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**Russia's Initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian Process:  
Another Move to Regain Influence in the Middle East**

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Forty years after Russia was pushed out of the Middle East by the United States, President Vladimir Putin is now striving to restore Russia's status in the region, as part of his aspiration to reposition Moscow as a world power. This drive was reflected by Russia's military involvement in Syria; its closer relations with Iran; its attempts to forge stronger ties with the leading Arab countries; and its special relationship with Israel. Within the scope of these efforts, Russia is taking action to promote a political initiative regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, focusing on an attempt to convene a summit in Moscow between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, to prompt resumption of the dialogue between them. This initiative reflects Russia's intention of gaining the upper hand in the Middle East and improving its relations with Arab countries. At the same time, Russia wants to prove once again that it is succeeding in brokering processes where the United States and the West have failed.

In recent months, bilateral contacts have intensified both between Russia and Israel and between Russia and the Palestinian Authority, with the aim of promoting the idea of the summit. Neither side responded enthusiastically to the Russian initiative. High-ranking Israeli delegations visited Russia four times this year, some to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The subject was also raised with the Palestinians – at around the same time as Netanyahu's meetings in Moscow, President Abbas and PA Minister of Foreign Affairs Riyad al-Maliki flew to Moscow for meetings.

On July 25, 2016, President Putin sent a letter to the participants in the Arab League summit in Mauritania, addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as Russia's main views on the subject: "We believe that the status quo in the Palestinian issue is unacceptable and that the political process must be relaunched, with the result the creation of an independent, viable, and integral Palestinian state, with its capital in East Jerusalem, that coexists peacefully with its neighbors. Russia offers all possible assistance in resolving the Palestinian problem, and it is ready to act through both the bilateral and multilateral channels." Although the language of the greeting does not materially differ from the familiar Russian stance on the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict, it is surprising that Israel was not mentioned at all. On a related note, in a recent meeting in Tehran between Mikhail Bogdanov, Russia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Putin's delegate for Middle East affairs, and Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Muhammad Zarif, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was referred to as one of the items on the Russian-Iranian agenda in the region.

The first public announcement of the Russian initiative was mentioned during a speech by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. According to el-Sisi, Russia contacted him and proposed promoting an initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Egypt had recently proposed an initiative of its own to convene an Israeli-Palestinian summit in Cairo, but Egypt will presumably be willing to hand the matter over to the Russians. If Russia pursues these efforts, it will seek a model whereby Moscow brokers the relaunch of the Israeli-Palestinian political process, with the support of the Arab League.

For their part, the Palestinians, expressed their consent in principle to participate in a summit in Moscow, but initially made their consent contingent upon Israel freezing construction of settlements and releasing prisoners (those who were to be released within the framework of the talks led by US Secretary of State John Kerry). President Abbas has repeatedly insisted on these demands on prior occasions.

From the outset Israel was not enthusiastic about the Russian initiative and delayed its response. The Russians applied pressure through a number of channels and sent signals to Israel, which included Russian diplomats at the UN voicing criticism against Israel's policy regarding construction starts in East Jerusalem. Russia also declared that it will not support Israel at the UN if a proposed resolution on the subject of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is put to a vote. In the final analysis, Israel decided to respond favorably to the Russian initiative, and Netanyahu and Putin clarified the conditions and implications via telephone.

In early September, Bogdanov visited Israel and the Palestinian Authority in order to coordinate the Moscow summit. However, besides the disagreements between the Israelis and Palestinians about the preconditions to the process, additional difficulties are delaying the convening of the summit: (a) agreement on a mutually acceptable date; (b) shifting demands by the Palestinians regarding preconditions; (c) ongoing review by the regional partners, mainly the Arab League, of the matter; (d) lack of interest on the part of the United States, which led the political process for years, in handing over the reins to Russia, since Moscow will exploit this initiative to strengthen its regional and global position, and therefore, the United States has been vague about its position; (e) the unclear position of the European Union; it had agreed to the French initiative for restarting the political process through an international summit and is against giving Russia any political currency, considering its conduct in Ukraine.

Israel was compelled to respond favorably to the Russian initiative, in order not to be perceived as being anti-peace and due to its concern about disturbing its fragile relationship with Russia. Perhaps Israel assesses that the Russian initiative might have the power to neutralize other initiatives, such as a Security Council resolution that might contain principles on resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nevertheless, Israel agreed to participate in the summit in Moscow after consulting with the United States, and all parties are more amenable to the title “leaders’ summit” than “international summit.”

The saga of the Russian initiative shows that there is no complete convergence between Russian and Israeli interests in the Middle East, and that Russia can surprise Israel from time to time, despite the backdrop of the aerial-operational military coordination between them in the Syrian arena. Israel is well aware of the fact that Russia's fundamental positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are tipped in favor of the Palestinian side. Also in relation to other regional issues – including the regional position of Iran, and the future of Syria and the pro-Assad coalition that Russia leads with the Shiite Axis – the positions of Israel and Russia are at odds with each other.

Another key factor that could undermine the initiative is that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have preconditions to their agreeing to sit down together. In response to the Russian initiative, the Palestinians immediately reiterated their demands for a freeze on construction in the West Bank and a release of prisoners, although they later withdrew their preconditions. For its part, Israel did not publicly present its preconditions, although essential for it is a recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. In any event, there is skepticism whether both the Palestinians and the Israelis will soften their stances in order to placate Moscow, when they refused to do so for Washington. Consequently, even if Russia does succeed in bringing President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu to a summit in Moscow, the Russian achievement stands to be merely symbolic. In other words, the likelihood that the summit will lead to a substantive breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian situation is exceedingly slim.

