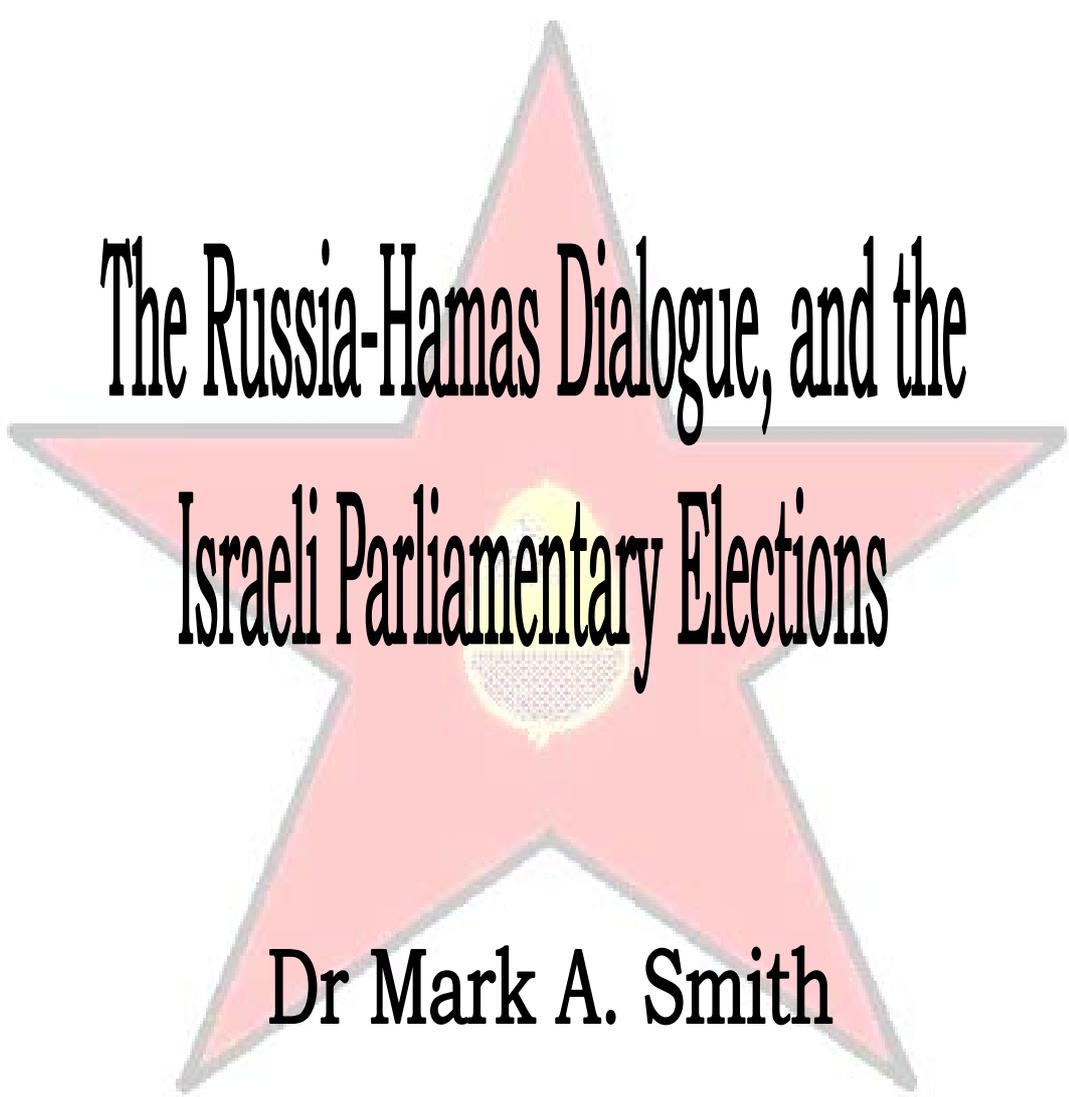


Conflict Studies Research Centre



**The Russia-Hamas Dialogue, and the
Israeli Parliamentary Elections**

Dr Mark A. Smith

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Abstract:

Russia's invitation to Hamas Palestinian leadership to visit Moscow in March 2006 revealed a difference between Russian policy on the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) and that of the USA, EU and UN.

