

Expansion of Russia – Hamas Relations: Sources and Implications

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Abstract

Russia's relations with Hamas is of a great importance because from one hand, this organization has been listed as a terrorist organization in the US and Europe and from the other, Moscow's relations with this Palestinian organization includes many political contradictions for the both sides. Hamas, at least verbally, has always supported Islamic movements throughout the world, which includes the Chechens in the North Caucasus. Putin's government made an apparent effort to enhance relations with the Middle Eastern countries – pro-US and anti-US, Arab and non-Arab. It is noteworthy that in this process, it established close relations with both major Palestinian Organizations – Fatah and Hamas – and also with Lebanon's Hezbollah. The question of this paper is why Moscow, despite all the mentioned differences, has continued to expand its relations with Hamas? The author surveys the development in Russia's Middle East policy, then its impact on the relations of Russia with Palestinian groups, like Hamas.

Keywords: Russia, Middle East, Palestine, Israel, Hamas

Introduction:

Vladimir Putin's election in 2000 as the president of the Russian Federation caused an important upheaval in Russia's foreign policy; because it released the country from the volatile isolation surrounded it following the collapse of the Soviet Union and once again introduced it as an effective international actor. More importantly, in the second term of Putin's presidency, Russia pursued a confrontational policy toward the US and at the same time, developed a new approach toward the Middle East. Putin's government made an apparent effort to enhance relations with the Middle Eastern countries – both pro-US and anti-US, Arab and non-Arab.

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It is noteworthy that in this process, it established close relations with both major Palestinian organizations – Fatah and Hamas – and also with Lebanon's Hezbollah (Katz, April 2010).

Meanwhile, Russia's relations with Hamas is of a great importance because from one hand, this organization has been listed as a terrorist organization in the US and Europe and from the other, Moscow's relations with this Palestinian organization includes many political contradictions for the both sides. Hamas, at least verbally, has always supported Islamic movements throughout the world, which includes the Chechens in the North Caucasus. Moreover, after the second Chechen war, the Kremlin has always warned of a serious plot aiming to establish an Islamic Caliphate (McGregor, 2006). The September 11 terrorist attacks created an opportunity for Russia to justify its military actions in Chechnya for the Muslim countries (Smith, 2002).

All in all, despite the opposition by the US and Israel which has close ties with Moscow, Russia – Hamas relations has been growing since it's established. Hence, with regard to the difference in the power levels of Russia and Hamas; difference in the two sides' approach toward the Russian Muslims; international entrenchment, led by the US, against Hamas; and Russia's foreign and international policy approach in the last decade toward the American unilateralism; the question is, why Moscow, despite all the mentioned differences, has continued to expand its relations with Hamas?

The literature often refers to the Russian efforts to play an effective role in the Middle East. Analysts consider the triangle of relations between Russia, Israel and Hamas as a sign of activism in Russia's Middle Eastern policy in the Putin era, comparing to the Yeltsin years. While confirming the existing ideas, it is also possible to assess the unequal Russia – Hamas relations in the context of Russia's balancing policy in its new sphere of influence in the Middle East; aimed at increasing its international action power. This article claims that Russia, with the goal of establishing an effective role in the Middle East through entering the Middle Eastern peace process, has benefited from the power vacuum among the Palestinians and by establishing the relations with Hamas, managed to introduce itself as an important actor in the Middle East peace talks.

On this basis, after reviewing the Russian foreign policy, Moscow's Middle Eastern policy will be evaluated from the viewpoint of its balancing efforts and the backgrounds, factors and objectives behind establishing Russia – Hamas relations will be analyzed and explained. At the end, the results and findings will be summarized.

