countries in regard to international affairs.<sup>357</sup> In fact, there are well-established cooperative links between the Russian and Israeli Security Councils and intelligence services in order to fight terrorism and what they consider to be the threat of Islamic extremism.<sup>358</sup> While many official and unofficial Western European statements were sharply critical of Israeli military actions and repression against the Palestinians during the Intifada, Russian official statements, while calling on both parties to exercise the “utmost restraint” and return to the peace talks, nevertheless, attempted to avoid any direct condemnation of Israel.<sup>359</sup> With the exception of a small number of left wing and nationalist papers, most of the Russian media were, and still are, generally more pro-Israeli than in Western Europe, and the Russian public, while alarmed about the events, remained predominantly detached and neutral.<sup>360</sup>

However, this did not necessarily imply that the plight of the Palestinians and their struggle were completely forgotten, and the long-lasting relations with the Palestinian organizations broken. In Russia, there have always been substantial political forces such as the Communist Party<sup>361</sup> and the majority of the Moslem population, which wanted to support the Palestinian cause. Indeed, in the spring of 2001, the Muslim deputies in the Lower House of Parliament-Duma created their own separate parliamentary caucus, which claimed as one of

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<sup>356</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 24 January 2001.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>358</sup> “Russia, Israel Demonstrate Common Approach to Anti-Terrorism,” and “Russian, Israeli Security Councils to Fight Terrorism,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 23 January 2001.

<sup>359</sup> Avineri, Shlomo, “Israel-Russia Relations,” presented at Non-Proliferation Conference 2001, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

<sup>360</sup> According to a public opinion poll in October 2000, 60 percent of Russians were concerned about the situation, with only 18 percent being indifferent, and 14 percent unaware about events. However, 52 percent of the respondents thought that Russia should not support either conflicting side, with 5 percent suggesting support for Israel and 6 percent for the Palestinians. More than one-third of the respondents (37 percent) believed that the Israelis and Palestinians were equally to blame for the confrontation; 10 percent blamed the Israelis more, and 6 percent the Palestinians more. Interfax, 19 October 2000, *FBIS-SOV-2000-1018*. In 2001 Russian public opinion shifted more to the Israeli side, *Moscow News*, 29 August 2001.

<sup>361</sup> See Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party of Russia and of the People's Patriotic Union meeting with Arab ambassadors, on 23 May 2001. *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 23 May 2001. Zyuganov's statement strongly condemned “broadening of Israel's armed action against Palestine” and expressed embarrassment over the “markedly friendly reception given in Moscow to Israeli Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, (*Ibid.*).

its major goals, the defence of the Palestinian people.<sup>362</sup> Later, led by Abdul Vakhed Niyazov, they created the Eurasian Party of Russia which they expected would garner at least three million votes.<sup>363</sup> The Palestinians, and their present situation, also attract the sympathy of many other independent-minded, and well-informed organizations, including Russian Orthodox Church leaders. In his address to the conference, "The Holy Land and Russian-Palestinian Relations: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," held in Moscow on 10 October 2001, the Head of the Church, Patriarch of All Russia, Alexei II, stressed that his Church "has traditionally supported the lawful desire of the Arab people of Palestine to acquire statehood, and to restore their internationally recognized rights to their own native land, including territories inside Jerusalem."<sup>364</sup> On 4 April 2002, the special statement of the Patriarch and the Holy Synod, the ruling body of the Russian Orthodox Church, during the Israeli "Defensive Shield" operation in the West Bank, expressed: "...alarm to see the Arab civil self-organization structures weakened forcibly and attempts made to delegitimize the PNA. Those actions can lead to a complete breakdown in the negotiation process and the deprivation of the Palestinian people of their internationally recognized right to create a state of their own."<sup>365</sup>

Other major pro-Palestinian organizations include the once popular journal, *Asia i Afrika Sevodnya*, and the Russian-Palestinian Friendship Society, with which some scholars and journalists are associated.

Probably much more important is the fact that, for reasons already mentioned, Russian state interests still require cooperation with Arab nations, and open channels to the Palestinians. The occasional Palestinian rights support may still provide Moscow with several political and economic benefits, such as easy access to the region which is strategically crucial, political and moral prestige among the developing nations, and last but not least, better business opportunities in many Moslem countries. Being in a very critical situation after the end of the Cold War, and without significant international support, both Palestinians and other Arab leaders have continuously asked for Russian intervention on their behalf. While in Moscow in May 2001, Arafat reiterated to President Putin that Palestinians see Russia "as one of the most serious guarantors" of the

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<sup>362</sup> Deputies representing the Muslim movement, Refah, left Putin's party, Unity, in order to create their own political organization on 15 March 2001. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 March 2001.