However, these differences should not be overstated. Russia is urging Hamas to renounce violence and recognise Israel. After initial coolness, both the USA and Israel have dropped their criticism of Moscow's move.

If Hamas does moderate its policy, Moscow has scope for playing a mediator-role, enhancing its role in the MEPP and Middle East in general. However the USA will remain the main player in the MEPP.

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The visit of the Hamas Palestinian National Authority (PNA) leadership to Moscow in early March 2006 at the invitation of the Russian leadership marked a further attempt by Moscow to differentiate its Middle Eastern policy from that of the other members of the Quartet (the other members being the USA, the EU and the UN).

The USA and the EU have so far refused to have any relationship with Hamas as they see it as a terrorist organisation, and also because it refuses to accept the right of Israel to exist. President Putin's decision to invite the Hamas leadership to Moscow therefore marks a significant break with the USA and the EU over the Middle East. Why has Russia taken this step, in view of the USA's and EU's stance on Hamas?

- Moscow had a close relationship with the PLO, dating back to the Soviet period. She presumably wishes to maintain this special relationship with the post-PLO Palestinian leadership.
- It may be seen as an attempt by Moscow to carve out a greater and more independent role for itself in the Middle East and increase her options and her influence in the Middle East. In April 2005, when he visited Egypt, Putin also attempted to raise Moscow's profile by suggesting a special meeting in Moscow in autumn 2005 to discuss an Arab-Israeli peace settlement.
- If progress is made towards an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, then Moscow may feel that she will have more opportunities for influence with a Palestinian state if she has developed a good relationship with all key Palestinian players, not just the PLO.
- A dialogue with Hamas may help to push Hamas to a more moderate position vis-à-vis Israel, and so help the peace process. This may therefore increase Russia's value as a member of the Quartet and her importance to Israel.
- A good relationship with Hamas may also be seen as an attempt by Russia to improve her image in the Islamic world, and possibly reduce any hostility incurred as a result of her policies in the Northern Caucasus. Hamas political chief Khaled Mashaal has stated that Chechnya is Russia's internal affair.¹

The decision to pursue a closer relationship with Hamas underlines many of the ambiguities and conflicting interests in Russia's Middle Eastern policy. Russia on the one hand desires to have a cordial cooperative relationship with both Israel and the USA, yet on the other hand also desires cooperation with Hamas, Iran and Syria, all of whom are *bêtes noires* in the eyes of Israel and the USA.

The Russian leadership has been at pains to make clear that Hamas must accept the Quartet's three demands. (These are that Hamas must: 1. renounce violence; 2. Renounce its commitment to the destruction of Israel; 3. Accept all previous peace agreements.) It thus hopes to move Hamas towards the Road Map. By doing this, Moscow's policy of dialogue would be vindicated, and its standing in the Quartet would be enhanced.

Putin saw the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian parliamentary elections as a blow to US policy, which implies that he saw the opportunity for a dialogue with Hamas as a means of taking advantage of this setback for the US and an opportunity for Russia to increase her own influence amongst Arab states hostile to the US. Putin also made it clear that Russia did not, in contrast to the USA, EU and Israel, regard Hamas as a terrorist organisation. However the Israeli leadership took a cool view of Putin's decision to invite the Hamas leadership to Moscow. Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated that he regarded Putin's decision to meet the Hamas leadership as a "mistake".² Then Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz, meeting his Russian counterpart Sergey Ivanov, requested that Moscow reconsider its position, and withdraw the invitation to Hamas.³ One Israeli government source stated that, "You can't say you are a friend of Israel, that you are in favour of peace in the Middle East, and at the same time give Hamas a clean bill of health". Israel was concerned that Russia's decision to enter into a dialogue with Hamas could put an end to Hamas's international isolation whilst it still refused to accept Israel's right to exist. Israel was also angered that Russia did not consult with it before inviting Hamas (Israel only learned of Russia's decision through the media), and by comments made by Sergey Lavrov that appeared to equate Hamas' terrorist actions with Israeli counter-terrorist operations. Consequently Israel cancelled a trip by foreign minister Tzipi Livni to Moscow in March, citing "technical reasons" as the cause of the cancellation.⁴ France, Spain and Turkey supported Putin's decision.