Russian foreign policy: a conceptual framework

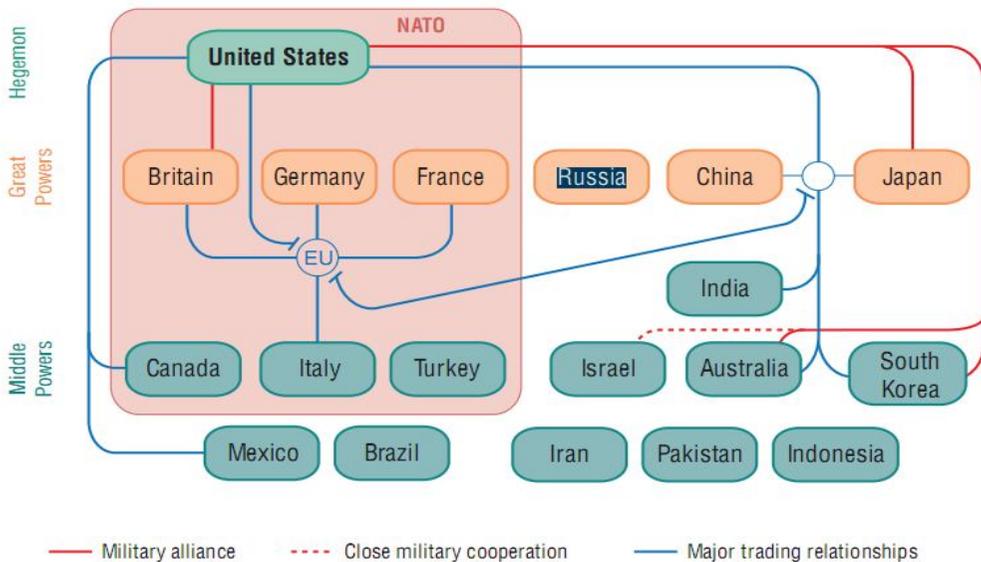
From the theoretical view, the more common approaches to the study of Russian foreign policy are the Offensive Realism, with its inclination to the systemic variables; Realism, with its emphasis on the understanding and the role of the Russian leaders; the Neoclassical Realism, with its focus on the connection between the systemic variables and the foreign policy behaviors of the leaders; and the Constructivism, with its emphasis on the effect of identity on a country's foreign policy. One of the common elements in all these analyses about the components of Russian foreign policy is Russia's efforts to counter the US unilateralism (Radivilova, 2003).

After a period of instability and conflicting with various issues and problems in the first half of the 1990s, Russian foreign policy reached a more balanced situation in the second half of that decade – from the time of the foreign ministry and then the prime ministry of Primakov to the presidency of Putin – and is known as a powerful, pragmatic, independent and sometimes offensive foreign policy. The statements, actions and behaviors of the Russian politicians were obvious symbols of this policy.

This factor makes it possible to use the balance of power theory to understand the Russian foreign policy. This approach reflects the Russian policy makers' estimation of the threats posed by the American unilateralism (Tsygankov, 2001). Putin's Russia realized that it has achieved a relative strength against the Western pressures, using the reliable power of its energy resources, and by strengthening its political position in this field; it could become an influential global power. This sense of power resulted in more daring to act in the foreign policy priorities and this sense has been growing ever since. A consensus gradually emerged in Russia that this country could and had to act as a "great power" (Bremner, 2001). After the election of Dmitry Medvedev as the president, Russian foreign policy took a new shape once again, which was represented in the "Reset" with the US; but Russia's stance toward the NATO invasion of Libya and the Western support of the massive protests in Syria proved all the assumptions of a liberal democratic change in the Russian foreign policy to be invalid. In fact, the vision was grown that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had been subdued to the Western conquerors, because of adopting a passive stance.

In addition, from the textual aspect, according to the Russian foreign policy documents of 2000 and 2008, the American unilateralism has been identified as an international challenge, and the opposition to the unipolar system and trying to establish a multipolar one has been declared as one of Russia's main priorities. For this reason, Russia's regional priorities have been expanded from the focus on the close fields to encompass other regions.

However, the other reason for such an effort could be found in the increase of power of the other actors. As Kenneth Waltz argues, the efforts to establish balance of power emerge when many units struggle to survive (Waltz, 1979). As figure 1 shows, it could be claimed that such an atmosphere currently exists (<http://www.pearsonhighered.com>, 2011).



Increasing the priorities and the scope of regional relations:

One of the characteristics of the Russian balancing foreign policy is the expansion of priorities and the scope of regional relations. From 2000, in all Russian foreign policy documents, Moscow's priorities within the territories of CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) have been increased. This approach is a result of Russia's concerns from one hand and a sign of its aim to increase its power from the other. Problems such as the establishing and presence of foreign military bases in Russia's neighborhood, reducing Moscow's global influence in the political, economic and military levels after the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO expansion to the East and weakening Russia's position in the CIS – in fact, the desire of CIS countries to join NATO – are among the issues which have caused Russia concern and resulted in the priority of the Middle East in its foreign policy (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2008)

Furthermore, in this period, with increasing Moscow's attention to the other parts of the world, Africa also came into the focus of the Russian government; especially because at the north of this continent, some countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Libya are among the costumers of Russian arms.