<sup>363</sup> *RFE/RL Newslines*, 12 April 2002, Part I.

<sup>364</sup> <http://www.russianorthodox-church.org.ru/ne0/00114.htm>

<sup>365</sup> <http://www.russianorthodox-church.org.ru/ne204052.htm>

negotiating process and stressed the need to intensify its role as a co-sponsor of the Mideast process.<sup>366</sup> Tunisian Foreign Minister, Habib Ben Yahya, may well have spoken for many when he said that “the Arab nations regard Russia...as an important catalyst of regional peace...and hope that Russia will use all its weight as co-sponsor of the Middle East peace process, to find a final settlement to the problem in keeping with international law and with the UN resolutions.”<sup>367</sup> Similar statements have been repeated many times.<sup>368</sup>

The Russian reply to these requests, however, has been cautious and rather modest. From the beginning of the Second Intifada, Moscow has condemned all violence, and asked for the renewal of negotiations. In its statement on 2 December 2001, after the Palestinian suicide bombers' attack in Jerusalem, the Foreign Ministry strongly condemned the “terrible crime which was carried out by Palestinian 'fanatics’” and called on the Palestinian leadership “to take effective measures to bring an end to extremism.”<sup>369</sup> However, it also added that, “it is necessary to take steps to break down a senseless circle of violence when each act of bloodletting, no matter where it comes from, leads only to escalation of the crisis and new victims.”<sup>370</sup> In Moscow's view, the only solution is “to bring the situation back to the track of a political settlement.”<sup>371</sup>

In regards to the Israeli violence that caused many more casualties, Russia's condemnation has been much milder, and usually devoid of any moral judgement, but seems to suggest the futility of the Israeli repression. Nevertheless, on 15 December 2001, Putin warned the Israelis that “making a blockade, the bombing of Palestinian territories, the introduction of Israeli troops into Palestinian towns, and passing

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<sup>366</sup> *Xinhua News Agency*, 29 May 2001.

<sup>367</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 25 May 2001.

<sup>368</sup> Particularly dramatic was an interview by Palestinian Ambassador to Russia, Khairi al-Oridi, with RIA Novosti on 9 April 2002. In view of the tragic situation at that time, he called for “immediate intervention of the international community” in order to prevent the Israeli “genocide” of the Palestinian people, *Pravda*, in English on line, 10 April 2002. In his previous statement on 15 December 2001, al-Oridi stressed that “Palestinians expect Russia to assist them, they hope that Russia's efforts will help unblock the situation around the Palestinian territories,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 15 December 2001.

<sup>369</sup> “Russia Condemns Terrorist Bombing in Jerusalem,” *AP Worldstream*, 2 December 2001.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*

sentences without trial, will not likely provide a clue to the problems that have piled up in Israeli-Palestinian relations.”<sup>372</sup> Further, Moscow supported the George Mitchell Commission's peace plan as “a balanced document which creates all conditions for normalizing the situation,”<sup>373</sup> and on numerous occasions Russian leaders have reiterated the position that their country remains firmly in favour of the Middle East peace process, and that this has the greatest potential to achieve, as its consequences, the fulfilment of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

The essence of the present Russian political proposals for the Middle East peace settlement were summarized by President Putin in his address to the Arab League meeting in Beirut on 26 March 2002. According to him:

Peace can be achieved in the Middle East only by ending the occupation of the Arab territories, the realization of the national rights of the people of Palestine, including their right to self-determination and the creation of their own independent state, and also the equal and reliable security of all the countries and nations of the region, both the Arabs and the Israelis.<sup>374</sup>

Russia's official position is thus entirely in accordance with International Public Law, the UN resolutions, and the almost unanimous consensus of the world community, which is, in practice, blocked only by the Israeli refusal and general U.S. support for all Israeli governments. Consequently, Putin and other Russian leaders have opposed any of Prime Minister Sharon's efforts to isolate and even eliminate Yasser Arafat. On 7 April 2002, at the high point of the Israeli invasion during the siege of Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah, Putin stated that Arafat was “an internationally recognized leader, who commands respect and influence in the Arab world, and first of all, in Palestine,”<sup>375</sup> that talks on the Middle East settlement require a partner, “and if there is

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<sup>372</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 15 December 2001.

