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Toward a New Russian Initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian Issue?

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The significance of this week's visit to Moscow by PA President Mahmoud Abbas should be assessed in the context of Russia's increasing effort to influence the Israeli-Palestinian political process and advance a settlement of the conflict. This particular effort appears well-suited to Russia's new Middle East policy, reflected in the decision, announced on April 13, 2015, to supply the S-300 missile system to Iran.

Abbas has stated that he intends to coordinate his efforts with Russia and recruit its support for a renewed Palestinian appeal to the UN Security Council in place of the request that was rejected in late 2014. For its part, Russia has of late been quite active in the Palestinian theater. A letter from President Vladimir Putin to the Arab League Summit that met at Sharm el-Sheikh on March 28, 2015 included various messages about the current challenges in the Middle East. Russia stressed its opposition in principle to external interference in the region, but at the same time, and somewhat in contradiction to this message, Putin declared that the Palestinians were entitled to a viable independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital. The letter noted explicitly that Russia, which attached special importance to this issue, intended to persist in its efforts to achieve this goal through both multilateral channels, including the Quartet framework, and bilateral channels.

This is not the first time that Russian officials, including Putin, have emphasized the special importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict among the crises in the Middle East. Russia complained recently about the lowered priority of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the regional and international agendas. Russia has reiterated its position that without a resolution of this issue, stability and security in the region will not be attained, and it has sent messages along these lines to the Quartet, accompanied by Moscow's ongoing criticism of the United States. The US administration was assigned responsibility for the negative processes currently underway in the Middle East, and for Russia's marginalization in all matters pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Given the severe crises gripping the Middle East, Putin's decision to emphasize the Israeli-Palestinian issue appears difficult to understand. This political choice, however, is

explained by the overall Russian interest in enhancing its presence in the region as a lever for advancing its status in the inter-bloc rivalry. Its self-portrayal as acting on behalf of the Muslim world in general, especially the Arab component, is designed to serve this strategic goal.

Russia's efforts to influence the Israeli-Palestinian arena join Moscow's active involvement in two Middle East crises that currently lead the international agenda. Russia's role in the ongoing civil war in Syria – its support for the Bashar al-Assad regime against the rebels and its efforts to mediate between the warring parties in the civil war – suits its overall handling of what it regards as the threat of radical Islam to Russian territory. In addition, Russia constitutes something of a counterweight to the pressure exerted by the Western powers against Iran on the nuclear issue. Russia's Defense Minister recently visited Tehran and discussed significant expansion of the cooperation between the two countries, including in military procurement. Russia's announcement that it will lift a five-year ban and supply the S-300 missile system to Iran is part of this trend. At the same time, Russia aims at repairing its relations with other countries in the Middle East. One significant development in this direction was Putin's visit to Egypt in February 2015. Putin's trip to the Middle East was also designed to include a visit to Israel and the Palestinian Authority, but the election campaign underway in Israel at the time postponed the visit.

Since the Soviet era, Russia has maintained close relations with the Palestinian national movement. Senior Palestinian officials visit Moscow regularly, and PA President Abbas visits Moscow once or twice a year. Russia provides material and humanitarian aid to the PA, and in February 2015 it was reported that Russia was considering expanding its economic cooperation with the PA. Implementation of this idea was discussed during Abbas's current visit. Russia supports the Palestinians consistently in the international arena, including in relevant UN votes. At the same time, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the significant improvement in bilateral Israeli-Russian relations, Russian foreign policy has displayed greater balance between Israel and the Palestinians. Russia's neutrality in the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the summer of 2014, and Israel neutrality in the crisis in Ukraine point to this trend. Russia is also expected to refrain from any blatant preference for the Palestinian position in measures toward a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue in order to avoid undermining its relations with Israel.

This assessment is based on messages sent by Moscow since early 2015, reflecting the basic assumptions of Russian policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian political process:

- a. Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict plays a key role in instability in the Middle East, the countries in the region, preoccupied with other problems, are insufficiently proactive on the issue. For its part, the US has been unsuccessful in achieving constructive dialogue between the two sides, and the Quartet's efforts have

therefore been neutralized, with a preference for bilateral discussions with Israel on the one hand, and with the Palestinians on the other. Russia's proposal to expand the Quartet by adding the Arab League to this forum was rejected by the forum. In any event, Russia seems increasingly driven to renew the negotiations between the parties as a means of restoring stability to the Middle East.

- b. Russia rejects the approach advocated by the US, in which all the core issues in the conflict must be addressed simultaneously, regarding this procedure as ineffective. Moscow claims that a rapid overall settlement is unachievable.
- c. Russia aims only at the signing of an agreement in principle within a short period – a few months – with the core issues to be discussed later, in stages.
- d. Inclusion of the question of Gaza in the negotiations is essential in order to move the process forward. According to Russia, Moscow possesses the means to include Gaza in the negotiations.
- e. Russia is able to promote an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, in part because of its good relations with both sides. On the other hand, as Moscow sees it, Israel's relations with the US have cooled, which is likely to make progress on the political process difficult.

Over the years, it has appeared that Russia was willing to accept participation in the Israeli-Palestinian political process through the Quartet, because its very membership in this forum puts it on equal footing with the US and the European Union – even though its ability to provide practical help toward a solution, both on a political level and in financial support, was limited in comparison with the US and the EU. Recently, however, it appears that as part of a wider effort to expand its geopolitical interests, Russia has sensed an opportunity to play a more active role in the political process than in the past. Cooler relations between Israel and the US, while complicating prospects for negotiations, open the door for greater and more tangible Russian influence on the political process. For this reason, an active Russian attempt to jumpstart the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians cannot be ruled out. It is possible that Putin's plan to visit Israel and the PA will soon be revived, and an official Russian initiative to renew negotiations towards a settlement may be presented to the parties.