For this reason, in addition to the efforts for investment in this region, Russia has provided financial aids for the poor countries of the region in order to establish close ties with them. Two other important reasons can also be mentioned for increasing Russia's interest toward the Middle East and North Africa: First, because a great part of Russian territories – more than 60 percent – is in Asia; and the second, because this country is adjacent to the world's economic powers such as Japan, China and India which are located in Asia. Since 2000, these countries have entered the phase of economic rebound and the assessments suggest that in the near future, they will become the main axes of investment, growth and development in the world. Thus, Moscow can't be inattentive to this region.

However, Russia's dual policy in the Middle East, from the relations with the parties involved in the Middle East conflict – from Israel to Syria, Lebanon, and even Hezbollah and Hamas – to its relations with the other Arab countries; its complicated strategy toward Iran's nuclear program; Kremlin's economic and security approach to the relations with Turkey and also Afghanistan and Pakistan issues; have led some analysts to use the term "Russia's Greater Middle East policy"³ to describe such a policy (Katz, April 2010). Meanwhile, despite some Western charges against Russia about the closure of the American airbase in Manas, Kyrgyzstan, and equipping the Taliban by Moscow, by increasing Taliban activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Russia expanded its cooperation with the US and NATO in this field. In the Iran issue, as before, Russia coordinates its policy with the US in issuing resolutions against Iran's nuclear program and even speaking tough against Tehran; but at the same time, tries to prevent the complete collapse of bilateral relations by some activities such as signing energy contracts. From the viewpoint of American analysts, Russian – Iranian nuclear cooperation has created one of the most important concerns in their bilateral relations (Kemp, 2003).

Russia's Middle Eastern activism:

The Middle East is still of a great importance in the Russian foreign policy. After the second wave of the US democratization⁴, which was continued in the former Soviet republics from Georgia to Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan (Koolae, 2012), the Middle East has faced the third wave of democratization. In this wave, on which the process of globalization has been very influential, the Middle East has become the scene of the "Network Revolutions".

³ A concept which was first proposed by former American president, George W. Bush, with the aim of democratization of the Middle East; but later, it was marginalized among the other US programs.

⁴ The first wave was created by the US in its military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; with the claim that by collapsing the dictatorial regimes, democratic systems will be established.

The role of media and social networks has been considerable in these developments (Cottle, 2011). From the viewpoint of Russian leaders, considering the extensive transformations in the world and especially in the Middle East, the US is attempting to utilize the democratization waves to rebuild and strengthen its position. For this reason, the US and the EU policies toward the "Arab Spring" is assessed in line with the plans to create a Greater Middle East. These plans had been proposed by the US and the European countries after the terrorist attacks of September 2001 with the aim of creating profound and fundamental changes in the Islamic countries of the Middle East.

In analyzing the dynamics of Russia's Middle Eastern foreign policy, there are various viewpoints which could be studied in the frameworks of two security and political approaches. In addition, taking into account the common aspects of the internal and external approaches and the regional and international objectives, the causes of activation of Russia's Middle Eastern policy could be summed up in four cases: confronting the American unilateralism; achieving international role as a great power; developing economic relations with countries of the region and creating and expanding the Middle Eastern market for Russia; and finally, creating more influence on the Russian Muslims.

In analyzing Russia's internal matters and their interface with the Middle East problems, the issue of Russian Muslims is raised. Undoubtedly, Russia's national and regional approach to the Muslim world has a security – political nature. It could be argued that Russia, based on the experience of the years of internal conflict with the Muslims and the consequences of the US dealing with the political Islam in the Middle East, has come to the conclusion that its security depends on the peace and security in the Muslim regions of the world, especially the Middle East. Thus, considering its various ties with the region, any disruption in the security status of the Middle East, could also put Russia's security at risk. In fact, Russia on the one hand needs good relations with the Muslim countries in order to resolve its internal problems with the Muslims (Hunter, 2004) and on the other hand, needs to avoid tensions with the Muslim world to prevent the spread of Islamic fundamentalism to Russia and its surrounding areas.