However the initial concern caused by Moscow's decision to invite Hamas to Moscow appears to have died down after Moscow made it clear that it would not be deviating from the Quartet's position in favour of the Road Map. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that "the Russians assure us, after President Putin's comments, that anything that they say to Hamas will simply be to reinforce that message [i.e. the message of the Quartet]".⁵

Moscow takes the view that Hamas in power is now a reality that cannot be ignored. In February 2006, defence minister Sergey Ivanov stated that sooner or later the whole world community would have to establish contact with the Hamas movement. This was echoed by the presidential special representative on international cooperation to combat terrorism and transnational organized crime, Anatoliy Safonov, who said in February 2006 that the isolation of the Hamas movement, on the part of Israel and a number of Western states would be unproductive. He argued:

Representatives of the Hamas movement have won the trust of the people and become a political force. It is undoubtedly absolutely right to give the new Palestinian authorities the possibility to show how they are going to behave in this specific situation, rather than closing the doors on them. Talking, helping and encouraging a path that suits all are what is needed...Hamas has two wings - political and armed. The activities of the second wing included methods and practices we do not accept.⁶

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This view was elaborated on in March 2006 by Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Duma Committee on International Affairs. He defended Russia's decision to talk to Hamas and stated:

In order to understand whether our actions were correct, suffice it to recall that the party that lost the latest Palestinian election, the Fatah party, as recently at 15 years ago was regarded by all and everybody, perhaps except the then Soviet Union, as an unequivocally terrorist organization. Its leader, Yasir Arafat, was absolutely unacceptable to Israel, the USA or the European Union as a partner for talks. But we know what progress Yasir Arafat personally and his movement made in those 15 years, and he even was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize together with Shimon Peres. I think that if the world had chosen to isolate the then Palestinian leadership, this progress would not have taken place, no doubt about that, and there would have been no advance in the Middle East. So as long as there is hope to modify Hamas and make them give up their radical positions, one has to work with Hamas, absolutely.

I believe that if, God forbid, we are wrong and Hamas will stick to its extremely radical positions of non-recognition of Israel, propaganda of terrorist methods of struggle and so on, it cannot be ruled out that ultimately all the partners in the Middle East quartet, including Russia, will agree to cut all contacts with Hamas. However, we are not in this situation at all yet. Moreover, there is clear hope that Hamas will develop in the right direction, after all.⁷

Sergey Lavrov, commenting on the discussions in Moscow with the Hamas leadership, stated in February:

we expressly conveyed to the leadership of Hamas the coordinated position of the Quartet of international mediators on the necessity of fulfilling all the criteria that were formulated in the Quartet's statement at the end of January this year. It is, above all, the necessity of commitment to all the existing accords in the peace process, the necessity of recognizing the right of Israel to exist as a partner in negotiations, and the necessity of giving up armed methods of dealing with political issues.⁸

He expressed a similar view in May 2006:

Without such initiatives [i.e. Russia's invitation to the Hamas leadership to visit Moscow in March 2006] in the conditions when Hamas won the Palestinian elections, which were recognised by all as free and democratic, the policy of the international community in the Middle East peace process risks going into a dead end, and the decisions of the quartet of international mediators will only exist on paper. The flexibility secured by the position of Russia gives the efforts of the quartet a second wind. Democracy, as is known, is a double edged sword, which itself can heal the wounds which it inflicts. Presenting to Hamas the agreed position of the international community, we have started the process of pulling it into open

politics – a process in which the Arab world actively participates. A whole range of Western European countries have supported us. Judging by the reaction of our partners to the results of the Moscow talks with representatives of Hamas, our step has not been perceived by anyone as an attempt at an “independent game” on anyone’s account.⁹

