

Kremlin's Shadow Over Jerusalem

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Israel has tried to be neutral in the big geopolitics, especially when it comes to Russia. Famous narrative that Putin could be a dictator, but not an antisemite had been talked to death. We all could remember Netanyahu's posters, pictured handshake with Putin about "Another League". Russia is also strategic allies with some unknown small countries, whose planes sometimes attack Iranian objects in Syria.

The story have another twist: On February 28-29, a so-called "inter-Palestinian meeting" will be held in Moscow, to which representatives of Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) are invited.

And it will not be the first time that Russia hosted this conference. Not only have they had these meetings before, but Hamas' official delegation has been visiting Moscow just after the bloody massacre of the 7th of October in the south of Israel. In addition, Russian diplomat in Lebanon, Alexander Rudakov openly stated: "Moscow will support Hezbollah in the event of a war in Lebanon". It was in his interview to the Russian website Pravda.ru (And it's full of the "interesting" things - such as blood libels and claiming that Israel is using forbidden phosphorus bombs against Lebanon.

It is not surprising, since Russia has recently significantly developed a relationship with Iran. They have even together launched into orbit a couple of satellites - according to the press-releases - some of them are operated by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Nobody has stated that these satellites are to spy on Israel, although it has been written that they can do detailed images of the Earth surface in real time.

In the intricate web of international diplomacy and regional conflicts, the Kremlin's influence in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis represents a compelling narrative of geopolitical maneuvering and soft power. And although Russia's assistance to Israel's opponents has not surprised anyone throughout history, there is a point that is little talked about in the Israeli media.

The Russian Federation, under President Vladimir Putin, has historically positioned itself as a mediator capable of engaging with multiple actors in the Middle East. Moscow's involvement in the region is not a recent development but a continuation of its long-standing policy to expand its geopolitical influence.

Amidst the escalating tensions in the Middle East, an investigation reveals Russia's multifaceted approach to assert its presence, with the Russian Orthodox Church playing a pivotal role in Moscow's strategy. However, the subtle yet significant role of the Russian Orthodox Church in this geopolitical chess game has often been overlooked.

The Church's Soft Power

The Russian Orthodox Church, closely aligned with the state's foreign policy objectives, serves as a critical instrument of Russia's soft power in the region. The Church's historical presence in the Holy Land and its significant property holdings in Jerusalem provide Moscow with a unique leverage point. This religious diplomacy complements Russia's broader

strategy to project influence through cultural and spiritual ties, rather than solely through political or military means.

And it is also not a new thing, like the King Solomon wrote (And the Russian Patriarchate equally loves to quote Jewish sources as well as Israeli politicians) - "Look, there is nothing new under the sun." The influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the region is also not new, and most importantly, it did not stop even before the founding of the State of Israel and even during the USSR, when the church in the Soviet Union was banned and outlawed. A little historical background:

19th Century Expansion. The Russian Church established a mission in Jerusalem in 1860, acquiring land and building churches and other facilities. From those days and till now, the Church owns numerous landholdings and properties in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Tiberia, Bethlehem and a Jordan. And amongst others, it's including the iconic Holy Trinity Cathedral, the Gethsemane Monastery, Gorny Convent in Ein Karem, with three churches: the Cathedral of All Russian Saints, the Church of Our Lady of Kazan, and the cave church of St. John the Baptist. Convent and Church of Mary Magdalene on the Mount of Olives. And also on the Mount of Olives Convent with the Russian Church of the Saviour's Ascension and its bell-tower.