Russia's political and economic problems in the first years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was prolonged by its introversion, led Russian leaders to accept the fact that the management of the external arena also contributes to resolve domestic problems. Thus, with the rise of Vladimir Putin as the President, a new era began in Russia's foreign policy. The first inevitable outcome of the new situation was Russia's focus on the accessible power priorities and real influence, with regard to the sensible and practical criteria such as the economy. The most important decision by Putin to resolve internal, regional and international problems was the focus on the two areas of military and energy industries.

Putin realized that by investing in these two fields he could – with a lower cost – resolve economic and political problems inside the country and at the same time, recover the lost economic and political status of Russia in the global sphere. For this reason, Russia's view to its peripheral areas, namely Central Asia and the Middle East, has an economic – aside from security-political – aspect. According to the viewpoints of the Russian leaders, this region is of a special importance for them (Kemp and Saunders, 2003).

Based on the shaped Russian behaviors in this region, it is possible to analyze the Middle East issues for this country in three levels: the Near Abroad, consisting of Central Asia and the Caucasus; Iran, Afghanistan and Turkey (the middle region); and the Arabic countries, south of the Persian Gulf and North Africa (the outer region). After a short period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in which Russia had excluded the former Soviet republics from the focus of its interests, the Tajikistan civil war and its various regional consequences altered this approach dramatically. The US military presence in Afghanistan and the spread of radical fundamentalism from this country throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus, Russia's nuclear cooperation with Iran and its vast economic relations with Turkey, returned these countries to the center of Russia's attention. Moreover, regarding the Arab countries, a process of expanding the relations formed since the second half of the 1990's, which was especially promoted during the Putin's presidency. As the gap between Russia and the US increased, the Middle East became more important for this country.

Assessments indicate that from 1991, the Middle East has been the importer of about 5 to 7 percent of Russia's total exports and 15 to 20 percent of its military exports (Rivlin, 2005), which, comparing to Russia's exports to the other regions of the world, reflects the economic importance of the Middle East markets for this country. On the other hand, considering Russia's dependence on the global energy market, which is also related to the Middle East, the economic importance of the region for Russia becomes clearer. For this reason, in addition to a growing relationship with Israel, Moscow at the same time tries to establish political and economic ties with the US traditional allies. However, the existence of huge energy resources in the Middle East is not important for Russia in terms of its energy needs; but the influence on the energy production and distribution in the Middle East, on which the world's industrialized nations are dependent, is of a great importance to maintain Russia's control over the global market. In addition, it should be noted that the Middle East, as a traditional market for Russian arms and a scene for expanding Russian nuclear market, has a great importance in Moscow's economic calculations. Among these countries, Iran has had a special place. In light of the growing deterioration of relations between Iran and the West, Russia has expanded its economic and trade relations with Iran. The value of trade between the two countries increased from \$ 276 million in 1995 to \$ 3715 million in 2008 (Katz, September 2010).

However, the opposition by the US and Russia's new partners has not hindered the development of relations between Moscow and some regional countries such as Iran and Syria. Therefore, Russia's attitude toward the Middle East from a different perspective than the US is considerable. In their foreign policy strategy, Russians have considered some important Middle Eastern countries such as Iran and Iraq vital for maintaining balance of power and preserving their ability to compete in the international arena; but on the Syrian problem, due to the existence of Russian military base in Tartus, Russia strongly stands against any Western act of intervention in the Syrian internal affairs. In addition, despite the technological backwardness, the Russians believe that their country has all the required elements for a revival and becoming a global great power in the 21 century, including: population and territorial extent; strategic and geostrategic position; benefiting from the Heartland position; atomic and military capability; democratic and development-seeking tendencies; vast energy; traditional interests of some countries, especially in Central Asia and the Middle East to consolidate and expand their relations with Russia; and the economic revival of the country. Therefore, from the viewpoint of the Russian leaders, these factors are enough to pursue and implement a balancing policy.

In analyzing this variable and also Russia's motivation to compete the American unilateralism, this article assumes that the indicators existing in Russia's Middle Eastern foreign policy are the results of Russia's realistic experiences of the developments in the international politics after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many factors, especially the conditions of the international system, economic problems of the country, lack of the required capabilities to compete the old rivals, and also the rise of the military rivals in the region – such as China, India and Pakistan – have caused Russia to evade idealism and show more flexibility, especially from the geopolitical view, in the Middle East. Thus, Russia's attitude toward the Middle East for confronting the American unilateralism and achieving an international status is a soft approach in which some other goals are pursued.

