

Putin's New Friends: Moscow Hosts Hamas

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In recent congressional testimony, the new director of national intelligence, Admiral Mike McConnell, warned that Russia, flush with petrodollars, feels "emboldened . . . to pursue foreign policy goals that are not always consistent with those of Western institutions." How true. From the murder in London of KGB/FSB critic Alexander Litvinenko to the blocking of international sanctions against Iran's nuclear weapons program, recent events make clear that Russia's foreign policy is increasingly assertive and, from the American point of view, unhelpful.

The most recent confirmation of this coincided with McConnell's congressional testimony. Even as the director of national intelligence sat before the Senate Armed Services committee, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov was hosting Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal in Moscow -- for the second time within a year. The red carpet visit occurred despite Hamas's refusal to recognize Israel, renounce violence, or accept previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements as required by the Quartet comprising the United States, European Union, United Nations, and -- yes - Russia.

Moscow's angling for a greater role in the Middle East is nothing new. Its diplomatic overture to Hamas comes at the same time Russia is considering the sale of advanced anti-tank weapons systems to Syria (previous Russian arms shipments to Damascus were provided to Hezbollah militants and employed against Israel in last summer's war). But Russia's outreach to Hamas is particularly strange because Moscow has its own reasons to be wary of the radical Islamist Palestinian group.

In July, Russia's Federal Security Service, successor agency to the KGB, released a list of 17 organizations the Russian Supreme Court had identified as "terrorist." The FSB's counterterrorism chief described all 17 groups as a threat to the Russian state and noted that almost all were linked in some way to the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the 17. Hamas, however, was not listed, though it openly describes itself as the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and frequently features deceased Brotherhood dignitaries like Hassan al-Banna and Abdullah Azzam alongside Hamas leaders on its posters and pamphlets. The reason for not listing Hamas, the counterterrorism chief explained, was that Hamas was not engaged in violent activity in Russia, nor was it linked to illegal armed groups operating in the North Caucasus. But Hamas supporters do maintain a presence in Russia, and the group does express solidarity with Chechen fighters, including suicide bombers.

Hamas operates some 20 websites in a variety of languages -- including Russian -- to reach key constituencies. The fact that Hamas finds supporters among Russian speakers should not surprise, given the extent to which Hamas identifies with and glorifies Chechen terrorism, especially on its Internet sites and in recruitment and radicalization materials distributed in the West Bank and Gaza.

For example, the Hamas website Palestine-info featured a fatwa (religious edict) written by Muhammad bin Abdullah al-Seif, described as the mufti of the mujahedeen (holy warriors) in Chechnya. The fatwa finds that Chechen and Palestinian suicide attacks are both legitimate because they are part of the wars against Russia and Israel, respectively. The fatwa also rules in favor of deploying female suicide bombers, citing the example of the suicide attack executed by Hawaa Barayev in Chechnya in June 2000. Another website, Islamway, which focused on supporting what it called the Chechen jihad, also issued calls to support the jihad in Palestine. The site called on readers to donate money to provide jihadists "with weapons and physical strength to carry on with the war against those who kill them."

Hamas radicalization materials distributed in the West Bank and Gaza cite the Chechen jihad as the standard to which Palestinian militants should aspire. In raids of Hamas institutions in 2003 and 2004, Israeli forces found extensive materials -- posters, videos, CDs -- praising Chechen rebels and leaders like Shamil Basayev and Khattab, expressing solidarity with Chechen terrorism, and indoctrinating Palestinian youth to engage in similar attacks. One CD, entitled "The Russian's Hell," displays scenes from the fighting in Chechnya interspersed with religious messages justifying jihad and claiming that those killed in the course of jihad go to heaven as martyrs. A poster included on a CD found at two different Hamas institutions features Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Chechen leaders Basayev and Khattab, and Osama bin Laden. According to Israeli authorities, materials such as these were distributed by Hamas at the American University in Jenin in November 2003, at Hebron University in February 2004, and at the Hebron Orphan Asylum in August 2004.

Such materials prove successful indoctrination tools, as evidenced by the comments of a leader of the Abu Rish Brigades, a Gaza-based collection of disaffected Fatah operatives with close ties to Hamas. In the words of the group's spokesman, "Our banner is jihad everywhere, even Chechnya. Our aim is to liberate every piece of land in

Palestine, including what is now called Israel."

Several Russian newspapers blasted the Hamas visit, and Mashaal was reportedly refused a meeting with Putin. But Lavrov attempted to paint the visit as a success, claiming to have "received confirmation" that Hamas would cease firing Qassam rockets at Israeli population centers from Gaza. Recent trends leave reason to question Lavrov's optimism.

Over the past year Hamas established its own standing militia -- the "executive force" -- to rival mainstream Palestinian security forces. Reports now suggest Hamas plans to increase its size from 6,000 to as many as 12,000 members. Moreover, Israeli defense officials recently revealed that Hamas is sending hundreds of members to training camps in Syria and Iran. The operatives enter Egypt through the Rafah crossing in southern Gaza and from there travel on to Damascus and Tehran. Israeli officials are also concerned about reports that Hamas is using the intra-Palestinian cease-fire recently negotiated in Mecca to import and stockpile weapons.

All this comes against the backdrop of the Israel Security Agency's newly released 2006 terrorism report, which documents an 80 percent increase in the number of suicide bombers arrested before they could carry out their attacks. The report notes that approximately 53 percent of attacks in 2006 were executed by operatives from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. Clearly, a year in power has not moderated Hamas, which continues to conduct attacks of its own and does nothing in its role as the duly elected government to stop attacks by other militant groups.

Russia's newfound assertiveness, the director of national intelligence testified, will "inject elements of rivalry and antagonism into U.S. dealings with Moscow." It already has.

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