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**From Cold War Allies to Regional Players:  
Analyzing the Shifting Dynamics of Russia, Palestine, and Israel  
Since the Soviet Union and its Connection to the Conflict in Ukraine**

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**Anna Vartsaba**

*Emory University*

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marks a turn in history. With the profound impact this event had on the geopolitical landscape of the world, the effects of it are still being felt today. In the Middle East, Russia has played a key role in the Arab Israeli conflict while pursuing its own interests in the region. This paper explores Russia's involvement in the region and, specifically, Palestine, including its relationships with the United States, Israel, and other surrounding nations. Additionally, the analysis looks at Russia's foreign policy objectives and the implications they have had for global politics. Finally, this essay connects the central themes explored through Russia's interests in the Middle East and its current aggression towards Ukraine. Each section supplies both a background and an in-depth analysis of Russia's role as a

mediator in the conflict between Israel and Palestine, providing a comprehensive yet focused overview on this complex topic.

### Background: Fall of the Soviet Union

The Soviet Union, throughout the 1980s until 1991, can best be described as a perfect storm with a hapless captain. It was during this time period that Mikhail Gorbachev, alongside his team of Soviet leadership, launched some of the largest economic and political reforms the nation has ever seen<sup>1</sup>. However, the political officials in charge of Soviet reform were unable to fully recognize and understand the failures that lay ahead through which new actors emerged taking on the rubble of the old system and the chaos of the decade to come.<sup>2</sup>

When Gorbachev took power, he was largely influenced by Vladimir Lenin under which the Soviet Union began its exponential decline. Gorbachev's aim was to embrace revolutionary change and, in contrast to Lenin, rejected the methods that were key to Lenin's revolutionary success. Many historians believe that it was Gorbachev's leadership and character itself that led to Soviet self-destruction; with political timidity and visionary foreign policy initiatives that seldom led to crucial domestic reforms, he was a unique leader in Soviet history.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1990s, the economic advisor to the President at the time, Nikolai Petrakov, designed a program of radical economic reforms that had the potential to change the climate of the entire country, Although in part of the nation, such as Lithuania, there were open rebellions, the core was still centered in Russia with Gorbachev yielding the power to appoint a new government, introduce

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<sup>1</sup> Vladislav Zubok, "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union," Yale University Press, November 30, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1zvccnm>, 427.

<sup>2</sup> Vladislav Zubok, "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union," Yale University Press, November 30, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1zvccnm>, 427.

<sup>3</sup> Zubok, "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union," 430.

presidential rule and proceed with market reform. Instead, Gorbachev waited and the window for political reform closed with the masses increasingly believing in the impotence of the government. The government's indecision and decentralization of power fragmented the Party and eventually led to the empowerment of republican institutions and nationalist movements. In the end, what pulled the country apart was not the strength of the opposition but the weakness of the Kremlin leadership. Most notably in Ukraine, by 1991, the majority of the people believed it would be better for nations to exist as separate republics rather than a common state.<sup>4</sup>

The final years of Soviet history were largely defined by ideological divides. Khrushchev created a somewhat refurbished utopia with a less cruel form of socialism and additional openness. Gorbachev sought to do the same but largely failed to follow through on domestic promises.<sup>5</sup> Socialist utopia was finally burned to the ground with glasnost and what remained was a gaping vacuum between the realities and ideals that outlined the nationalism, anti-communism, and populism of the nation. With great speed and ease, the Soviet central structures collapsed with even the institutions that remained highly resilient throughout the Soviet Union's existence erupting in the political turmoil of 1991. What remained was a state apparatus that was taken in control by the Russian Federation and further reinvented throughout the presidency of Vladimir Putin.<sup>6</sup>

The fall of the Soviet Union played a major role in the changing dynamics between Russia, Palestine, and Israel. The collapse of the Soviet Union completely shifted Russia's foreign policy priorities. Due to this, Russia's this, Russia's relationship with Palestine and Israel

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<sup>4</sup> Zubok, "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union," 430.