The continuation of the crisis in Iraq and Afghanistan and American involvement in these two countries, and the success of social movements in the countries which had previously good relations with the US, prepared a proper opportunity for Russia to actively seek to replace the US in the region. The Middle East is a good market for the Russian arms and manufacturing, including nuclear power plants. With regard to the Middle East energy resources, Russian influence in the region causes Russia's energy policy to affect the energy policies of the oil-rich Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, without joining OPEC, Russia could benefit from the advantages of the market regulation by OPEC. Increased Russian influence in the Middle East could partly recoup this country's reduced influence in other regions such as Eastern Europe.

However, some analysts see Russian policies in the Middle East as an effort to form a group of countries such as Iran and Syria (Eran, Magen and Stein, 2011).

With a glance at Russia's Middle East policy at the last decade and the various events in this region, it becomes clear that Russia, which had been removed from the Middle Eastern political scene, has tried to enter the main political trends of the region once again. In his first term of presidency, Putin had two visits of the region in 2005 and 2007. In 2005 he had also a visit of Tehran, which, after the Stalin's visit, was the first trip of a Russian leader to Iran. Until now, Iran has been the political scene in which Russia has had a serious presence; but now Russia has a stubborn presence in the Syrian developments. Russia has seriously pursued having a role in the Middle East diplomatic developments (Eran, Magen and Stein, 2011). Russia has encouraged the national reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah and has expanded its relations with Hamas in order to draw the Palestinian side into the dialogue. In addition, Moscow has supported the recognition of Palestine in the UN (Eran, Magen and Stein, 2011). The reasons for the activism of Russia's Middle East foreign policy could be analyzed according to the global, regional and internal factors, which represent pursuing a kind of balancing policy. Russia's behavioral pattern in this region has been based on making cooperation for the competition.

The Palestinian and Hamas Problem

In most analyses about the evolution of Russia's Middle East policy, establishing the relationship between Russia and Hamas is considered as a symbol of this evolution (Erenler, 2012). The significance of Russian policy toward Hamas is for a number of reasons: First of all, because in the past, Russia's relations with Palestine had been based on its relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (Fatah). Another reason is that the official relations between Russia and Hamas represent an apparent difference between Russia's policy in the Middle East and the US, EU and UN policies. Therefore, the question is that why Russia has pursued a different policy with the other international powers and what are the Russia's goals in its relations with Hamas?

A remarkable Russian initiative for establishing official relations with Hamas dates back to the 2006 parliamentary elections in Palestine; when for the first time, Hamas took part in the election and by gaining 44.45 percent of votes to its electoral list and 41.73 percent to the electorate candidates, could rule the parliament with 74 seats. Fatah movement lost its previous majority by 41.43 percent of votes to its electoral list and 36.96 percent to its electorate candidates (The Final Results for Electoral Lists, 2010). Thus, in an initiative, Russia invited Hamas leaders to Moscow.

For many, including the Israeli leaders, this act caused anger and surprise; and in the first Israeli reaction, foreign minister Tzipi Livni canceled its trip to Moscow which was scheduled for that March (Smith, 2006).

Palestinian Legislative Council Elections (January 25, 2006) Distribution of Seats		
Political Party/Affiliation	Percentage	Number of Total Seats Won
Change and Reform (Hamas)	44.45%	74
Fatah Movement	41.43%	45
Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa	4.25%	3
The Third Way	2.92%	2
The Alternative	2.72%	2
Independent Palestine	2.42%	2
Independents	0.72%	4
Total		132
Source: Palestinian Central Election Commission		

However, in response to the criticisms, Russia declared that holding the power by Hamas was a fact and could not be ignored. Hamas' popular status has been very significant for Russia; although Moscow prefers to expand its relations more with Fatah organization and Mahmoud Abbas (Trenin ,2010). After the EU and the US aids to the Hamas government was cut off, Putin, by supporting the democratic process in which Hamas had been elected to power, declared that he wouldn't spare any effort to help the Palestine and warned of the consequences of such an act (Radio France International, 2006).

In February 2006, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov stated that the international community should take steps to establish contacts with Hamas, sooner or later. Anatoly Safonov, Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for International Cooperation in the Fight against Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime, also declared that "Isolating the Hamas movement by Israel some of the Western countries has been ineffective. Hamas representatives have been successful in winning the people's trust and becoming a political force. Thus, instead of closing the doors on them, dialogue, support and encouragement are the right direction which anybody needs"(BBC , 18 Feb 2006).