<sup>373</sup> Statement by the Russian President's special envoy for the Middle East peace settlement, Vasily Sredin, 15 August 2001. *ITAR-TASS News Agency in English*, 15 August 2001, in *FBIS-SOV-2001-0815*.

<sup>374</sup> *Interfax Diplomatic Panorama* for 26 March 2002, *FBIS-SOV-2002-0326*.

<sup>375</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 7 April 2002, and in *FBIS-SOV-2002-0407*.



no second partner at the talks, one is left with only one option—force.”<sup>376</sup> While in Israel two weeks earlier, Sergei Mironov, the new speaker of the Upper House of the Russian parliament, failed to meet Arafat. His omission caused great anger on the part of the members of the Russian parliament and a rebuke from President Putin.<sup>377</sup> After Sharon's invasion on 29 March 2002, Mironov was quick to stress that “Arafat is a world recognized leader of the Palestinian people and the Palestinian National Authority...there is no other alternative [for him].”<sup>378</sup>

In April 2002, the Israeli army's brutal pacification of Jenin and its closing of the area to the press and relief organizations, caused a strong reaction in Russia. On 23 April 2002, the usually cautious and “balanced” Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, stated to the Russian press that: “The refugee camp was completely flattened and nobody can tell now how many victims are buried under the debris.... Clearly such developments cannot be accounted for, and even less justified as any resistance to terrorism.”<sup>379</sup> Ivanov called for “the speedy completion of the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the territories of the PNA, and, first of all, the lifting of the siege of the residence of Yasser Arafat in Ramallah and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.”<sup>380</sup> He further added, “we cannot stand by while innocent civilians, who do not have enough water, food, and medicines, are suffering. Many of them have nowhere to live, and are in despair.”<sup>381</sup> The next day, on 24 April 2002, the State Duma condemned the Israeli actions which “led to mass killing among civilians,” and asked the Israeli leaders to “stop the violence immediately”, expressing the opinion that if Israel refused to comply with the international demands, it would be necessary to impose economic and other sanctions against it.”<sup>382</sup> For the first time, the tone of moral condemnation sounded strong in Russian official pronouncements. Regardless of its new pro-Western leanings and the

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<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>377</sup> *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Moscow, 23 March 2002, *FBIS-NES-2002-0326*.

<sup>378</sup> *Xinhua News Agency*, 29 March 2002, *FBIS-CHI-2002-0329*.

<sup>379</sup> *Interfax Diplomatic Panorama* for 23 April 2002, *FBIS-SOV-2002-0424*.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>382</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, in English, 24 April 2002, *FBIS-SOV-2002-0324*.

frankly admitted self-interest orientation, Moscow's attitude towards the Palestinians remained markedly different from the American attitude.

The transformation of Russian relations with the Palestinians, and its newly expanded friendship with Israel promoted by President Putin, predictably caused mixed reactions among the Arabs. While Palestinians and other Arab leaders or diplomats tried to avoid any direct criticism of Moscow, and have frequently given "a positive assessment to Russia's efforts to de-block the situation on Palestinian territories,"<sup>383</sup> other less restrained Arab analysts expressed their frustration and occasional bitterness. During Arafat's visit to Moscow in May 2001, the London based independent Arab daily *Al-Quds al Arabi* predicted that Arafat "is not expected to return to his headquarters in Gaza or Ramallah without a bag full of promises and wishes."<sup>384</sup> The editorial also indicated that Russia does not want to compete with the U.S. in the Middle East, and neither wants nor is even able to play the role of "balancer" that Arafat wants it to accomplish. Russia does not now see Israel as an enemy, and in fact Moscow-Tel Aviv relations are blooming. Consequently, for the Palestinians, all hopes for Russian intercession appear to be nothing but "mirages."<sup>385</sup> The Secretary General of the Palestinian Liberation Front, and a member of the PNC, Muhammed Abbas (Abu Abbas) was clearly bitter when interviewed by a Russian journalist saying that Russia has "not declined but has come to an end," and that Russia no longer played any meaningful role in the region.<sup>386</sup> According to Abbas, "Russia is not carrying out the duties of a mediator on a par with the U.S. Even if Russia does accomplish something, it does it shyly, as if by accident."<sup>387</sup> However, he also stated that Russia was capable of "doing more", and that its "political involvement would reinforce its authority in the

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<sup>383</sup> See, for instance, "Arab Ambassadors in Moscow Highly Assess Russia's Efforts Towards Mideast Process," *FBIS-SOV-2002-0314*.