<sup>5</sup> Zubok, "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union," 432.

<sup>6</sup> Zubok, "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union," 432.

changed with Russia seeking to become a mediator between the two nations. As will be discussed, the Soviet Union strongly supported the Palestinian cause yet post-Soviet leadership took on a more nuanced approach to the issue. Similarly, Russia's aggression towards Ukraine can be traced back to the fall of the Soviet Union which left ethnic Russians in Ukraine feeling vulnerable and marginalized while Moscow saw Ukraine's shift towards Westernism as a threat to their strategic interests. The conflict in Ukraine has further complicated the already nuanced relationship between Russia, Palestine, and Israel with Russia further displaying acts of aggressive expansionist tendencies.

### 1. Russia and the Arab Israeli Conflict: Introduction

With the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia came under the leadership of Boris Yelstin. The period from 1991 until 1999 when Yelstin was in power was largely characterized by political instability and foreign policy that was mainly focused on United States relations. The country's refocus on the Middle East came under President Vladimir Putin, specifically during his second term when the Arab Israeli conflict became a key issue for Moscow for the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup>

In January of 2000, Vladimir Putin became the acting president and came into the role with three main objectives – ones that continue to illuminate the decisions made by the government in the years to come. Primarily, Putin was interested in restoring Russia's global

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<sup>7</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "Russia, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Putin Years," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 3 (September 21, 2010): 51–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2010.00450.x>, 51.

status as a dominant power and regaining the increasing power of the U.S. within the international order. Furthermore, Putin aimed to restore Russia's economy in order for the nation to become a great power once again. The final objective was to eliminate Middle Eastern aid to the Chechen rebellion that erupted in 1999 to give Moscow a better opportunity of shutting it down. Putin began by consolidating the power of the President and ending the anarchy that characterized Yeltsin's presidency. Moreover, the government took control of media outlets, replaced all of the officials within nuclear energy and oil that were financially involved in the Middle East and Central Asia.<sup>8</sup>

Since then, Russia has played an important role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by engaging in diplomatic efforts to help resolve the conflict as well as promote its own interests and by supplying military support to the parties involved. Russia has maintained and further developed close relationships with both Israel and Palestine and has tried to become a mediator between the two parties over the years. Today, Moscow has publicly stated that it is concerned about the new round of armed violence in the region and has called on the parties involved to "show maximum restraint, prevent an escalation of military activities and immediately return to a sustainable ceasefire"<sup>9</sup>. In August of 2022, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, reiterated Russia's efforts in finding a comprehensive and long-term solution to the conflict based on the two-state principle.<sup>10</sup> In conclusion, Russia's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been multifaceted and has evolved over the years. Despite its

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<sup>8</sup>Freedman, "Russia, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Putin Years," 52.

<sup>9</sup> TASS: Russian News Agency, "Russia Calls on Parties to Israeli-Palestinian Conflict to Return to Sustainable Ceasefire," TASS, August 6, 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1490355>.

<sup>10</sup> TASS: Russian News Agency.

efforts, the conflict persists, and a lasting solution remains elusive. As the conflict continues, for better or for worse, Russia's role is likely to remain a crucial one.

## 2. Russia's Interests in the Arab World & Palestine

In the decades leading up to 1949, Moscow supported the creation of an Arab-Palestinian state and continued promoting Jerusalem's internationalization. Soviet support for the Zionist cause came to an end by the end of 1948, although it's important to note that Moscow never withdraw the recognition of Israel's statehood and national legitimacy. This shift followed the first Arab Israeli war as Moscow began to see Palestinian Arabs as refugees and the conflict as one of the interstate dimensions between Israel and their Arab neighbors. Within a year, the Soviets went from militarily supporting Israel to fully supporting the "lawful and inalienable rights of Palestinian Arabs".<sup>11</sup> This phrase was first stated in the joint Soviet-Algerian communiqué in 1964 and then again during Khrushchev's visit to Egypt a few weeks later. For a long time, Moscow was cautious in supporting the PLO and continued their stance against the use of terrorism at the same time arguing that Arab reactionaries as well as Israeli agents are the ones pushing Palestinians towards extremist actions. Additionally, Soviet leadership was discouraged by Palestinian disunity and social conservatism. For decades, Moscow continued to establish secret contacts with Palestinian leaders and improve Soviet-Palestinian relations through political understanding and cooperation.<sup>12</sup>