In addition, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated at a joint conference with Hamas Secretary General that “we clearly inform the Hamas of the positions of the Quartet (Official Site of The Ministry Foreign Affairs of The Russian Federation, 3 March 2006). According to Alexander Saltanov, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East, negotiating sides had suggested three options for influencing Hamas. The first was using military force against this movement; but Gaza events proved this method to be ineffective. The second option was ignoring Hamas, which was also ineffective. And the third option was convincing Hamas leaders to dialogue in order to adopt a constructive position – in the first stage on the issue of Palestinian unity (Official Site of The Ministry Foreign Affairs of The Russian Federation, 9 Dec 2009). In a meeting between Russian and Turkish leaders, Dmitry Medvedev and Abdullah Gul on 13 May 2010, both sides emphasized the significance of having an eye on the role and place of Hamas in the peace talks (*Today Zaman*, 13 May 2010).

The Course of Development in the Relations

Although the policy of establishing official relations with Hamas has been attributed to Putin, but at the last months of his presidency in 2007, the Russian foreign ministry rejected the suspension of relations with Hamas and underlined the existence of regular relations between the two sides (Official Site of The Ministry Foreign Affairs of The Russian Federation, 9 Dec 2009). Hence, Medvedev’s trip to Palestine his emphasis on the necessity of establishing an independent Palestinian state, was an effort by Russia to demonstrate its independent positions in the Middle East and creating a new momentum in the Arab- Israeli peace process. However, this act resulted in Tel Aviv official’s anger from Moscow. They canceled Medvedev’s scheduled trip to Israel and the Israeli media interpreted his words supporting Palestine as a “slap to Israel”. In that trip, in the city of Ariha, Medvedev underline the Soviet Union’s positions regarding the recognition of the independent Palestinian state based on the 1967 border lines (*The Guardian*, 18 January 2011).

Since 2009 and at the same time with the Arab countries’ efforts for a national reconciliation in Palestine, the Russians began talks with Hamas in this respect (Al Jazeera, 24 May 2009). Russian leaders had three requests from Hamas which were within the framework of the roadmap of the Quartet: 1- Denouncing violence. 2- Ignoring the goal of destructing Israel. 3- Accepting the previous peace agreements. According to Khaled Mashal, the leader of Hamas, at those talks Russia had asked Hamas to enter the international peace talks by abandoning arm struggle and recognizing Israel. Hamas had tied this request to the refrain from violence by the Israelis (*BBC*, 30 Aug. 2010)

Russia – Israel Relations

Although Russia had an effective role in the formation of the Israeli state, cold war era patterns put the US and Israel against the Soviet Union and its Arab allies soon. By implementing Gorbachev's reformist policies, this process changed sensibly. The widespread and steady immigration of the Jews from the Soviet Union resulted in the increase of the number of ethnic Russians in the demographic composition of Israel; so that today, they constitute about 20 percent of Israel's population. The steady development of the bilateral relations caused the visa regime between the two countries to be removed by 2008 (Trenin, 2010). Many of these immigrants have shaped various economic relations between Russia and Israel (Koolae, 2012). Moscow has made a considerable effort to expand its relations with the Arab countries and organizations, but due to the problem of Chechen separatists and its material and spiritual damages, it has also had a close relationship with Israel. However, Russia is one of the important actors in the Middle East peace process.

In the Putin era, which the foreign policy of the Russian Federation had been considered as pragmatic, a great deal of effort made for the expansion of relations with Israel. At the end of April 2003 told the members of the Israeli delegation in Moscow that "we have all the necessary conditions, and above all, the required determination for friendship, cooperation, trust and the development of overall relations"(Breman, 2006). The economic relations between the two sides also expanded considerably in this period and Israel's dependence on the Russian energy resources increased. According to an agreement between the Gazprom chairman and Israeli prime minister, it was agreed that by 2025, Russia's share in supplying Israel's energy reaches to 25 percent (Breman, 2006). Political cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism was one of the two sides' shared interests. By the intensification of terrorist acts in Russia, Israeli officials tried to introduce the Chechens like the Palestinians and to set the stage for the joint actions of the two countries. Trade has burgeoned; Israeli exports to Russia grew almost fourfold between 2003 and 2008, reaching \$3 billion. That may not sound like much, but the areas of economic cooperation under consideration include nanotechnology, energy, and [joint military projects](#), including the production of unmanned drone warplanes. Russia's natural gas monopoly [Gazprom](#) is eyeing offshore gas deposits in Israel, while the state-owned Russian Railroads is hoping to participate in a new [Tel Aviv-Eilat](#) high speed rail link (Weir, 2012).

