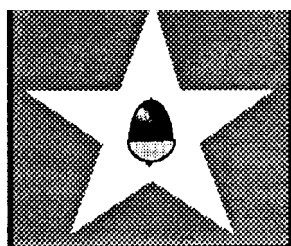


Conflict Studies Research Centre

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**Russia &
The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

17 April 2002



**Occasional
Brief No 90**

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Russia's role as one of the 'Quartet' gives Russia back a leading role in attempts to provide a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Russia advocated an international peacekeeping force for the region in 1994, and recent statements suggest that Russia may favour its imposition by force.

Russian Policy Before 2001

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the drastic reduction in Russian economic and military power in the 1990s resulted in a Russian retreat from the Middle East, a region where the Soviet Union had been a significant player since the mid-1950s. The Russian leadership has long desired to return to the region. In November 1994, Yel'tsin's then envoy to the Middle East, Viktor Posuvalyuk, outlined Russia's view on the Middle East.

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

The Russian foreign policy community's sentiment that Russia should be recognised as a great power provides a further reason why Russia should play an active independent role in the Middle East. In April 1994, Posuvalyuk outlined Russian policy goals as follows:

Russia, as a great power, has two key roles with regard to the Middle East. Firstly, it is a close neighbour, a major power with very broad interests, economic, political, spiritual, religious, and, of course, military. Its second role is as a permanent member of the Security Council and a co-sponsor alongside the USA in the Middle East peace process.²

Russia has long advocated the creation of an OSCE type regional security system in the region.³ Her position as co-chairman (along with the USA) of the Madrid process, which began in 1991, gives her an official leading role in attempts to reach a settlement, although her weakness has meant that the USA has played the leading role to promote a peace process in the region, with the Russian Federation doing little other than following the US line.

For most of the Soviet period, Moscow eschewed diplomatic ties with Israel and was aligned with leftist Arab states such as Syria and Iraq, who took a hard line against Israel and also gave strong support to the PLO. This handicapped Moscow as it meant that she was only able to talk with the Arab states and not with Israel, whereas the USA could talk to both sides. This policy changed in the late Gorbachev period, and diplomatic relations were restored with Israel in 1991. This has continued in the post-Soviet period, with Russia pursuing an even-handed policy towards both Israel and the Arab states. Ties between Israel and Russia have become much closer, due largely to the new inflow of Jewish immigration to Israel from Russia and other former Soviet states in the late 1980s and 1990s.⁴

The history of close ties between Moscow and the PLO and certain Arab states in the Soviet period gives her in theory opportunities to promote her own vision of a Middle East peace settlement. This opportunity only exists in theory so far, in view of Russian weakness vis-à-vis the USA.

Recent Statements

The latest phase of Palestinian intifada and the Israeli response to it, which began in September 2000, has now become a major threat to regional and even international security. Russia has sought to play an active role in attempts to promote a settlement of the dispute. Moscow's position is in broad harmony with the USA, arguing that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority should abide by the recommendations of the Mitchell Committee and Tenet plan. In March 2002, foreign minister Igor Ivanov confirmed that Russian policy was acting in coordination with the USA, the EU and the UN, aiming at stepping up efforts to overcome the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation and resuming the progress towards an all-inclusive Arab-Israeli settlement based on the Madrid principles, UN Security Council Resolutions 242, 338 and 1397, and the existing agreements and deals.⁵ To this can now be added UN Security Council resolutions 1402 and 1403, passed in March-April 2002. This is the officially declared Russian policy.

The development of a much closer relationship between Russia and the West since September 2001 and the worsening situation between Israel and the Palestinians have given Russia greater opportunity to pursue active diplomacy in the region in the hope of promoting a settlement. The intensification of the dispute has led to calls within Russia and elsewhere for an international peacekeeping force to keep the peace between the Palestinians and Israel. Such an idea was put forward by then foreign minister Andrey Kozyrev as far back as March 1994, and Russian participation was offered.⁶ In July 2001, foreign minister Igor Ivanov stated that Russia believes that an international presence in the Middle East "in a form acceptable to both Palestine and Israel would help to check the dangerous tendencies in that region."⁷

Russian calls for an international peacekeeping force have become much stronger in April 2002 following the large-scale intervention by the Israeli

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Defence Force into Palestinian towns following the Passover bombings. These calls were being made initially by those outside the political leadership. For example, on 29 March, the chairman of the Duma international affairs committee, Dmitry Rogozin, said that both sides in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict must be compelled to accept peace immediately.