On December 8, 1991, the USSR came to a disastrous end and the Palestinian view towards the nation was of disappointment in an "old friend", one that was not able to alleviate

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<sup>11</sup>Andrej Kreutz, "Russian-Palestinian Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 6, no. 3 (January 1, 2004), 7-10.

<sup>12</sup>Andrej Kreutz, "Russian-Palestinian Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 6, no. 3 (January 1, 2004), 7-10.

their suffering and better the conditions under which they were living. In the years leading up to the fall of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev played a vital role in the crises of the Middle East. When Soviet immigrants were being settled on Palestinian lands, the Palestinians were being expelled to Jordan from which they were expelled across the Arab world.<sup>13</sup> Gorbachev largely marked the shift in Soviet policies toward the Middle East and Palestine away from direct involvement due to Moscow's focus on domestic reforms and improvement in relations with the West. Moreover, Gorbachev pursued a policy that emphasized balanced diplomacy in the Middle East which sought to better relations with both Israel and the Arab states.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow's relationship with Palestine shifted significantly due to Russia's geopolitical realignment and increased focus on domestic and regional issues. This resulted in a more pragmatic approach towards the conflict overall with Russia increasingly emphasizing economic and security operations with Israel. In its policies in the Middle East, Russia has and continues to show a high level of independence yet in the issue of the Arab Israeli conflict, its diplomacy shifted towards one of caution and restraint. This can be narrowed down into three main reasons: Russian relations with the U.S., Russian shifted geopolitical interests in the Middle East, and the growing Russian ties with Israel.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1 US-Russia Relations in the Middle East

The Middle East is a region of national passion and religious exclusivism at the same time characterized by conflict and instability. The long Cold War and ideological matrix of Soviet-U.S. competition only exacerbated these tensions in a region that was already y

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<sup>13</sup> Andrej Kreutz, "Russian-Palestinian Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis," 11-16.

<sup>14</sup> Andrej Kreutz, "Russian-Palestinian Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis," 16.

fragmented in so many ways. In analyzing the US-Soviet relationship in the Middle East, one must understand the origins of the East-West relationship, one which was polarized by decades of Soviet insistence. U.S. objectives in the Middle East can largely be characterized by the following issues: protection of Middle East energy resources, the welfare of Israel, maintenance of US political influence, and overall regional stability. The Middle East Journal calls this the US “declaratory policy” in which Washington pursues an unspoken preference within the Arab Israeli issue. It is important to note the inherent pro-Palestine bias of this source but also acknowledge the consistent interest of the US in Israel’s security. In 1990, when this article was published in the “Middle East Journal”, the author hypothesized the presumed centrality of the US role to be challenged.<sup>15</sup> Since then, the Oslo Accords were signed between Israel and the PLO based on previous UN resolutions giving Palestinians authority over the West Bank and Gaza. In 2000, the second intifada began and continued until 2005, leaving hundreds of people dead on both sides. After years of violence, in 2017, the US recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and has announced that there will be a shift in the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv – this, of course, stirred outrage from the Palestinians.<sup>16</sup>

Defining Soviet interests in the region is more complex with the collapse of Marxist globalism and political “free-for-all” in Soviet society at the time of the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow’s interests are unstable and continued to be for a decade before Putin took a stronger stance on the issue. Throughout the Gorbachev era, the political part in power largely aimed to avoid international conflict and settle regional disputes through peaceful means, as we have seen