Therefore, although the Hamas leaders' visit to Moscow faced a strong protest from the Israeli officials, it wouldn't wipe out various cooperation grounds between Russia and Israel. On the other hand, Russia has always tried to analyze the nuclear cooperation with Iran within the framework of technical and economic issues, but for the Israeli leaders, the nature of this issue has been considered as political.

However, Russian officials always underlined Iran's compliance with the IAEA regulations. Russia, alongside the other major global powers, has been active in the international confidence building in this field – in the form of Iran-5+1 talks – but these efforts have not led to the persuasion of the Israeli leaders.

Russia's Objectives of Creating and Developing Relations with Hamas

Russia- Hamas relations established in the second term of Putin's presidency. In 2006, Hamas' victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, which was very distant from the American goals in the region, created the opportunity for Russia to enter into dialogue with Hamas; especially the Palestinians had introduced Hamas as their legitimate representative. Russia pursued the following considerations from this relationship:

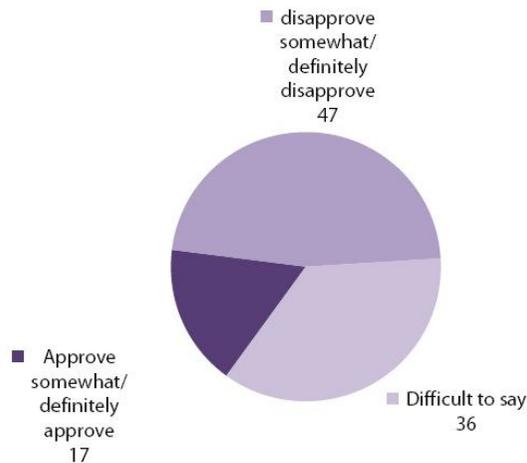
- Entering the talks with Hamas, which was considered by the US as a terrorist organization, could be a bargaining tool against the Americans. When Putin, at a press conference, gave official recognition to the Russia- Hamas relations, he clearly described Hamas' victory in the Palestinian elections as a heavy blow to the US diplomacy in the Middle East (*European Jewish Press*, 1 Feb. 2006).

- Relations with the Palestine's representative could help increasing Russia's influence in the Arab countries.

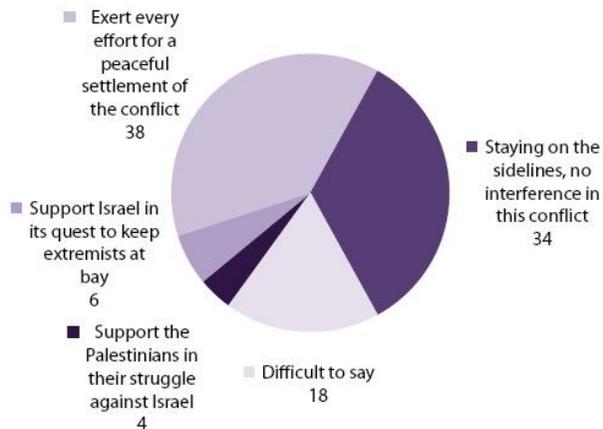
- Comparing to the US and the EU, Russia could play a more effective role in the mediations between the Arabs and Israel by establishing the relations with Hamas.

- One of the other Russian objectives was downplaying the Chechen issue in the eyes of the international community (Freedman, 2007). Russian leaders knew that the relations with Hamas had internal repercussions for them and could convince the radical Islamists that the Russian government supports the Islamic movements across the globe (McGregor, 2006). On the other side, in their trip to Moscow, Hamas leaders visited the Russian Muftis Council and declared that one of their main agendas in the future trips to Moscow would be visiting this council (The Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Report, 11 February 2010).