<sup>384</sup> "Editorial Belittles Outcome of Arafat's Visit to Moscow, Russian Role in Middle East Peace Process," *Al Quds al Arabi*, London, 30 May 2001, *FBIS-NES-2001-0530*.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>386</sup> "PLO's Abu Abbas Concerned Over Lack of Russia's Role in Middle East," *Interfax in English*, 21 February 2002, *FBIS-SOV-2002-0221*.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*

international arena.”<sup>388</sup> He also indicated that although “America exerts influence on Eastern rulers...ordinary people respect Russia” and that Moscow is “remembered and trusted in the Middle East.”<sup>389</sup>

Though Abu Abbas appears to hope that Russia could restore the balance of power in the region, other analysts are much more pessimistic, and assert that Russia “is no longer interested in ideology, or in recruiting Third World allies to its camp,”<sup>390</sup> as it sees the need to “build the bridges with Europe and avoid any confrontation with the U.S.”<sup>391</sup> Though this situation seems an accurate description, the emotional and political foreign policy patterns deeply rooted in the past, are changing slowly, and the popular perception of reality often lags. The myth of Russia as a country that is friendly and benevolent to the Palestinians and other Arabs is still alive, and may persist for a much longer time.

During 2002 and at the beginning of 2003, the Russian political elite seemed to be still deeply divided about Moscow’s relations with Israel and Palestine. The building of a modern Russian nation and the corresponding foreign policy are still far from being completed,<sup>392</sup> and their development is conditioned both by the fresh memory of the Soviet past and a number of more recent international and domestic factors.<sup>393</sup> An important role is played by a number of influential groups including some ethnic and religious lobbies that have connections and common interests with either Israelis or Palestinians.<sup>394</sup> There is still also a gap between the perceptions of the many Duma members and Putin and his close advisors. In April 2002, Dimitry Olegovich, Head of the Russian Parliamentary delegation visiting Pakistan, stated that Moscow “firmly

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<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>390</sup> “Editorial Belittles Outcome of Arafat’s Visit to Moscow,” Al-Quds al-Arabi, FBIS-NES-2001-0530.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>392</sup> G. Kosach, E. Melkumian, “Blizhnyi Vostok v Rossiiskoi Vneshnei politike,” *Mirovaya Ekonomika I Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, No. 9, 2002, p. 70.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*

recognizes Palestinian rights,” and that “the liberation movement in Palestine is legitimate and does not fall under terrorism.”<sup>395</sup> However, shortly after that, President Putin, replying to a desperate phone appeal by Yasser Arafat to “undertrake steps to prevent a further aggravation of the conflict,”<sup>396</sup> had no more to say except to advise him to speak with the Israeli authorities.<sup>397</sup> In addition, he stated that “the struggle against terrorism and extremism now appears to be the most important task for the world community and that nothing could justify terrorist actions against a peaceful Israeli population.”<sup>398</sup>

In January 2003, Yevgeny Primakov, who was then both a Duma member and President of Russia’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry, suggested that with the peace process stalemated, the Quartet (the UN, U.S., E.U. and Russia) should work out a final solution with moderate Arab states which the UN would then impose on the Israelis and the Palestinians.<sup>399</sup> According to him, this solution should be based on the plan presented by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah: Israel must unconditionally withdraw to its pre-1967 borders, a Palestinian state must be created, and Arab governments must recognize Israel.<sup>400</sup> Although Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov has also called for an immediate implementation of the Mideast settlement plan approved by the Quartet in December 2002,<sup>401</sup> it seems highly unlikely that Putin and his pro-Israeli advisors would follow Primakov’s suggestions. In May 2002, Russia still insisted that Israel allow the UN Secretary General Commission to investigate the events in the Palestinian refugee camp in Jenin, and Minister Igor Ivanov stressed that the resolutions of the UN Security Council “must be obeyed by all UN member states”.<sup>402</sup> However, later, equally bloody Israeli actions did not elicit any stronger reaction from Moscow. When on 26 January 2003 the Israeli troops raided Gaza, killing at least twelve and wounding more than sixty

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<sup>395</sup> See Endnote 392.