One of the most famous Russian Orthodox Church objects is a Pilgrimage Center: The Russian Compound, which contains Yelizaveta's courtyard and Sergei's Courtyard in Jerusalem. If you forget – I'll reminding you. In April 2019 in Sheremetyevo International Airport, Russian authorities arrested Israeli-American Naama Issachar, a transit passenger flying from India to Israel, for alleged drug smuggling after some 10 grams of marijuana or hashish were found in her bag during a stopover in Moscow. In Russia, she was found guilty of possession and smuggling of drugs and sentenced to seven and a half years in prison. To bring her out from the prison, Netanyahu was asked by Putin for two things. First – the girl should personally ask Putin for a pardon ("How can you grant pardon if the girl does not ask for pardon?" – was asking Russian president's spokesperson), and a second thing – to return the whole complex of the Russian Compound. Not only the Sergei's Courtyard, which is already technically operated by Russia and could be considered as Russian territory, since there are some part of the Russian Diplomatic Mission, but also a Yelizaveta's courtyard (Nowadays there are based a Main Jerusalem Police Department, and a Detention Center).

What will Russia do with such territory? Rent out, like some territory of the Sergei's Courtyard. By the way, the modest and intelligent russian managers of the territory of the compound are well known in the Arab part of the capital – so-called Eastern Jerusalem.

For example, manager of the courtyard has rented out space for a bar and restaurant. But this restaurant is unusual. At first glance, it belongs to a person completely unconnected with Russia, an Azerbaijani philanthropist and businessman whose interests are in space and far beyond the borders of Russia and Israel. But there is a small nuance. In his earthly life, he is a member of the board of an organization called the **IOPS**.

Faith Under Surveillance

So, it all started at 1860, when the IOPS was created. The (Imperial) Orthodox Palestine Society. This organization is actually existing till nowadays, as a legal NGO, operating both

in Israel, and Palestinian Autonomy. The Jerusalem branch of the IOPS cooperates with the Israeli Ministry of Tourism. We will look at this organization separately later. It's not the only organization that has been working from these days till now. There are two more:

- International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC): This global organization, affiliated with the ROC, has an active presence in Palestine, focusing on areas like emergency relief, healthcare, and agriculture development.
- Russian Spiritual Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem: This Mission, apart from its religious tasks, also participates in humanitarian initiatives and social outreach programs within the local community.

Even though they are registered and legal NGOs in Israel, their current activities in Israeli and the Palestinian territories are primarily carried out through the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations (DECR). Which is the ROC's department of the Foreign Affairs.

According to their reports, they are doing a great job.

IOCC has worked in Gaza: Providing medication, training healthcare professionals, and offering psychosocial support to children impacted by conflict. And assisted on evacuation of the Russian citizens, which surprisingly were still there amidst the huge military actions even in December-2023 (Source - RIA, Russian governmental media).

IOPS is actively providing support for Palestinian farmers: Investing in agricultural projects, providing access to water and seeds, and helping farmers market their produce.

The DECR provides financial and humanitarian assistance to Palestinian Christians, supports the restoration of churches and monasteries, and engages in interfaith dialogue. The ROC operates clinics and hospitals offering free or subsidized medical care to Palestinians, regardless of their religion. This includes general healthcare, specialized services like dentistry and ophthalmology, and assistance with medication costs.

Also, ROC provides aid to vulnerable groups like refugees, internally displaced families, and the elderly. This includes food distribution, financial assistance, and educational programs.

As well, they all have been connected and cooperated with the UN, UNRWA and the Red Cross.

The Kremlin's Clergy

Let's have a closer look at IOPS. Since 2007, the Head of the organization is **Sergei Vadimovich Stepashin**, who briefly served as Prime Minister of Russia in 1999. Prior to this he had been appointed as federal security minister by President Boris Yeltsin in 1994. What is special about Mr. Stepashin? Well, first of all, he was succeeded by Vladimir Putin. Twice. First as a Head of the FSB, and secondly as a Prime-minister in 1999.

The government Mr. Stepashin has formed remained without personnel changes under the next Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and, to a large extent, under Mikhail Kasyanov.

Stepashin's career before becoming a Prime minister of Russia is very interesting. Prior he served from November 1991 to January 1992 as Deputy General Director of the AFB (Agency of the Federal Security) RSFSR, and from February 1994 as a Head of the Federal Counterintelligence Service. Stepashin served as the Head of the FSK (the predecessor of the FSB) until June 1995.

