

# Russia's Relationship with Hamas and Putin's Global Calculations

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



Articles & Testimony

## There is no evidence Moscow knew about the October 7 attack, but it has provided support to Hamas and is taking advantage of the resultant blows to U.S. interests.

At least 16 Russian citizens died as a result of Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October, but Moscow did not condemn Hamas directly. And while the Kremlin [labels](#)

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some of its own—peaceful—political opponents as terrorists, it did not give this designation to Hamas. Instead, President Vladimir Putin blamed US policies for the current Middle East crisis. He [compared](#) [https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F\\_https%3A%2F%2Fwww.reuters.com%2Farticle%2Fisrael-palestinians-putin-gaza-idAFS8N3A2088\\_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxlTEqw6Wsi9QAcsfzIgcZZIdoaV6A9Aw%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808](https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F_https%3A%2F%2Fwww.reuters.com%2Farticle%2Fisrael-palestinians-putin-gaza-idAFS8N3A2088_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxlTEqw6Wsi9QAcsfzIgcZZIdoaV6A9Aw%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808)

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Israel's blockade of Gaza to Nazi Germany's siege of Leningrad—one of the most traumatic events in Russia's history. In this context, Putin offered to serve as a mediator between Israel and the Palestinians, while Hamas, [according](#) [https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F\\_https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vedomosti.ru%2Fpolitics%2Fnews%2F2023%2F10%2F14%2F1000623-hamas-otsenil-pozitsiyu-putina\\_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxlTEqw6Wsi9QAcsfzIgcZZIdoYwF9tpQ%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808](https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F_https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vedomosti.ru%2Fpolitics%2Fnews%2F2023%2F10%2F14%2F1000623-hamas-otsenil-pozitsiyu-putina_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxlTEqw6Wsi9QAcsfzIgcZZIdoYwF9tpQ%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808)

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## Longstanding Relationship with Hamas

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union approached the Middle East through a rigid ideological lens. The KGB—the Soviet security agency—funded, trained, advised, and equipped anti-Western terrorist and militant groups in the region, including groups that saw the destruction of Israel as their primary goal.

The Soviet Union had no diplomatic relations with Israel from 1967, after the Six-Day War, until October 1991, approximately two months before the USSR ceased to exist. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the Russian government took a more flexible approach. It pursued good ties with Israel, styled itself as a mediator, joined the Quartet, and condemned acts of terrorism by Hamas.

Still, it did not label Hamas a terrorist organisation. In February 2006, Putin [invited](#) [https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F\\_https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2006%2F03%2F04%2Fworld%2Fmiddleeast%2Fhamas-delegation-visits-moscow-for-a-crash-course-in.html\\_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxlTEqw6Wsi9QAcsfzIgcZZIdpJpKEJ9g%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808](https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldefense.com%2Fv3%2F_https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2006%2F03%2F04%2Fworld%2Fmiddleeast%2Fhamas-delegation-visits-moscow-for-a-crash-course-in.html_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxlTEqw6Wsi9QAcsfzIgcZZIdpJpKEJ9g%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808)

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According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, the March meeting “touched on Russia’s unchanged position in support of a just solution to the Palestinian problem.” Hamas (and Iranian) officials were most recently in Moscow on 26 October after the Hamas attack on Israel.

## Material Support

Russian-made weapons had found their way to Hamas for years. In May 2021, senior Hamas leader Osama Hamdan gave an interview to Russia’s investigative Novaya Gazeta. In response to a question, “Where did Hamas get such a large number of Russian-made rockets used to attack Israel?” he said, “I think the Russian people should be proud they gave the oppressed peoples of the world weapons with which they can defend themselves. These weapons were sent to our region in the 60s and 70s.”

Putin’s Russia, for its part, at the very least, provided material support to Hamas. According to a 13 October *Wall Street Journal* report, Hamas-linked terrorist groups found ways to circumvent Western sanctions by utilising Russia’s cryptocurrency exchanges.