Former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister and current head of the Russian Chamber of Commerce Yevgenny Primakov took an identical view to the Russian leadership, and argued in May that this approach had already yielded results in the form of Hamas’ decision to abide by the ceasefire agreed in 2005.¹⁰

Both the USA and Israel appeared reassured by the actual line that Russia took in the talks. Vladimir Putin contacted then acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert by telephone in early March to brief him on the Russia-Hamas talks. Whilst Olmert thought Russia was mistaken to enter into dialogue with Hamas before it accepts the three demands of the Quartet, he appeared reassured that Putin would require Hamas to accept the three demands. Olmert stated:

Russian President Vladimir Putin relayed a clear, sharp, unmistakable message to me, saying: I support these three principles; I am true to these three principles. And I would like to add something that may have not been reported until now, which I believe to be of considerable importance. The Russian president further said: I told my friend Arik Sharon, whom I admire and whom I wish recovery from the bottom of my heart, that Russia is forever obliged to never again harm the State of Israel. And now, the president said, I am passing my commitment to Arik Sharon on to you as his successor, as the man who is carrying on his course.¹¹

Overall, it would appear that Russia’s decision to invite the Hamas leadership to Moscow has not damaged its relationship either with Israel or the rest of the Quartet. The current Russian leadership is unlikely to take any steps that would risk any major rupture of its relationship with Jerusalem. It has probably also raised its standing in the rest of the Arab world, and judging by the French and Spanish reaction to the decision to invite the Hamas leadership, has also gained some support from Europe. From Moscow’s standpoint therefore, the invitation to Hamas can be seen as beneficial.

The suspension of US and EU financial assistance has plunged the new leadership into a financial crisis, which in Moscow’s view could result in civil war in Palestine which would make the development of the MEPP impossible. Russia intends to provide the PNA with humanitarian aid, and has counselled against isolating the Hamas administration. However the amount promised by Russia is \$10 million, and can only be regarded as a gesture, which possibly aims at trying to persuade the USA and EU to reconsider its policy. Russia therefore sees the decision made by the Quartet on 9 May to provide direct aid to Palestinians, bypassing the Hamas-controlled government, as a vindication of its stance.

Russia has also expressed interest in military-technical cooperation with the PNA, but will not supply it with arms without Israeli consent. Deputy foreign minister Aleksandr Saltanov says that Moscow also trains Palestinian diplomats and uses other forms of assistance aimed at providing help in forming and strengthening the administrative bodies of the PNA.

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The existence of two rival power centres in the Palestinian political system (i.e. the Hamas led government, and the Fatah presidency) makes the pursuit of the MEPP more complicated, and it makes it more difficult for Moscow (and other powers) to conduct relations with the PNA. The President of the PNA, Mahmud Abbas has had close personal ties with Moscow, as he was a post-graduate student there in the 1980s.¹² Abbas visited Putin in Sochi in May 2006, and affirmed his commitment to the Road Map. Abbas has argued that talks with Israel are the responsibility of the PLO, not Hamas.¹³ Moscow wishes to support both Abbas and Hamas, seeing this as a key part of its strategy to prevent the isolation of the PNA. It therefore stressed that both Fatah and Hamas should avoid conflicts in their relationship following the clashes between supporters of the two forces in Gaza in May 2006, and urged the development of a common political platform to pursue the Road Map.