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<sup>15</sup> Graham E. Fuller, “The Middle East in US-Soviet Relations,” *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 3 (1990): 417–30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328141>.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Murphy and Adam Taylor, “The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, a Timeline,” *Washington Post* (The Washington Post, May 13, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/13/israel-palestinians-timeline-conflict/>.

before. More specifically though, the Soviets were focused on countering US efforts to dominate the region.<sup>17</sup> The need primarily, can be characterized as psychological: as Moscow deals with internal instability, there is a need from leaders to discourage US tendency to dominate major international geopolitical issues. This is especially true, and is a reoccurring theme, when that projection is close to Soviet and now Russia's borders. In 1990, it was projected that it is unlikely for Moscow to contest militarily unilateral US moves even though Russia continues to be interested in distributing power and intervention capabilities across multiple nations. This, in turn, reduces the salience of US power and scope of global military involvement.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.2 Russian Shifted Geopolitical Interests in the Middle East

Post-Soviet Russia briefly and rather partially retreated from the Middle East. By and large, Russia existed as an independent polity and these interests survived the Soviet Union. In many ways though, the impact on the Middle East after the fall of the Soviet Union cannot be separated from not only Russia's relationship with the West but also its domestic situation. Primarily, the fall of the USSR led to the inevitable decline of Soviet influence in the Middle East and the subsequent rise of American influence in the region. Moreover, Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and internal economic difficulties left a power vacuum that was filled by the US and due to this, Middle Eastern countries began to increasingly look to the US for support and security. The period after 1991 saw a larger shift in the balance of power in the region.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Graham E. Fuller, "The Middle East in US-Soviet Relations," *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 3 (1990): 417–30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328141>, 420.

<sup>18</sup> Graham E. Fuller, "The Middle East in US-Soviet Relations," *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 3 (1990): 417–30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328141>, 420.

<sup>19</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, "How the Death of the Soviet Union Transformed the Middle East," *The Washington Institute*, December 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-death-soviet-union-transformed-middle-east>.

By 1996, Yevgeniy Primakov replaced Kozyrev in Russia, who more formally articulated Moscow's vision for a multipolar world with a Russia-India-China triangle to counterbalance the West. Further, Primakov sought to reestablish Russia's influence in the Middle East which gave Russia the focus it lacked after the fall and one that Vladimir Putin embraced going into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Building upon the vision and foundation of Primakov, Putin pursued pragmatic ties with most major actors in the region, more closely to those that were anti-Western in nature. This strategy proved to be more pragmatic, flexible, and successful than the ideological blinkering of the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> Finally, Putin's intervention in Syria was primarily about taking a stand against the US-led global order and to protect the fall of another authoritarian regime in the hands of the US but that intervention specifically officially brought Russia back to the Middle East. Today, thirty years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has come to the Middle East to stay and continue influencing power without over-commitment. Where US continues to shift its priorities, Russia finds opportunity to cement its presence even further. History has not ended, and the great power competition continues.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.3 Russian Ties with Israel

As mentioned, throughout Putin's years as the head of government in Russia, the nation has built cooperative relations with Israel. Although this is not the first time the two nations see eye to eye. Before Khrushchev came to power and Moscow became heavily aligned with anti-Western, and therefore, anti-Israeli nationalist governments, Stalin was one of the first

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<sup>20</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, "How the Death of the Soviet Union Transformed the Middle East," The Washington Institute, December 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-death-soviet-union-transformed-middle-east>.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, "How the Death of the Soviet Union Transformed the Middle East," The Washington Institute, December 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-death-soviet-union-transformed-middle-east>.

