Putin's Self-Serving Israel Agenda

Why Russia Now Recognizes West Jerusalem as the Capital

By Anna Borshchevskaya

On April 6, the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry announced that Moscow formally recognized West Jerusalem as Israel's capital. In the declaration, Russia first reaffirmed its commitment to UN principles of an eventual Israeli-Palestinian settlement and said it saw East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. "At the same time," the statement read, "we must state that in this context we view West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel." Although Israel continues to view Jerusalem in its entirety as the country's capital, no country today maintains an embassy in the city. El Salvador and Costa Rica moved their embassies to Tel Aviv a decade ago (they were the last to do so). And despite the declaration, Russia is reportedly not yet considering moving its embassy.

Moscow's statement, which Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Emmanuel Nahshon said Israel is "studying," nevertheless marks a major change. Russia is now the only country in the world that recognizes any part of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, although in recent months there had been discussions within U.S. President Donald Trump's administration about whether to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem.

There are many reasons that can explain Russia's move. For one, the timing distracts from international condemnation of Russia's continued support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The announcement came two days after Assad unleashed the worst chemical weapons attack against his people in years, but before the U.S. air strike in response to said attack. Still, Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely pursuing a larger and more self-serving agenda.

PUTIN'S RENEWED REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT

When Putin officially assumed power in May 2000, he sought to increase Russia's role in the Middle East after his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, had largely abandoned the region in order to concentrate on domestic affairs. The Soviet Union's approach to the Middle East was ideological, but Putin's was purely pragmatic. He was willing to work with anyone in the region so long as it fit Russia's interests—as Putin defined them. In turn, the Russian president sought to improve Russia's relations with Israel.

Putin repeatedly drew parallels between Russia's struggle with Sunni Islamist extremism and Israel's own terrorist struggle. He also sought to improve trade relations with Israel. Between Putin's ascent to power in 2000 and 2014, bilateral trade at least tripled, to over $3 billion. In addition, over a million Russian immigrants call Israel home, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov often talks about Russia's "compatriots" in the country. An agreement comes into force this year in which Russia will pay $83 million in pensions to former Soviet citizens now living in Israel—even as it has no money to adjust pensions for inflation for Russian citizens.

Broadly speaking, Putin sought to limit U.S. influence in the Middle East and to work with everyone in the region, whether traditional friend or foe. Improving ties with another country in the region, and a close U.S. ally at that, helped accomplish this goal in his zero-sum worldview. Furthermore, improved ties with Israel (and Sunni powers) would shield Putin from accusations of being pro-Shiite.

Perhaps as a consequence of Putin's outreach, Israel was one of the few countries (ironically, Iran was another) that didn't criticize Putin over his actions in Chechnya, while most others condemned Moscow's human rights violations that helped turn what originally began as a secular separatist struggle into an Islamist extremist one. Israel was also among the first countries to offer Moscow support in September 2004 after a group of armed Chechen and Ingush terrorists seized a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, bringing 18 children and their parents on a three-week healing trip to Israel. While other countries also condemned the heinous terrorist act, many inside Russia, especially relatives of the hostages, criticized the Russian government's botched rescue attempt, which led to the deaths of 380 of the hostages, 186 them children. (Putin would subsequently use Beslan as a justification for Russia's democratic backslide.)

In April 2005, Putin became the first Kremlin leader to visit Israel. This trip came as Russia began to pursue a generally more aggressive foreign policy in the wake of color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East for which Putin blamed the West. In recent years, he capitalized on a seeming U.S. retreat from the Middle East and deteriorating relations with traditional allies, including Israel. In June 2012, for example, Putin visited Israel a second time, nine months before then U.S. President Barack Obama would make his first visit. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for his part, traveled to Moscow more frequently than to Washington during Obama's presidency.

As part of Russia's deeper involvement in the Middle East, Putin took an interest in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. After the collapse of Camp David II talks in July 2000, Moscow took on a larger role as a mediator. Yasir Arafat traveled to Moscow the following month and met with Putin, who said Russia was ready to "co-sponsor" the Middle East settlement. Subsequent visits and telephone conversations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders followed over the years. "We speak for overwhelming and just settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict," Putin said in June 2016 when he met with Netanyahu in Moscow. In inserting himself in the Palestinian-Israeli talks, Putin has sought to present himself as more balanced in his approach than the United States and to present Russia as a country that will succeed where Washington has failed. Although Putin has yet to achieve this success, Russia has gained perceived importance as a major actor in critical world events—a status he craves.

THE LIMITS OF RUSSIAN STRATEGY

There will always be limits to the Russia-Israel relationship. Putin may view diplomacy as a zero-sum game, but Israeli leaders will not downgrade relations with Washington to appease Moscow. "There is no alternative to the United States [and] I am not looking for one," Netanyahu told reporters in Moscow in June 2016. "But my policy is to look for other partnerships with great powers such as China, India and Russia and other countries." It is doubtful that Putin expects to replace the United States when it comes to Israel. Israel's relationship with the United States is deep and enduring. Israel also has reason to mistrust Russia. Moscow's increasingly warm relations with Tehran, for one, are problematic. Putin's Syria intervention has only reinforced Russia's pro-Shiite tilt in the Middle East. Moscow also refuses to label either Hezbollah or Hamas as terrorist organizations. Russian officials have at the very least looked away as advanced weaponry from Russia has fallen into Hezbollah's hands, and the Kremlin hosted Fatah and Hamas leaders in Moscow this past January for talks to form a unity government.

Putin may view diplomacy as a zero-sum game, but Israeli leaders will not downgrade relations with Washington to appease Moscow.

On March 17, the Israeli air force struck several targets in Syria to prevent advanced weapons from reaching Hezbollah. Although Israel routinely carries out such attacks, in this particular incident the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry demanded that Israeli Ambassador Gary Koren "clarify" Israel's unilateral actions. Details about the incident are still murky, and

Netanyahu stressed that Israel will continue with its policy to prevent attempts to transfer advanced weapons to Hezbollah. However, Lavrov warned on March 22 in Moscow, "We will judge by deeds and not by statements in order to figure out if our Israeli counterparts abide by" Russian-Israeli agreements "concerning military cooperation" in Syria. Neither Russia nor Israel seeks a crisis in relations, but Lavrov's comment reflects how the Kremlin tends to view allies as subjects rather than partners.

Israel owes its existence in part to the Soviet Union and its Cold War proxies voting in the United Nations 70 years ago in support of the partition of Palestine and creation of the Jewish state, but the Kremlin quickly broke off relations once it became clear that Israel stood in the Western camp. Russia would not restore relations until 1991. Moscow's ties to Israel have long been complicated and multifaceted, and they remain so today. Russia may have a geostrategic rationale for recognizing West Jerusalem as Israel's capital. But the move, even as it raises eyebrows, obliges Moscow to little, especially if the Russian embassy remains in Tel Aviv.

For all his pursuit of power, Putin remains flexible and, in the Middle East, seeks to keep his options open. His real goal may have less to do with Israel than with the United States: the statement could very well signal that Trump needs to deal with Putin in the Middle East, not only when it comes to Syria and Iran but also when it comes to Israel. Trump, like nearly all of his White House predecessors dating back to Dwight Eisenhower, has made Middle East peace a priority for Washington. Putin's recognition of West Jerusalem as Israel's capital should signal to Trump and son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner, whom Trump tasked with brokering a Middle East peace deal, that the Kremlin plans to play a larger role in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Trump may play peacemaker, but he will not be alone in the sandbox.