

Putin Offers Muted Response to Attack on Israel. That Speaks Volumes.

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FULL TEXT



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President Vladimir Putin of Russia has long cast himself as a friend of Israel and the Jewish people. He helped establish visa-free travel between Russia and Israel in 2008, presided over the construction of a

sprawling Moscow Jewish Museum in 2012 and, side by side with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem in 2020, unveiled a memorial to the victims of Nazi Germany's siege of Leningrad.

But amid the worst attack on Israel in 50 years, the high regard that Putin has shown for Israel in the past appears remarkably absent. More than three days after the start of the incursion by Hamas, there has been no message of condolence from the Kremlin, even though Putin previously published such notes of sympathy in the wake of terrorist attacks in Israel.

And he has not yet called Netanyahu, even though he spoke with Israeli leaders at least 11 times in 2022 and developed a close relationship with Netanyahu over more than a decade of meetings and phone calls.

Instead, in his first brief comments on the attack, Putin took a swipe at the United States, without expressing any sympathy for Israeli suffering.

"This is a clear example of the failure of United States policy in the Middle East," Putin said Tuesday in a televised meeting at the Kremlin with Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, the Iraqi prime minister.

Rather than find a compromise amenable to both sides, Putin went on, Washington acted "each time without taking into account the fundamental interests of the Palestinian people."

On Russian state television and in the pro-Kremlin blogosphere, commentators have reacted to the attack on Israel with thinly veiled glee, casting it as a revelation of Western weakness and as the start of a war that could sap Western support for Ukraine.

The stark shift sheds light on one consequence of Putin's invasion of Ukraine: the sharp decline in the relationship between Moscow and Israel over the past year and a half, one that some Jewish leaders fear also presages a rise in antisemitism inside Russia.

It is also the latest conflict in a region where Moscow has played a major role but where it is now unwilling or unable to wield much influence. That played out dramatically last month in the Caucasus region, where Russia did not even seem to try to stop Azerbaijan from seizing control of the Armenian-populated breakaway enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh—a stinging defeat for Armenia, Russia's military ally.

While Moscow's support for the Palestinian cause dates to Soviet times, Putin balanced that by forging strong ties to Israel. So the Kremlin's arms-length stance toward Israel in recent days "is definitely a manifestation of a deteriorating relationship," said Pinchas Goldschmidt, who served as the chief rabbi of Moscow for nearly 30 years until being forced to flee the country last year because, he said, he refused to support the war in Ukraine.

Goldschmidt spoke by phone from Israel, where he had just attended the funeral of an Israeli soldier slain in the fighting Saturday. He said the deceased, Yuval Ben Yaakov, was the son of another former Moscow rabbi. He added that many Jewish leaders had once seen Putin as an ally in keeping the memory of World War II alive, but when the Russian president started falsely equating Ukraine's current government to Nazi Germany to try to justify an invasion, "that's when the Jews said: 'We're not part of it.'"

There are clear geopolitical reasons for Putin's shift on Israel. In the Middle East, where Russia has long tried to play a kingmaker role and build relations with all major powers, Moscow now finds itself beholden to Iran—Israel's bitter enemy—as one of its primary arms suppliers for the war in Ukraine.

And unlike in years past, when Putin sought ways to cooperate with Western countries, he now appears to see little incentive to try to work with them to broker an end to the fighting in Israel as Russian forces are being pummeled by Western weaponry in Ukraine.

But there are also, perhaps, more personal reasons. Putin appears stung that Israel and Jewish leaders around the world are not backing his false narrative about Ukraine's being run by "Nazis." In recent months, he has repeatedly lashed out at President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine for heading a Nazi government despite being Jewish. In June, Putin claimed that his "many Jewish friends" had told him that Zelenskyy was "a disgrace to the Jewish people."

There have been signs since last year that the relationship was fraying. Russia cracked down on the Jewish Agency, an Israeli nonprofit that was a mainstay of Jewish life in Russia and helped Russian Jews move to Israel. In June, Russia's Foreign Ministry summoned the Israeli ambassador to claim that Israel's envoy to Ukraine was complicit in

“whitewashing” Nazi crimes. (Some Ukrainian independence fighters fought alongside Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union in World War II, the foundation of Putin’s spurious claims that Ukraine’s current leaders are Nazis.) “No one in the Kremlin is rushing to show sympathy to the victims” of Hamas’ incursion into Israel, said Alexander Gabuev, director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center. “This also shows you the emotional attitude —‘grievance’ is the right word.”

He added that the Russian propagandists casting the incursion as a boon for Russia may have a point. The Kremlin “passively is a beneficiary for now, at least,” of the fighting, Gabuev said —if only because senior officials in Washington may have less time to focus on how best to support Ukraine.

The Kremlin’s grievance —even Schadenfreude —has played out on Russian state television in recent days. Many commentators taunted the tens of thousands of Russian Jews who had fled to Israel after Putin’s invasion of Ukraine —in some cases to avoid being drafted into the Russian army —and who now found themselves in the middle of another war.

“Let’s watch him go into Gaza now with a weapon in hand,” one talk show guest said of a Russian tech tycoon, Arkady Volozh, who had relocated to Israel and spoken out against the invasion of Ukraine.

Others on television crowed about the weekend’s military and intelligence failures by Israel and its Western allies, while predicting that the developments could play into Russia’s hands by distracting the West from supporting Ukraine.

“The image of the invincible Israeli fortress has just collapsed,” said Olga Skabeyeva, a talk-show host on the Rossiya-1 channel. Referring to the warships that the United States is now moving closer to Israel, she added, “Are U.S. aircraft carriers next?”

For all of Putin’s apparent frustration that Israel has not endorsed his rationale for invasion, Netanyahu’s government has been cautious in its support for Ukraine, drawing the ire of Kyiv, as well. Experts say Israel has been keen not to overly antagonize Russia given Moscow’s close ties to Iran, to limit the blowback against Jews still in Russia and to preserve the communications between the Israeli and Russian militaries operating in Syria that allow their forces to avoid coming into conflict there.

Israel has not participated in Western sanctions against Russia, and has refused to provide weapons to Ukraine because, Netanyahu has said, they could end up in Iranian hands. In June, Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry claimed that the Israeli government was ignoring the suffering of Ukrainian Jews while opting for “a path of close cooperation with the Russian Federation.”

But in recent days, Zelenskyy has cast those criticisms aside and embraced Israel’s cause. In a speech to NATO on Monday, he said that Russia and Hamas, the Palestinian faction that controls Gaza, represented “the same evil.”

“The only difference is that there is a terrorist organization that attacked Israel, and here is a terrorist state that attacked Ukraine,” Zelenskyy said.

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