<sup>396</sup> A Gusher, “Otrezvenie: Rossije I konfliktky no Vostoke,” *Asia I Afrika*, No. 10, 2002, p. 7.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>399</sup> *Arab News*. com, 21 January 2003.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>402</sup> See Endnote 393

Palestinians and causing great damage to the local infrastructure, the Russian Foreign Ministry limited itself to a very cautious reminder that “force only distances prospects for solving the conflict, and breeds still more violence,” and that “the way out of the crisis lies exclusively in political channels.”<sup>403</sup> A few days earlier, when visiting Russia, Israeli Foreign Ministry’s Deputy Director General for Media and Public Affairs, Gideon Meir, expressed his high regard for the Putin administration’s role in the Middle East peace process. While contrasting Moscow with some Western European countries, he said that “Russia fully understands the fight against terrorism which Israel is conducting, and is committed to settling this conflict.”<sup>404</sup>

Russian business interests which include diamonds, banking, arms, and energy, “closely tie the Kremlin to Ariel Sharon, to the electorate of the Russian diaspora that voted him into power.”<sup>405</sup> Although according to the Russian Foreign Ministry, “the obtaining of independence and sovereignty by the Palestinians is key to a Middle Eastern settlement,”<sup>406</sup> peace in the Middle East is hardly among its top priorities.<sup>407</sup> According to certain Russian analysts, the existing stalemate provides it with high oil prices and a “market for weapons.”<sup>408</sup>

In addition, according to a well-known Israeli scholar and politician, Shlomo Avineri, “Moscow is aware that at present there is no obvious winning strategy” in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and does not want to become involved in a political failure.<sup>409</sup> Federation Council, International Relations’ Commission Chairman, Mikhail Margelov, expressed a similar opinion, concluding that the only hope remaining now “is to wait for the moment when the inertia of violence exhausts itself, as no politician involved has

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<sup>403</sup> Interfax in English, 26 January 2003. The Russian statement was particularly moderate in view of the fact that France outwardly condemned “the operation in the town centre of Gaza” (AFP Domestic Service in French, 27 January 2003, 1.

<sup>404</sup> Interfax in English, 22 January 2003.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>406</sup> Interfax in English, 3 December 2002.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>409</sup> Avineri, Shlomo, Israel-Russia Relations Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Publications, 2001, <<http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/russiaisrael>>

demonstrated the ability, or the will to curtail it.”<sup>410</sup> In the meantime, Moscow policy seems to frequently just pretend to be involved, while limiting this to the purely rhetorical level, apparently in order to extract as much as possible from both parties, and to preserve its appearance of great power status in the international arena. However, the role of Moscow may well not be finished. Due to its geographical proximity and well-established links both with the Arab world and Israel, no real settlement in the Middle East may be possible without its participation and acceptance. Both its decline in general power and internal political divisions make its real power levers in the region quite modest, but the situation could change in the future. After the Israeli elections in January 2003, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that: “Now, when Israel’s election campaign is already a thing of the past, it is important that efforts be immediately stepped up to overcome the Palestinian-Israeli standoff” and ascertain that Russia is going to make a “weighty contribution to achieving this goal through energetic interaction with the Quartet partners, Israel and the Arab countries.”<sup>411</sup>

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian relations with the Holy Land and its indigenous inhabitants went through a series of complex and dramatic transformations. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Empire wanted to balance British and French influence there, and increase its own international standing as a great European power able to protect “our Christian Orthodox brethren”, the Eastern Christian minorities in the Middle East, including the Christian Orthodox Palestinian population. During the Communist period, the Bolsheviks supported national liberation movements of the developing nations all over the world—including Palestine and recognized the social and political rights of the Palestinian people, at a time when the West was unwilling to do so. Subsequently, during the Cold War period, the USSR used Palestinian organizations as tools against the United States and its client regimes in the region. The

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<sup>410</sup> *RFE/RL Newswire*, 3 April 2002, Vol. 6, No. 62, p. 1.

<sup>411</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, in English, 30 January 2003.

post-Soviet Russian Federation is no longer a revolutionary power, and in addition, needs to win the acceptance and economic help of the West. Furthermore, it is much weaker than the former Soviet Union, and even the former Russian Empire. Therefore, its foreign policy must be cautious and self-restrained. It also does not have the economic and military means to advance its goals, or to speak from a position of strength. Close cooperation with the State of Israel is conceived in Moscow as a necessary precondition for good Russian-American relations, and this is greatly facilitated by numerous Russian language immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Israel. In addition, due to its international connections and access to modern technology, Israel has much more to offer Moscow than any other state in the region, and furthermore, post-Soviet Russia's foreign policy is not motivated by ideological considerations.