*"The mutual Israeli-Palestinian aggression has entered the stage where the **imposition** of peace should be the single common line of the world community interested in a Middle East settlement."*⁸

The Americans should join the other co-sponsors in solving the question of peacekeepers' deployment in the Middle East as quickly as possible," said Rogozin. If the USA did so, "this would also pose a question for Russia".⁹ Presumably Rogozin was referring to the need for Russia to develop a policy on peacekeeping, and for Russian participation in it. The former head of the Duma international affairs committee, Vladimir Lukin, said on 1 April that "the world community should form a group of police forces and dispatch it as a minimum, to separate the conflicting parties, and as maximum, to occupy temporarily and partly Palestine and some parts of Israel". He argued that cease-fire should be forced on the Palestinians and Israel "through a collective ultimatum from Russia, the United States, Europe and level-headed Arab states".¹⁰

The idea that a solution should be imposed on Israel and the Palestinians was developed further by former foreign minister and current president of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Yevgenny Primakov, when visiting China in April. He said the situation in the area of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was at boiling point and commented:

*"The conflicting parties are unlikely to come to terms on their own, without outside intervention, as both terrorist attacks and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories continue...the current crisis, seemingly insoluble, can be resolved, if the international group consisting of Russia, Europe, the USA, Egypt and the UN formulates compromise settlement terms and **imposes** them on both parties...probably, we should **impose** on the conflicting parties the problem of the creation of a Palestinian state - not at the expense of the Israeli state, of course. This is the sole way of resolving the problem of Israel's security, which must be one of the mandatory clauses of a future compromise agreement."*¹¹

The idea was then developed by the Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov in an interview with ORT on 7 April.

I think that Russia does have levers of influence but I can also say that Russia does not have levers of influence which could change the situation radically. I believe that only through a concerted effort including all levers - US, European, Russian, Arab and UN - will we be able to achieve results ...

Dr Mark A Smith

*[Interviewer - Vladimir Pozner] Someone put forward the following idea: the USA, Russia and the European Union should get together and tell both sides: Well, you sit at the negotiating table, and you withdraw your troops immediately under the threat of sanctions on the part of the world community, **including the use of force**. Is this scenario possible?*

*[Ivanov] Of course, this is an extreme and painful measure. It would be better to do without it. **But this measure cannot be ruled out** ...*

*If these resolutions [ie UNSC resolutions 1402 and 1403] are not observed, we will start thinking about **more harsh measures** at the UN Security Council, **including the measures which you have mentioned** ...¹²*

He repeated these sentiments on 10 April.¹³ In a web interview in response to a question about sending international observers to the Palestinian territories, Ivanov also stated on that day

"The common view - by the way, it was recorded back at the G8 meeting in Genoa last year - is that the parties need assistance from the international community. And the assistance is needed not only for stopping the violence, but also for resuming the process of political settlement. Regrettably, there are Israel's objections so far. We have today agreed to continue the work and find a form of international presence which would be acceptable to both sides. We believe this is possible. On this issue the US Secretary of State also will negotiate.

Question: What steps must the Quartet take in order to ensure the fulfilment of its demands?

*Foreign Minister Ivanov: Above all, it is a question of exerting political pressure. Today the international community speaks with one voice and demands the implementation of specific steps. They are formulated, and this is our joint demand, which is already a strong move. **If either party fails to comply with them, then the use of other measures provided by the UN Charter is not ruled out. We hope we will not have to go beyond the political measures of pressure.**"¹⁴*

In March and April 2002, the Russian leadership has cooperated very closely with the USA, the EU and the UN in the attempt to promote a ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinians. This grouping has become known as "the Quartet", and at their meeting in Madrid on 10 April worked out the approach taken by US Secretary of State Colin Powell when he visited the Middle East on 12 April.¹⁵

Russia is likely to continue to act as part of the Quartet. This gives Russia a key role in attempts to provide a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and ensures that she will have a presence in the region. The creation of the Quartet partially reduces the role that has been played by the USA in recent years to try to mediate a settlement and thereby enhances the importance of both Russia and the EU. Russian policy is likely to remain within the framework of the Quartet for the time being. If any settlement is reached, then it is quite likely that Germany's suggestion that the Quartet become guarantors of that settlement¹⁶ will be realised. This could mean the insertion of international observers, or a peacekeeping force, even the forcible imposition of such a force from the USA, Russia and EU states backed up with UN authorisation. The resurrection of Kozyrev's 1994 idea in concert with the forces of Russia's partners in NATO and the EU is far from impossible. The relatively successful cooperation between Russia and NATO forces in Bosnia and Kosovo has established a precedent that could be emulated in Palestine. It would also achieve a long-standing Russian goal of returning to the Middle East, and becoming a major player in the region.