All of them, AFB, FSK and FSB is the principal security agency of Russia and the main successor agency to the Soviet Union's KGB; its immediate predecessor was the Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK) which was reorganized into the FSB in 1995 by Mr. Stepashin himself.

On May 19, 2023, Stepashin was sanctioned by the UK "because he works as a director or equivalent person who conducts business in a sector of strategic importance to the Russian Government."

By the way, at the time of his release from his post, he was a lieutenant general, and now a colonel general. Vladimir Putin, by the way, was the first head of the service with a rank below general (he was a lieutenant colonel).

We do not know for what merit Stepashin received his promotion. We know little about this man, but it is clear that he is one of the people in President Putin's inner circle. But since 2007 there have been many personnel changes and geopolitical events. And he is still the head of the IOPS.

Cloak, Cross, and Spy

Another interesting high-profile member of the IOPS is **Vladimir Alexandrovich Kalanda**. He is a Vice President of PJSC Transneft. There is less information about him, but it is known that he also served in the KGB (Started right after graduating from university, and worked on other state security bodies after the collapse of the USSR). Then, some time he worked as head of a department in the Personnel Administration of the President of the Russian Federation and by decree of Russian President Putin he was awarded the rank of colonel general.

Archimandrite Vassian (Zmeev) joined the organization on November 28, 2018 by decision of the IOPS Council and by a personal decision of the Chairman (Stepashin) - he was admitted to the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society.

His connection with our region is unclear. Why was it necessary to admit and introduce a person into the organization if at that moment he served and headed one of the farmsteads of the Russian Orthodox Church in Bulgaria.

According to the news, soon after the events of October 7, when Russian citizens were kidnapped and killed, and Israel began preparing an operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, there was another news that not so many people noticed. The Head of the Russian Spiritual Mission in Jerusalem was replaced in Israel. By the decision of the Holy Synod of Russian Orthodox Church of October 11, Archimandrite Vassian (Zmeev) was released from the post of representative of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' under the Patriarch of Bulgaria and rector of the metochion of the Russian Orthodox Church in Sofia and appointed head of the Russian spiritual mission in Jerusalem.

Standard church rotation? **Not likely**. On September 12, 2023, North Macedonian authorities banned him from entering the country. In addition, three Russian diplomats were expelled from North Macedonia. The message from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia stated that the decision on expulsion was made in connection with the commission of actions by these Russians that violate the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. But this is not the whole thing.

On September 21, 2023, the Bulgarian authorities obliged the rector of the metochion of the Russian Orthodox Church in Sofia, Archimandrite Vassian (Zmeev), the secretary of the metochion, Archpriest Evgeniy Pavelchuk, and the metochion employee to leave the country within twenty-four hours; The Bulgarian State Agency for National Security explained that “the measures were taken in connection with their activities directed against the national security and interests of the Republic of Bulgaria”. Bulgarian authorities expelled from the country the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Sofia, Archimandrite Vasian (Zmeev), who was expelled from Skopje a week earlier due to information that he was a Russian spy.

Therefore, the person accused of espionage was transferred to a place where there were already many former career intelligence officers. To Israel.

The Specter of a New Crusade

Critics warn that Russia's maneuvers signal a new kind of crusade, not of swords and sieges, but of soft power and strategic alliances, aiming to carve out a sphere of influence in the tinderbox of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This quest for dominance, masked in religious garb, raises alarming questions about the true price of peace in the Holy Land.

Deputy Chairman of the IOPS is **Mikhail Leonidovich Bogdanov**. Finally, not a FSB guy. He is Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia and Special Representative of the President of Russia for the Middle East. In a November 2015 news conference, Mikhail Bogdanov declared that Russia did not consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization, since it had not committed terrorist acts on Russian soil, and maintained a legitimate presence in the Lebanese government.