A poll conducted in Russia about the Israeli raid on Gaza. In response to the question that "Do you approve of Israeli military operations against the Palestinian organization Hamas in the Gaza Strip?" the results were as follows (Russian Analytical Digest, 2010):



And in response to another question of “What should Russia’s position be in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict?” the respondents said (Russian Analytical Digest , 2010):



The Implications of Expanding the Relations

At a time when the US and the EU has become disappointed from resolving the Palestinian issue after years, it seems that Russia’s motivation has been increased. While, according to the Hamas officials, this organization has asked Russia to withdraw from the Quartet negotiations, Russia has maintained its position in the Quartet and has been able to gain successes in the issue of the Palestinian national reconciliation and reducing the violence in Palestine. According to Khaled Mashal, Head of the Political Bureau of Hamas, there is an impression in Russia that the Gaza blockade and sanctions should be removed (Bsaikri, 2010).

He said that in his trip to Moscow there was a question that “if the exchange of prisoners happens as the Israeli side wants, will the Gaza blockade be also removed?” and the Hamas answer was that “if this happens, then the blockade will become a bit lighter, but won’t be removed completely”. Another question was “if the Palestinian forces reconcile with each other, could this also lead to the lightening of the blockade?” In fact, these questions show the Russian efforts to find a solution for removing the Gaza blockade and sanctions.

It is noteworthy that after this trip, Hamas agreed to exchange Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier, with its prisoners in Israel. Moreover, an agreement was signed between Fatah and Hamas and the two Palestinian groups officially appreciated Russia’s efforts for the national reconciliation in Palestine (Trend News, 24 May 2011). According to the Russian news sources, in response to the Fatah- Hamas agreement, Mikhail Margelov, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council of Russia, expressed hope that Mahmud Abbas could soften the Hamas position about Israel (Itar- Tass, 7 Feb. 2012) . The cause of Russia’s success to win the confidence of Hamas could be found in the point that according to the Hamas’ Secretary General, the top request of the organization is to be recognized as a political force. He also says that “the Russian government does not set any conditions for us. Our interactions are increasing and this is praiseworthy”. In this context, if the Russians could be successful in changing the attitude of Hamas, they will achieve a great success in enhancing their position. Even now, some analyze the continuing relations between Russia and Hamas and the growing Russo- Israeli relations during the past years as a somehow recognition of Russia- Hamas relations by Israel (Epstein, 2007) and at the same time, moderating the attitude of Hamas toward Israel.

Conclusion

Considering a number of criteria, it could be said that the Russia’s objectives of establishing the relations with Hamas have to a large point been achieved:

1. Difference in the power levels of Russia and Hamas;
2. Difference in the two sides’ approach toward the Russian Muslims;
3. International entrenchment, led by the US, against Hamas;
4. Russia’s foreign and international policy approach in the last decade toward the American unilateralism.

A great part of Russia’s role and status in the international system relates to its policies in the Middle East, which in turn has consisted partly of the role played by Russia in the Middle East peace process and in relation to the both Palestinian and the Israeli sides.

It is true that having the privilege of energy resources by Russia was an important factor in this regard. Moscow's initiative to establish and develop the relations with Hamas was formed after the year 2005, in which Russia introduced itself as the second energy exporter of the world and increased its currency reserves dramatically. However, this issue should be seen in the context of the Russian tendency to disturb the unilateral American order. Russia's favorable international system is multipolar. Russia has considered the multipolarity as its main objective and regarded the effective participation in the structure of the international system and balancing the US and anti- US trends as the best way to achieve this goal. During the two decades after the Soviet Union, Russian foreign policy has been accompanied with many contradictions and controversies. On the one hand, the claim to be a great power has resulted in supporting anti- western thoughts and on the other hand, the fear of isolation and the need for Western technology and capital have led to the formation of a cooperation approach in Russia toward the US and the West. Thus, as it is clear in the process of Russia- Hamas relations, Russia's support from Hamas will be continued only if it doesn't lead to the escalation of controversy between Russia at the one side and the US and Israel at the other. In fact, Russia has tried to expand its relations in various aspects with all of the countries in the Middle East and its periphery – which in some definitions has been called "the Greater Middle East".

Russia has a very important status in the global strategic equations, especially from the military aspect; but in terms of technology and the ability of financial support it couldn't compete with the US. Despite all the advancements, Russia is still a second-grade economic power which strongly needs the Western technology and capital. Although this country has an important measure, i.e. energy, with which it could exert pressure on the Europeans, its economic strength is not at the level that it could be able to enter complete confrontation in the international scene. Russia does not want to repeat the inefficient experiences of the Soviet era; though it considers the geopolitical realities of the competition as undeniable.

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