

Russia's Strategy Regarding Operation al-Aqsa Flood and Israeli War on Gaza Strip

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Introduction

Major powers shape their foreign policy with a global view, positioning each region based on their opponents' strategies there.

Russia has recognized the need to develop its strategy in the Middle East to counter Western efforts to further disintegrate the Russian Federation after the Soviet Union's collapse, particularly by fueling separatist inclinations within it. This is crucial for Russia, which includes 22 republics and 89 federal entities, with minorities making up 19% of its population.

Russia recognized this trend through the following indicators:

1. The US call at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Council Conference in Prague in 2003 to expand NATO's work east and south, i.e., in an area extending from the Maghreb to Central Asia.
2. NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011, a practical implementation of NATO's expansion.
3. In 2021, the Israeli army was shifted from the US European Command (EUCOM) to the Central Command (CENTCOM), whose work covers the area of NATO's expansion.

Russian Strategy in the Middle East

The "core" of Russia's strategy in the Middle East is security and defense, evidenced by its foreign interventions in regions where NATO competes, including Georgia, Crimea, Syria, Libya, Belarus, Ukraine and the Sahel, as affirmed in Shanghai Cooperation Organization discussions. This focus is underscored by 40–50% of Russia's military sales being directed to the region, alongside efforts to establish military bases in Syria, Libya and Sudan. Additionally, the development of the Russian-Chinese-Iranian strategic triangle, consolidated in 2019 with joint naval maneuvers, has deepened following the war in Ukraine.





The Russian Strategic Framework Regarding Operation al-Aqsa Flood

The above outlines Russia's strategic approach to Operation al-Aqsa Flood and the Israeli war on Gaza Strip (GS) as follows:

1. Russia perceives Iran from two perspectives: as its strongest ally in the region and as the central figure in the axis of resistance. Operation al-Aqsa Flood has tested the Russian-Iranian relationship regarding its consistency. The Russian reaction to Israeli attacks on Syria remains insufficient. However, this does underline how Israeli policies are widening the rift in Russian-Israeli relations and gradually nudging Russia towards aligning with the resistance axis, especially given Israel's support for the Western side in the Ukraine conflict.
2. Russia has feared that the GS war would impact its social stability for the following reasons:
 - a. Riots erupted in Muslim-majority Dagestan following the arrival of Jewish immigrants from Israel shortly after Operation al-Aqsa Flood.
 - b. Many of the Jews who immigrated to Israel from the Soviet Union hail from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Russia is concerned that differences among these countries could destabilize its internal situation.
3. Russia exploited Western social unrest on the streets, in universities and within institutions to highlight double standards in comparing Western attitudes toward Israel and Russia. Operation al-Aqsa Flood diverted attention from Russia's actions in Ukraine.
4. Operation al-Aqsa Flood redirected some US and Western aid from Ukraine to Israel, easing pressure on Russia.
5. The Israeli stance aligning with Ukraine prompted Russia to seek closer ties with Hamas. Russia utilized this approach to bolster its standing in Muslim countries and the developing world, bridging gaps with Islamic factions concerning its 2015 intervention in Syria. This was underscored by Russia hosting a Hamas delegation on 26/10/2023, resulting in the release of 3 out of 6 Russian captives, and another delegation on 24/6/2024.
6. The Ukrainian conflict compelled Israel to take a firm stance, publicly condemning Russia's military actions in Ukraine, which subsequently strained Russia's willingness to mend relations with Israel post-Operation al-Aqsa Flood.
7. If the Ukraine war has unified Western positions against Russia, Operation al-Aqsa Flood has created disparities that Russia is attempting to exploit, particularly following the stance of several European countries, spearheaded by Spain, on recognizing Palestine.



8. Russian public sentiment towards Operation al-Aqsa Flood and its aftermath is mirrored in the findings of a poll conducted by the Levada Center on 25/10/2023:

- 88% of Russians are aware of the new escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in comparison with a poll regarding events in Ukraine, in which 86% stated they are closely following events.
- 66% are not ready to support either side in the conflict.
- 21% rather sympathize with the Palestinians, and 6% sympathize with Israel.
- Older Russians are nearly four times more likely than younger people to express sympathy towards Palestine, a contrast to the prevailing sentiment in the West.
- Only 46% of Russian Muslims sympathize with Palestine, mirroring the sentiment in Central Asian countries.
- Respondents noted that the main responsibility for what is happening lies with the US and NATO countries (45%), while 12% place responsibility on Israel, and 8% of respondents place the blame on Hamas/Palestinian side.

Russian diplomacy aligns closely with the Axis of Resistance in UN voting on international resolutions. However, regarding the decisions of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which issued rulings against Putin similar to those against the Israeli prime minister and defense minister, Russia does not adhere to the ICC's rulings, as it is not a party to the Rome Statute that established the court. Concerning the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the genocide case involving Israel, Russia supports the court's recognition of the principle of Palestinian genocide, emphasizing the urgency of halting violence

Russia's General Attitudes Toward Operation al-Aqsa Flood

Russia's general stance on Operation al-Aqsa Flood and the Israeli war on GS can be outlined as follows:

1. Endorsing a two-state resolution with a Palestinian state on 1967 borders, including East Jerusalem as its capital, with full UN membership for this Palestinian state; treating the West Bank (WB) and GS as a unified territory; calling for cessation of Israeli settlements and displacement of Palestinians; and upholding Hashemite guardianship over holy sites.
2. Choosing not to mediate between the resistance groups and Israel, deferring this role to the US, Qatar and Egypt. Nonetheless, Russian statements have reiterated the call for a lasting ceasefire in GS and the urgent release of



captives without conditions. This stance was underscored in the April 2024 (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) BRICS statement. Russia has also implicitly criticized Ansar Allah' activities in the Red Sea and Arabian Sea, citing their impact on international maritime navigation freedom. Additionally, Russia has been unable to halt Israel's ongoing airstrikes on Syrian targets.

3. Inviting delegations from the resistance to consult or assist Palestinians in resolving their internal political issues, seen by Israel as Russian recognition of the legitimacy of all resistance forces.
4. Enhancing Russia's perception in the Arab public opinion, particularly within segments critical of Russia's involvement in Syria since 2015.
5. Highlighting the double standards in the Western value system, particularly in how GS and Ukraine are positioned and compared.
6. Russia's relatively advanced political stance contrasts sharply with its limited financial assistance to Palestine.
7. Between 2018 and 2023, Russia saw a 58.3% increase in exports to Israel and a 27.4% increase in imports. However, the Ukraine crisis and subsequent events have slowed down this growth.

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