The same Hezbollah, which aims to destroy Israel, and which a Russian official (whom I quoted at the beginning of the article) recently promised in the news to support in the event of war. So just like that. This is the kind of viper we have warmed up in Israel under the guise of many NGOs.

These people influence local politics, enter offices, communicate with various organizations, including Palestinian Authorities and communicate with various communities in those territories. The IOCC and IOPS councils include many philanthropists and work with UNRWA and the International Organization of the Red Cross. Organizations that were widely accused of tolerating terrorism and being used as a front by militants and terrorists.

I think it's funny that the IOPS conducts excursions called "Russian traces in Israel." If you want to hide something, put it in the most visible place. If everyone in the world is looking for a Russian trace, then these guys will admit everything openly.

The Patriarchate of Moscow has repeatedly called for peace and reconciliation in the region, leveraging its religious authority to advocate for Christian unity and interfaith dialogue. By positioning itself as a defender of Christian minorities, Russia uses the Church to extend its influence among the communities in the Middle East, subtly embedding its geopolitical interests under the guise of religious solidarity.

The Kremlin's Calculus

The investigation highlights that Russia's engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis through the lens of the Russian Orthodox Church is part of a larger strategy to enhance its standing as a global power. By intervening in such a complex and sensitive conflict, Russia aims to assert its relevance in international affairs, challenging the dominance of Western powers.

Critics argue that Russia's approach, while ostensibly promoting peace, masks a deeper intention to exploit the conflict for its geopolitical ambitions. The support for religious institutions and the use of soft power tactics are seen as efforts to sow divisions and gain a foothold in a region critical to global energy markets and strategic military positions. Some people are saying that for Russia it is crucially important to support the crisis in Gaza, because the world's and American attention is distracted from Ukraine, where military actions are slowly changing after more than a year of relative stability. Since October, Russia has had some significant success in Ukraine. There was also an intensification of rocket attacks. Recently, Ukrainians have withdrawn from Avdiivka, which they kept defending since 2014.

According to CNN Politics, US President Biden told reporters later Saturday that he's not confident other Ukrainian towns wouldn't also fall. And we see that Russia's plan is working, and the US government is still having more and more difficulty in allocating money to both Ukraine and Israel since October.

Cyber Influence and Disinformation Campaigns

Another dimension of Russia's involvement is its alleged use of cyber operations and disinformation campaigns to sway public opinion and destabilize the region. "There have been instances of social media campaigns traced back to Russian sources, aimed at inflaming tensions between Israelis and Palestinians," reveals a cybersecurity expert who wishes to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the information.

According to other experts, countries (including Israel) may be fairly protected from external attacks, but are often vulnerable to insiders from internal networks. In Israel, in addition to a large number of cities with a mixed population and representation of the Arab sector in government institutions and administrations, there are also the Russians mentioned above.

The International Response

The international community watches warily as Russia's involvement deepens. Some countries view Moscow's actions as a bid to undermine Western influence and exacerbate regional tensions. However, Russia defends its activities as efforts to promote peace and stability. "Russia's engagement in the Middle East is guided by the principles of respect for sovereignty and international law," claims a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Looking Ahead

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to evolve, the role of external actors like Russia and their use of soft power mechanisms, including religious diplomacy, will remain a subject of intense scrutiny. The effectiveness of Moscow's strategy in the Middle East, particularly its ability to balance its relationships with Israel and Palestine while promoting the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church, will be a critical determinant of Russia's influence in the region.

This investigation sheds light on the complexities of Russia's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and the nuanced role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Kremlin's foreign policy playbook. As global dynamics shift, understanding these undercurrents will be crucial for policymakers and analysts alike.

It seems that in addition to the discussion about the admissibility of broadcasting Al Jazeera and the authority of UNRWA to be in Israel, it is time to raise the topic of NGOs that are in fact closely and clearly affiliated with another, unfriendly state and intelligence agencies.