Ukrainian Center of National Resistance said that members of the paramilitary group Wagner allegedly participated in the [training of Hamas](https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldfense.com%2Fv3%2F_https%3A%2F%2Fwww.kyivpost.com%2Fpost%2F22528_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxITEqw6WsI9QAcsfzIgcZZIdqy8r9VMA%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808) (https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldfense.com%2Fv3%2F\_https%3A%2F%2Fwww.kyivpost.com%2Fpost%2F22528\_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxITEqw6WsI9QAcsfzIgcZZIdqy8r9VMA%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808) militants on “assault tactics and the use of small unmanned aerial vehicles to drop explosive devices onto vehicles and other targets.” Ukraine’s Head of Defence Intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, said that Russia has recently supplied Hamas with weapons but did not provide evidence for these claims. Senior Hamas official Ali Baraka said (https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldfense.com%2Fv3%2F\_https%3A%2F%2Fwww.memri.org%2Freports%2Fsenior-hamas-official-ali-baraka-we-have-been-secretly-planning-invasion-two-years-russia\_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxITEqw6WsI9QAcsfzIgcZZIdpIhZNXzW%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808) in an interview that aired on Russia’s main propaganda outlet, RT, that Hamas has a license from Russia to locally produce bullets for Kalashnikovs and that Russia “sympathises” with Hamas. He also claimed (https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldfense.com%2Fv3%2F\_https%3A%2F%2Fwww.memri.org%2Freports%2Fsenior-hamas-official-ali-baraka-we-have-been-secretly-planning-invasion-two-years-russia\_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxITEqw6WsI9QAcsfzIgcZZIdpIhZNXzW%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808) that Hamas’s attack would be taught in Russia’s military academies.

## Moscow’s Global Calculus

There is no direct evidence that Moscow was involved in the 7 October attack or knew about it and looked the other way. But Putin benefits from the resultant chaos, including Western distraction from his war on Ukraine.

He is likely to use the opportunity to exacerbate this situation, including through cyber operations against US forces, disinformation campaigns, and the use of Wagner to support other anti-American actors in the Middle East. Most recently, Hamas reportedly (https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Furldfense.com%2Fv3%2F\_https%3A%2F%2Ftwitter.com%2FAdityaRajKaul%2Fstatus%2F1719307233014485239\_%3B!!MED6SQ!LFQOC-Zd53SBbTDu7ebRSh8WPxrs0svTV3bpjJUoGgUCPNABCVxITEqw6WsI9QAcsfzIgcZZIdoEWbguuQ%24&data=05%7C01%7Clayelle.saad%40majalla.com%7Ce4d298873cf0463647e808) gave access to an RT journalist to the tunnel network nicknamed the Gaza Metro. This shows the Kremlin will have added opportunities to shape the narrative with Arab audiences to fit Russia’s state objectives.

Earlier, Putin himself suggested that Western weaponry intended for Ukraine ended up in the Middle East through the black market. He said this was likely an effort to shape Arab audiences’ perceptions—to side with Russia over Ukraine and against the West over its support for Israel—to suggest that Israel is using Western weapons against Palestinians.

It may surprise some that Putin chose now to side so explicitly with Hamas after he personally cultivated Russia’s relationship with Israel for so long and jeopardised his image as a Middle East mediator who can talk to all sides. But the fact of the matter is, the Kremlin views world affairs through a narrow zero-sum prism: for Russia to win, the US and the West have to lose. This is a global vision, a challenge to the US-led liberal world order, which Putin threw most overtly by invading Ukraine, a war which Putin has cast as an existential battle with the West.

No matter the effort to cast himself as a mediator, he always leaned closer to anti-American forces in the Middle East. This trend simply accelerated after he invaded Ukraine and became more apparent.

Sure, there are risks and challenges for Putin now if the conflict between Israel and Hamas escalates and spills into other countries, but Putin has operated in less-than-ideal circumstances before. More to the point, he has not paid a price high enough to change his calculus.

Over a year and a half after the invasion, Russia has avoided global isolation. Moscow’s narrative on the war resonates outside the West, and it has been able to find avenues outside it to mitigate the effects of sanctions.

As Russia aligns closer with the global south to push for its alternative vision of a world order, it is going to seek to benefit, at a low cost to itself, from distraction from Ukraine in the West, the rise of anti-American sentiment in the Middle East, and empowering anti-American forces. In other words, it will seek to escalate with the West, either directly or through proxies. The US must do more to convince non-Western partners that Russia’s vision of the world order is a losing one and think creatively about how to impose costs on Moscow in a way that shifts Putin’s strategic calculus—that the cost of escalating with the West outweighs the benefits.

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