leaders and the USSR one of the first countries to recognize Israel as a Jewish state after it declared independence. Since the rise of Putin, Russia and Israel have developed closer relations and cooperate in the economic, military and intelligence spheres.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, there is a strong connection between the two nations as a result of over a million Russian speakers having immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union. Not to mention, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was one of the few leaders who praised Putin's re-intervention in Chechnya in the late 2000s. Sharon argued that both Russia and Israel have been threatened by Muslim terrorists and resonated with Putin's decision. In 2005, Putin visited Israel and expressed his strong support for the security of the Jewish state.<sup>23</sup> Russia's alignment with anti-Israeli governments began with Khrushchev yet under Putin's leadership, the nation shifted in its policies, mainly through the desire to establish itself as a global power, thus taking on a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy. While the shared concern of the threat of terrorism can act as a basis for building diplomatic relations, it may also lead to negative unintended consequences. Putin's intervention in Chechnya and brutal attacks on Chechen separatists have been condemned by a number of human rights organizations. Sharon's praise for his actions, citing shared aversion to Muslim terrorism, is giving implicit approval to these brutal tactics and Russia's crackdown on dissent and opposition within the nation.<sup>24</sup>

A key divider in the Russia-Israel relationship is Iran. If Moscow does not help prevent Iran's expansion of power in Syria and the increasing support for Hizballah, Israel would have to

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<sup>22</sup> Mark N. Katz et al., "Russia and Israel: An Improbable Friendship," JSTOR, 2018, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep21138.15>.

<sup>23</sup> Mark N. Katz et al., "Russia and Israel: An Improbable Friendship," JSTOR, 2018, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep21138.15>.

<sup>24</sup> France24, "Israel-Russia: A History of Complex Relations," France 24, September 24, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180924-israel-russia-history-complex-relations>.

act against Iran and Hizballah. Since Israel relies so closely on American assistance, Russia siding with Iran and Hizballah would alienate Israel from the nation and cease their good relations. At the same time, by avoiding siding with Iran, Russia would look like a bystander in Syria – an idea highly counterintuitive to the great power objectives of Putin. This is already in progress as, according to *The Economist*, “Israel’s security chiefs are coming to realize that the Kremlin will not exert itself to limit Iran’s role in Syria”. Moreover, it is important to remember the role of US-Russian relations when looking at Russian Israeli cooperation as Israel would not jeopardize its security ties with Washington.<sup>25</sup> The Russia-Israel is complex and is contingent upon a number of factors but ultimately, the dynamic highlights the ongoing geopolitical competition among major powers in the region. As seen in Russia’s reluctance to fully align with Iran in Syria, the nation is taking on a pragmatic approach to foreign policy while being aware of the limitations of its power and potential risk of alignment. This reflects Russia’s broader trend within foreign policy after the fall of the Soviet Union – one of balancing competing interests whilst maintaining flexibility within an increasingly complex and unpredictable world.

### 3. Russia’s Foreign Policy Objectives & Implications for Global Politics

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 cultivated a new conception of Russian national interest within foreign relations. Specifically, Russia has put in a great amount of effort maintaining the appearance of a great power abroad while having an increasingly fragile domestic foundation. Much of scholarly literature on post-Soviet Russian foreign policy has narrowed down the propositions concerning Russia’s domestic and international context into a couple of points. Primarily, since the collapse of USSR, the Russian state has been dealing with

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<sup>25</sup> Mark N. Katz et al., “Russia and Israel: An Improbable Friendship,” *JSTOR*, 2018, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep21138.15>.

the crisis of political and national identity in which foreign policy has taken both unilateralist and nationalist directions. Additionally, decision making within foreign policy is highly unstructured as different agencies frequently pursue institutional or even personal directions which may not align closely with the interests of the state. As mentioned previously, since 1993, Russian diplomacy shifted to a decidedly unilateralist and mostly anti-Western direction. Generally, the questions that remain are rather open-ended yet an idea that Russian foreign policy presents to the outside world: How does the concept of “Russian-ness” in this era shape the Russian political content domestically and internationally, considering that so many Russian nationals live outside of the nation’s borders? <sup>26</sup>