However, the Palestinians and their cause have not been completely forgotten. In a cautious and apparently carefully balanced way, the present Russian leaders continue to be involved in Palestinian affairs, and though less than before, still express their recognition of Palestinian national rights and Moscow's willingness to "move quickly to achieve the aim of a peaceful coexistence of the sovereign states – Israel and Palestine."<sup>412</sup> In addition to historical traditions and the still persisting moral considerations among some of the Russian elite, there are, in Moscow, several important political reasons for a continuity of its interest in the fate of the Palestinians, and for support of a resolution of the Arab-Israeli confrontation.

As President Putin stressed, "First of all, there exists geographic proximity."<sup>413</sup> The repercussions of the Arab-Israeli conflict could well be felt in the southern and eastern parts of Russia itself.<sup>414</sup> The overwhelming U.S. influence in the Arab world and

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<sup>412</sup> Statement by Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Alexander Yakovenko, *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, in English, 21 January 2003.

<sup>413</sup> *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 1 February 2000.

<sup>414</sup> By the end of April 2002, a group of activists from the moderate nationalist group, the All Tatar Public Center (VTOTs) asked the delegation from Israel to leave the Republic of Tatarstan quickly as its visit would dishonour the memory of victims of the recent "Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people." *RFE/RL Newslines*, 30 April 2002, Part I.

Israel, plus the ensuing American penetration of the former Soviet republics of Transcaucasia are also highly undesirable and frightening prospects from Moscow's point of view. Continuous involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict and an occasional mild support for Palestinian rights, provides Russia with a particularly favorable access to the area. Access is crucial for economic and geopolitical reasons as it protects its interests and increases its prestige on the international stage as one of the major world powers. Last but not least, it facilitates Russian trade and business in the Arab world and in Israel.

In spite of its domestic problems and occasional American and Israeli pressures, in all probability Moscow will continue its relations with the Palestinians. Though its support for the Palestinians has in practice been quite limited, and recently far less outspoken than ever before, it is by no means unimportant. The close links between Palestinian leaders and Russia seem quite stable at present. In addition, Moscow's new friendship with Israel provides it with new possibilities in the region, and both Arab and Israeli politicians now vie for Russian support and friendship. Moscow is also working for a peaceful settlement and normalization of Israel's relations with neighbouring Arab countries, and of particular interest are those where Russia still has well established influences, such as in Syria, and to a lesser extent, Lebanon.<sup>415</sup>

In view of the previous history of imperial rivalry and hostility, the present moderate Russian peacemaking policy seems hypocritical and devoid of credibility. However, as the former President of the Russian Jewish Congress, E.Y. Satanovskij has said, "It is exactly the case now," and in the interests of Middle Eastern peace, the Western world should overcome its prejudices and embrace Russia's positive contribution.<sup>416</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Satanovskij, E.Y., "Rossijskaia Politika v otnoshenii Iraka, Irana i Blizhnego Vostoka," *Blizhnij Vostok i Sovremennost*, No. 6, 1999, p. 181.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.* Even now, Washington is relying on Moscow's good offices to persuade Syria and Iran to restrain Hizbullah in southern Lebanon, *Guardian Weekly*, 18-24 April 2002, p. 6. While meeting in Madrid on 11 April 2002, Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, told the U.S. State Secretary, C. Powell, that Russia would make diplomatic interventions with Syria and Iran to support American peace efforts. "Possible Powell Visit Points to Syria Importance," <Stratfor.com>, 12 April 2002.



In spite of all its present difficulties, Russia is still a very important international player and has been involved in the Middle East for more than a thousand years. Because it is located close to the region in question and the large Muslim, and now to a lesser extent, the Jewish population, its links with the region can be seen as “organic” and impossible to obliterate in the near future. Its foreign policy toward the Palestinians and the Arab World in general, is largely determined by the internal domestic developments which include both enormous socio-economic transformations and subsequent changes at the political elite level.

Post-Soviet Russia is certainly not an enemy of Israel, and as far as its own security interests allow, it tries hard to find an acceptable compromise which can satisfy the interests of all parties, including the basic needs of the Palestinian people.