The Holy Places

The issue of the holy places in the Middle East may seem esoteric, but it is a feature of Russian policy towards Israel, and should not be overlooked.¹⁷ Concern over the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem has exercised both the Russian political leadership and that of the Russian Orthodox Church since the large-scale Israeli intervention into the occupied territories in April 2002, and is another aspect of the conflict that convinces Russia of her need to be involved. Israeli military activity around the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem has caused strains in the Russo-Israeli relationship. The chronology below will give an indication of how this issue has become a feature of the Russo-Israeli relationship:¹⁸

1 April *Patriarch Aleksey II of Moscow and All Russia urges the clergy around the world to take an active part in the peacemaking process in the Middle East and to help stop the escalation of tension in the region. Aleksey II says that "Israelis and Palestinians must resolve the questions of their life only by peaceful means". He says that the growing confrontation in the Holy Land, "which is sacred to all Christians around the world", causes him "deep sadness and makes his soul ache".*

2 April *The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) says it regards as unacceptable the seizure by the Israeli army of a building and land belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church during an operation in the Palestinian town of Bethlehem. Deputy foreign minister Aleksandr Saltanov meets the Israeli ambassador in Moscow, Natan Meron. Saltanov states that "harming the activities and property of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Holy Land is unacceptable". The Russian embassy in Israel has got in touch with the Israeli side in order to seek an immediate end to the military presence on Russian Orthodox Church property.*

3 April Vladimir Putin says Russia is ready, together with the UN, the USA and Europe, to make a contribution to the peaceful resolution of the Middle East conflict. He calls on both sides to stop bloodshed. He says that the Middle East is the land of holy sites, spiritual and cultural monuments which belong to the whole of mankind. "Both sides should display a sense of responsibility and constraint and prevent damage to these panhuman monuments."

3 April Israeli ambassador to Moscow Natan Meron is invited to the MFA where he is told that Russia is "seriously concerned" about the continuing presence of Israeli troops on the territory of the Russian Orthodox Church in Bethlehem.

4 April Sergey Ivanov, visiting Greece, condemns Israel's military action near the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. "Russia definitely condemns these actions...a dirty war is going on in the holy land of Bethlehem, and Christians are enraged by this war."

5 April Patriarch Aleksey II and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church issue a statement calling for "an end to all military action in the area surrounding the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the withdrawal of armed men from there".

The Holy Synod expresses alarm at "the violent weakening of the structures of civil self-organization of the Arab people and attempts actually to de-legitimize the Palestinian National Authority ... these actions can completely destroy the negotiating process and deprive the Palestinian people of any real chance of exercising their internationally recognized right to set up their own State." The Holy Synod says it believes that the Holy Land "is the heritage of all humankind", and calls on the Palestinians to unconditionally stop terrorist attacks against civilians and on Israel to withdraw troops from Arab communities and let the Palestinian leader freely communicate with the outside world and his compatriots.

8 April The MFA says use of force against holy places, historical and cultural monuments in the zone of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is "unacceptable". Russia "is alarmed that religious shrines on Palestinian territory have found themselves under serious threat as a result of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict ... the only realistic exit from the bloodshed is to immediately carry out the requirements established by Resolutions 1402 and 1403 of the UN Security Council."

9 April The MFA says that as co-sponsor of a Middle East settlement, Russia insists "on the immediate withdrawal of troops from Palestinian territories, including Ramallah".

12 April The MFA makes a further complaint after an Israeli army unit again occupied a building belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church in Bethlehem on 11 April. The MFA says that the Israeli side was told that "it is difficult to

perceive what occurred as anything other than disregard for the concerns and interests of the Russian side".

ENDNOTES

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- 1 SWB SU/2152, 14 November 1994.
 - 2 SWB SU/1981, 26 April 1994.
 - 3 See Yevgenny Primakov's outline of such a system in Diplomatichesky Vestnik, No 11, 1997, pp27-28.
 - 4 See Shlomo Avineri Israel-Russia relations, Carnegie Endowment February 2001, for an overview of the Russo-Israeli relationship. <http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/russiaisrael.asp?from=pubauthor>
 - 5 BBC Summary of World Broadcasts Former Soviet Union (SWB FSU), 28 March 2002, SU/4471.
 - 6 SWB SU/1937, 4 March 1994.
 - 7 SWB SU/4129, 19 July 2001.
 - 8 SWB FSU, 30 March 2002, SU/4473.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 SWB FSU, 2 April 2002, SU/4476.
 - 11 SWB FSU, 4 April 2002, SU/4478.
 - 12 SWB FSU, 9 April 2002, SU/4483.
 - 13 SWB FSU, 11 April 2002, SU/4485.
 - 14 Transcript of Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Igor Ivanov's interview to Russian television and news agencies upon conclusion of the meeting of the "Quartet" on the Middle East, Madrid, 10 April 2002, 715-11-01-2002 on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website <http://www.mid.ru/>
 - 15 For text of the statement see the website of the US mission to the UN in Geneva, <http://www.us-mission.ch/press2002/0410jointstatement.htm>
 - 16 SWB FSU, 11 April 2002, SU/4485.
 - 17 See the section on the Middle East in Dr Mark A Smith, Russia and the Far Abroad 2000, Conflict Studies Research Centre, F72, December 2000, <http://www.csrc.ac.uk>
 - 18 The source for this chronology is the BBC SWB Former Soviet Union.

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UK Ministry of Defence

ISBN 1-903584-77-9

Published By:

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ISBN 1-903584-77-9