To begin, the statist conception of Russian identity can be characterized by being not fully democratic yet not fully authoritarian. Andrei Kozyrev, the former foreign minister, labeled Russia’s ideological identity as “semi bureaucratic, semicapitalist, and semi mafia”. The end of the Cold War vastly altered the international social order and, in turn, forced the actors of society to reexamine their roles and interests in this new world. Russian political thinkers can largely be characterized into three groups – the liberals, authoritarians, and statist – which all refuse to accept Russia’s decline within the international order and adamantly believe that their nation should achieve the status of great power. These notions have been complicated by both Russia's sense of itself and tensions with neighboring states and the West as well as Russia’s search for a national identity itself which has been complicated by influences of globalization which have brought new cultural and political ideas into the country. <sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Allen C. Lynch, “The Realism of Russia’s Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2001): 7–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130124714>, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Glenn Chafetz, “The Struggle for a National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 4 (1996): 661, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2152089>, 662.

Over the last few decades, Russian leaders have increasingly utilized anti-Western rhetoric – of which we can see its interstate military disputes with nations like Georgia, Syria, and, most notably today, Ukraine. There is a growing consensus in which Russia’s assertiveness and aggressions can be attributed to NATO expansion and western expansion into some of Russia’s zones of interest. Moreover, the foreign policy of Russia’s leadership supports the hypothesis that high oil revenues have contributed to Russia's escalatory rhetoric and anti-Western foreign policy stance. This goes in line with some of the earlier scholarly findings that connect the aggressiveness of petro-leaders, such as Russia, on the international stage to oil price peaks.<sup>28</sup> In 2007, Fyodor Lukyanov, an editor for *Russia in Global Affairs*, described Russia’s erratic Middle East policy within three contexts. Primarily, Russia wanted to restore its great power status through their direct involvement in the Israel-Palestine peace process by engaging with groups “shunned by the West”. Additionally, Russia wanted to maintain regional stability and promote its anti-Western rhetoric by preventing US attacks on Iran. Finally, Russia continues to pay special attention to oil and gas producers in the Middle East to continue promoting its energy interests in the region.<sup>29</sup>

The concept and actualization of “Russian-ness” became more so defined by civilizational superiority and underpins a new style of governing called a sovereign democracy. Under the notion of the new “Russian idea”, this has shaped the direction of foreign natural gas policy and has been articulated even through informal institutions such as the media and other private entities. Using Ukraine as a case study reveals how the institutionalization of the

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<sup>28</sup> Maria Snegovaya, “What Factors Contribute to the Aggressive Foreign Policy of Russian Leaders?,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 1 (January 18, 2019): 93–110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2018.1554408>.

<sup>29</sup> Aron Lund, “Russia in the Middle East” (THE SWEDISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, February 2018), <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-paper-no.-2-2019.pdf>.

“Russian idea” domestically has had crucial implications with not only its foreign governing policies but its “near abroad”.<sup>30</sup> In conclusion, the fall of the Soviet Union has played a profound role on Russian foreign policy and has created a crisis of national and, consequently, political identity. The concept of “Russian-ness” complicates Russia’s sense of self and its relations with neighboring states and, notably, the West. Overall, understanding Russia’s complex identity and foreign policy is essential in navigating the country's relations with neighboring states and the West.

#### 4. The Role of Ideology

In March of 2022, The Jerusalem Post published a comparison of the two conflicts of Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine, taking a highly biased stance yet presenting an interesting argument. “For both Russia and the Palestinian leaders, as it stands today, this is not a war over territory, it’s a war over ideology”.<sup>31</sup> This analysis positions Palestine as the obvious aggressor however the intriguing fact presented is the following: real change will not occur unless the mentality of both Russian and Palestinian leaders' changes. How might a shift in ideological beliefs amongst leaders impact the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine? In what ways might a deeper understanding of the role of ideology in these conflicts inform potential solutions or approaches to resolving them?

In contemporary Russia, as was the case throughout the Cold War, the foreign policy objectives have had a key ideological dimension. During the Soviet era, the ideological

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<sup>30</sup> Nuray Aridici, “Ideas & Foreign Policy: The Institutionalisation of the ‘Russian Idea’ in Russia’s Foreign Natural Gas Policy towards Ukraine,” 2015, <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/10078/1/thesis%20submission%202014.08.2015.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Emily Schrader, “For Russian and Palestinian Leaders, It’s a War over Ideology - Opinion,” The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, March 7, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-700601>.

competition was between communism and democratic capitalism. The governing body in Russia continues to utilize the image of the nation acting as a fortress against hostile Western designs continues to mobilize political support in all levels of society.<sup>32</sup> In the context of Palestine, how does ideology play a role in shaping politically driven movements and how does that relate to sentiments of their culture and the past? Palestinian ideology can mainly be interpreted through the following lenses: by virtue of myths and Arab beliefs, and as seen in the situation with Israel. The common Palestinian ideology remains a national struggle with the whole nation participating in a popular war. There is a shared sense of hostility towards the UN and an idea of a common utopia through the egalitarian state of the future.<sup>33</sup> The influence of ideology on foreign policy in Russia and Palestine has had far-reaching implications, including shaping political movements, impacting relationships with neighboring nations, and affecting global security. As these ideologies continue to evolve, it is likely that they will play a continued role in shaping the future trajectories of both regions, potentially impacting global power dynamics and international relations.

## 5. Counterargument

This paper looks at Russian policies mainly through a revived Cold War paradigm: one of Soviet and post-Soviet relations and themes. In some ways, this can be problematic and misguided as it doesn't give due diligence to the discontinuity and rupture between the USSR and post-Soviet Russia. In contrast, one can conceptualize Russia's engagement with the Middle

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<sup>32</sup> Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 20, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/20/russia-s-global-ambitions-in-perspective-pub-78067>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibrahim Sus, "The Palestinian Ideology," ed. Olivier Carre, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 3, no. 3 (1974): 138–41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2535900>.

East through an “inside-out” approach. Primarily, this requires the analysis of the domestic drivers of Russia's engagement that is linked to the perceived need to counter the threat of secessionism in the North Caucasus as well as potential influence on Russia’s own Muslim populations. Additionally, Russia has other strict economic interests in the region some of which include trading relations with moderately pro-Western states. Finally, the geopolitical considerations at play do not solely revolve around competition with the West but also incorporate Russia’s own ambitions to promote itself as a responsible great power within global norms – this including the settlement of the Arab Israeli conflict.<sup>34</sup> Although it is important to consider the domestic drivers of Russia’s engagement in the Middle East, it is important to note that the analysis employed is comprehensive within the historical and political contexts of the conflicts.

## 6. Contemporary Connection to Ukraine

In 2014, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea, armed conflict erupted in Ukraine. In the year leading up to this, protests in Kyiv against the President’s decision to reject a deal that would economically integrate the country with the European Union (EU). Protests intensified and President Yanukovych was forced to flee in February of 2014. Quickly after, President Vladimir Putin sent troops to take control of the Ukrainian region of Crimea, citing the need to protect the Russian citizens and speakers of the region. Russia formally annexed the area when Crimeans voted to join the nation in a highly disputed local referendum; sometime later, pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk held similar independence referendums. The conflict quickly intensified between Russian-backed forces and the Ukrainian army even though

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<sup>34</sup> Roland Dannreuther, “Russia and the Middle East: A Cold War Paradigm?,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 3 (May 2012): 543–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.661922>.