The Israeli parliamentary elections in March 2006 resulted in the formation of a Kadima-Labour coalition, led by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (Kadima). Israel will not talk to Hamas whilst it refuses to recognise Israel's right to exist and refuses to renounce armed struggle against Israel. The Russian leadership may see this as an opportunity to attempt to play a mediatory role. Konstantin Kosachev said the day after the Israeli election that "it is clear that the new coalition government of Israel of any composition will reject talks with Hamas. This, in turn, means that the role of Russia as an intermediary and a participant of the international Middle East quartet will definitely grow and there is more need for this."¹⁴ In May 2006, when Abbas was in Sochi, Saltanov said that he believed that Israel would make a move to develop the peace process, although he failed to explain why Israel would be willing to change its stance on this. Israeli deputy prime minister Shimon Peres met Mahmud Abbas in Sharm el-Sheikh along with Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni on 21 May. This meeting was a significant move as Israeli leaders have refused to meet Abbas since June 2005, claiming that such meetings were pointless if he could not halt rocket attacks on Israel. Livni said the Road Map is still viable, and that a meeting between Abbas and Olmert is possible, but ruled out dealing with Hamas, stating that the Hamas government should be delegitimised.¹⁵

Olmert has made clear his intention to proceed with unilateral withdrawals from the West Bank and to unilaterally define Israel's borders if agreement with the PNA is not forthcoming. He states that this process will start in 2007 and is to be completed by 2010. He is thus continuing the policy of unilateral withdrawal initiated by former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon when he withdrew from Gaza in August 2005. Moscow welcomed the Gaza withdrawal, but argued that it should form part of the Road Map, and not be part of a unilateral process. It is possible that a unilateral Israeli policy may be supported by the USA, but it is unlikely to be supported by any other member of the Quartet, including Moscow. However, Russia is unlikely to break with Israel over this policy, and will probably endeavour to play the sort of mediator role envisaged by Kosachev above. It is hard to see how any mediator could succeed if Hamas refuses to accept the Quartet's three demands however. If Hamas does not evolve away from its hard-line stance, then Israel will not deal with the PNA, and the implementation of a unilateral approach by Israel (if it occurs) could be regarded as indication that Russian policy towards Hamas has failed, although this is unlikely to damage Russian interests in either Israel or the PNA. Russian policy also does not alter the fact that the USA remains the main outside power capable of facilitating a breakthrough in the MEPP.

Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has compared Hamas with Iran, arguing that neither should be isolated.¹⁶ There are both similarities and differences in Russian

policy towards Iran and Hamas. Moscow argues against an isolationist and punitive approach towards both, believing that this would be counterproductive, and simply make the respective parties more intransigent. The Russian aim is to try to nudge both Hamas and Iran in a more accommodating direction. However, there is a greater divergence between Russian and Western interests over Iran than over the MEPP. There appear to be no crucial differences over the MEPP. Whilst Moscow does not favour the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran, she seems adamantly opposed to any use of force or the imposition of any other sanctions against Tehran. She has also opposed for many years US attempts to isolate Iran and on those lines would probably veto any possible UN Security Council resolution. At the end of the day Moscow would appear to prefer a nuclear armed Iran to an Iran that had been forcibly disarmed by the USA, not least because Moscow probably finds the expansion of American influence in the Middle East at least as uncongenial. It should also be remembered that Moscow has an interest in preventing the normalisation of US-Iranian relations, as US-Iranian tension increases Russia's value to Iran as a partner. Furthermore, any difficulties Iran may have in exporting its oil and gas increase the importance of Russia as an energy supplier. Therefore, whilst Moscow's differences with Washington over Hamas and the MEPP are virtually negligible, her differences over Iran may come to be more substantial.

A similar view can be taken about Moscow's stance towards the conflicts in Moldova and Georgia. In both of these cases the Russian Federation supports separatist autonomies (Transdnestr in Moldova, and South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia), which makes the conclusion of an overall settlement extremely difficult. Moscow's support of these separatist autonomies poses a serious threat to the territorial integrity of Moldova and Georgia. Its dialogue with Hamas cannot be said to pose a direct threat to Israel or pose a hindrance to US policy over the MEPP. Its cordial relationship with Iran, on the other hand, could be seen as such a hindrance to US policy interests in the region.

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