

The Russian Bear and the Molotov Cocktail: The Palestinians and the Crisis in Ukraine

Noa Shusterman | No. 1579 | March 27, 2022

While most Western countries condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the United National General Assembly, the Palestinian Authority remained silent. The Palestinians regard the Ukrainian struggle against the invasion as competing with them for international attention. They are frustrated that their struggle is cast by many as terrorism, while the struggle in Ukraine is treated as a just war for freedom. The Palestinians have accordingly neither expressed any public empathy for the Ukrainians nor demonstrated any solidarity with them. In addition, the Palestinians are careful to avoid any possible damage to their relations with Russia, which they consider an ally. While the Palestinians hope to upgrade Russia's status in the efforts to promote a political process with Israel, however, Moscow sees the Palestinian question as a means of furthering its status in the Middle East and scoring points against the United States – although it is doubtful whether on this issue Russia will go beyond rhetoric in the foreseeable future. To the extent that the international community is preoccupied with the crisis in Europe and the Palestinian question is consigned to the sidelines of the agenda, escalation on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, and subsequently in the Gaza Strip, becomes more likely.

While 144 countries condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the United Nations General Assembly, the Palestinian Authority (PA) remained silent. Not only did the Palestinians fail to empathize publicly with the Ukrainians and demonstrate solidarity with them; they even regard the Ukrainian fight against the invasion as competing with them for international attention. International interest in the Palestinians has been fading for quite some time, and over the years the issue has been pushed off center stage. Despite the renewal of relations with the United States early in the Biden presidency, the Palestinian leadership is careful to avoid damage to their relations with Russia, which they consider an ally. The Palestinians therefore did not officially condemn Russia, despite heavy pressure on PA Chairman Abu Mazen to do so.

Palestinian support for Ukraine could well strengthen relations between the PA and the United States and European countries, the PA's primary

donors, and help promote the reopening of a PLO consulate in Washington or the American consulate in Jerusalem. At the same time, however, Abu Mazen, who earned his doctorate in Russia and who has met personally with Russian President Vladimir Putin a number of times, wants Russia to play a key role in mediating between Israel and the Palestinians – together with the United States, who in the Palestinian theater is perceived as biased in favor of Israel, or in a multilateral framework, such as the Middle East Quartet. For its part, Russia has condemned Israel more than once for its activities in the Gaza Strip and the expansion of the Jewish communities on the West Bank, and Moscow has shown consistent support for the Palestinians. It is also possible that the expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe will be restricted as part of an arrangement for ending the war in Ukraine. If this happens, Russia will be considered the winner, and its status will be reinforced in the Middle East, especially given the US propensity of withdrawal from the region. Presumably Abu Mazen does not want to harm his relations with an actor that is likely to challenge US dominance in the region, particularly with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, Abu Mazen seeks to avoid a previous trauma – the political isolation of the PA in the early 1990s in response to Yasir Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein.

Nor has any broad-based popular support among the Palestinians for Ukraine been visible. As a people that has always highlighted its struggle against occupation, the Palestinians might have been expected to support the Ukrainian people's struggle and strive to exploit the international support for it in order to improve its position against Israel – if not immediately, with global attention currently focused on Europe, then in the future. Most Palestinian commentary on the social networks, however, focuses on what is portrayed as Western hypocrisy. Since the fighting in Ukraine began, pro-Palestinian groups have published posts with pictures of Ukrainian civilians preparing Molotov cocktails next to Palestinian Molotov cocktails, or pictures of children holding weapons under the title, "A Ukrainian Hero, but a Palestinian Terrorist," and a hashtag, "Double Standards." Other posts point to what is described as imbalance between the support for a new conflict and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of many

years standing, which has never made such an impact. The fact that what they portray as a same type of struggle is met with different responses – what in their case is regarded by some in the world as terrorism but is cast as a just war for freedom in Ukraine – is frustrating to the Palestinian public.