Russia maintained not having military involvement in the region.<sup>35</sup> In early 2015, France and Germany attempted to begin negotiations between Russia and Ukraine through the Minsk Accords: a framework of ceasefire and full Ukrainian control of the conflict zone. A diplomatic settlement was unsuccessful. Over the next few years, NATO deployed battalions to Eastern Europe, the U.S. deployed army tanks to Poland to further boost NATO's presence in the region and imposed sanctions on Russian officials. On February 24 of 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized a "special military operation" against Ukraine claiming the goal of demilitarizing and DE nazifying the nation with allegations of Russian genocide on Ukrainian territory.<sup>36</sup>

For many, neutrality is seen as a necessary component of a successful mediator, whether that is in the context of Israel and Palestine or Russia and Ukraine, a third party's credibility should be based on their lack of ties to a conflict. Some scholars have recently begun to challenge this notion, instead reasoning that impartiality better describes this role. As Russia has tried to take on the role of a mediator within the Arab-Israel conflict, the EU has played a role in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In actuality, the EU has pushed Ukraine's rapprochement towards the Union and increased Russia's blatant opposition. Both through its diplomatic efforts and sanctions policies, despite utilizing a range of mediation strategies, the EU has not been able to become a real mediator.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, for almost five decades, the EU has tried to build peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. With initiatives such as the Middle

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<sup>35</sup> Center for Preventive Action, "Conflict in Ukraine," Global Conflict Tracker (Council on Foreign Relations, March 16, 2023), <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>.

<sup>36</sup> Center for Preventive Action, "Conflict in Ukraine," Global Conflict Tracker (Council on Foreign Relations, March 16, 2023), <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>.

<sup>37</sup> Ole Elgström et al., "Perceptions of the EU's Role in the Ukraine-Russia and the Israel-Palestine Conflicts: A Biased Mediator?," *International Negotiation* 23, no. 2 (April 10, 2018): 299–318, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-23021154>.

East Peace Process in 1991, Europe merely provided a venue for the peace talks sponsored by US and the USSR at the time. Some view the EU as a problematic mediator, specifically in the MEPP, as the dominance of the US within internal EU divisions persists. With powers like the US and Russia racing to the podium of negotiation, examining the perceptions of conflict parties involved is key in understanding the nature and even effectiveness of mediation efforts.

Comparing the two cases, Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine, it seems as though the weaker parties that are favored by the EU in this case, exhibit certain similarities. This fact leads one to believe that a biased mediator may in fact find that distrust from its partiality prevents it from engaging in this role, its special relationship to a party may actually work as an asset in bringing two parties to the table.<sup>38</sup>

The conflicts of Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine are both deeply rooted in historical, territorial, and ethnic disputes, with each side claiming legitimacy to the disputed territories. These conflicts have been further complicated by outside actors such as the US and EU who have interests in the regions. A significant similarity between the two is the role of identity politics – a term used widely throughout the social sciences to describe a phenomenon rooted in the backgrounds and ties of a people. While each conflict has its unique characteristics, understanding the similarities and connections between the two may help inform efforts to resolve the issues at hand.

### Conclusion:

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<sup>38</sup> Ole Elgström et al., “Perceptions of the EU’s Role in the Ukraine-Russia and the Israel-Palestine Conflicts: A Biased Mediator?,” *International Negotiation* 23, no. 2 (April 10, 2018): 299–318, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-23021154>.

Few believe that Russia is pursuing a clear strategy in the Middle East. Aside from certain interests that include energy cooperation, counterterrorism, and the fear of US influence, Moscow's role in the Middle East seems to have been improvised with each step. Often, the Kremlin is responding to changing domestic and international constraints. Russian foreign policy expert Maxim Suchkov once said: "I think the idea of Moscow having a strategy is derived from the fact that a lot of Western countries, including the United States and the EU, do not have such a strategy", which is not necessarily a negative factor. Although, the absence of an explicit plan from Russia in the Middle East does not mean that Russian diplomacy functions randomly but rather portrays Russia's carving of a specific niche within the political environment in the Middle East. Specifically, one of clear self-interest and a pragmatic status quo power. Undeniably so, within the last decade, Russia has brought net benefits to itself through enhanced global prestige, new economic investments, greater regional influence, and increased leverage over Western powers. The question that remains about Putin's approach to foreign policy and Moscow's spiraling ambition is whether their investment in the region could once again go from an asset to a global liability.

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