While the international community is preoccupied with the crisis in Europe and embraces the Ukrainians, the Palestinians increasingly feel that they are a victim of injustice. Violent events in Jerusalem do not gain the attention that they once did, and even more so since the situation in Sheikh Jarrah has been silenced for now given a ruling preventing the eviction of Palestinians from their homes. Both the PA and UNRWA, which provides educational, health, and welfare services to millions of Palestinians, are already facing a steep decline in the scope of donations. The Palestinian leadership understands that after the war, international attention and monetary donations will be invested in the rehabilitation of Ukrainian refugees and the reconstruction of the country itself, in part at the expense of the Middle East (including the crises in Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan).

The strong sanctions imposed swiftly on Russia increase the sense of injustice. For over a decade the BDS movement tried to generate political pressure that leads to harsh sanctions against Israel, but to no avail, and its voice faded after 2016 during the Trump presidency. In contrast, the quick coalescing of many countries throughout the world around sanctions against Russia, even at a heavy economic price, surprised the Palestinians, who complained that these players had sided with Israel and refrained from sanctions against Jerusalem. Major corporations, which did not acquiesce in the BDS campaigns and refused to halt their activity in Israel, have discontinued their activity in Russia – a development that surprised many.

In contrast to the PA, Hamas was of two minds concerning the crisis in Ukraine. Russia hosts permanent Hamas delegations and maintains contact with its leaders, and Hamas too, like the PA, has an interest in Russia's growing dominance in the Middle East at the expense of the United

States. When the Russian invasion began, Palestinian and international media quoted Hamas political bureau member Khaled Mashal as calling on Putin to stop killing civilians and halt the invasion. However, Hisham Qasem, a senior external Hamas leader, quickly denied that Mashal had said this. Mousa Abu Marzouk, another member of the Hamas political bureau, was among the few leaders to comment on the events. He criticized the United States for failing to stop Russia and said that the US had lost its control of international politics.

An open question concerns the significance of an expression of neutrality, and how the failure to decide whom to support (itself tantamount to a decision) services Palestinian interests. In recent years, the Palestinians have framed their national claims against Israel in human rights discourse. In this context, it has been said that the international community should stop focusing on a search for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (the liberal discourse and discussion of a solution in terms of one or two states), and instead address the fact that the Palestinians' basic rights – in particular, freedom of movement and equality under the law – are denied. Israel should therefore be pressured to grant them these rights, as they are granted to Israel's own citizens. The Palestinian silence at this time, however, combined with its denigration of the Western commitment to the Ukrainian people, showcases these efforts negatively. The lack of response to the United States demand to support Ukraine alienates the Western world, yet the Palestinians seek Western support. For its part, Russia regards the Palestinian question as a means to further its standing in the Middle East and to bait the United States. It is doubtful whether Russia will increase its involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian question in the foreseeable future beyond its statements in the media. It therefore follows that if the war in Ukraine is prolonged and the Palestinians do not side with the West, they are liable to find themselves even more isolated than they are now.

Continued relegation of the Palestinian question to the sidelines of the agenda when the political deadlock continues and no change is on the horizon is liable to lead to escalation, particularly in the West Bank and East

Jerusalem. Escalation in the Gaza Strip is less likely in the short term, because Hamas is aware that as long as the fighting in Ukraine continues, it will not gain international attention and will have difficulty raising money for reconstruction. Hamas can therefore be expected to refrain from destabilizing the security situation in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, however, it is likely to continue its incitement efforts in the PA territories on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. The upcoming Land Day and month of Ramadan have the potential to spark such unrest, as do the rising prices and economic distress afflicting the PA. At the same time, rising prices also affect the public in the Gaza Strip, and are liable to have a negative impact on internationally financed infrastructure projects in the region. If the war in Ukraine continues and raises the cost of fuel and basic commodities, the risk of unrest in the Gaza Strip will also increase. For Israel, an increase in Palestinian frustration caused by the crisis in Europe, on top of disappointment with the Biden administration, growing economic distress, and a feeling of betrayal following the normalization agreements, will augment the security challenge that it faces.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen