

Why Moscow Can't Escape Tel Aviv

Last week I did an interview with a young Chinese academic about China's approach toward West Asia and especially Palestine. Today we want to do the same for Russia to understand the complex relationship Moscow has with the region. Here to help with this task is Dr. Maria Kicha. Dr. Kicha holds a PhD in Law and she is currently serving as an Associate Professor at the Russian State University of Justice in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. Links: Telegram Channel: https://t.me/kief_point Video mentioned in the intro: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbewnsfZCsc> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Goods Store: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction & Soviet Legacy in the Middle East 00:08:33 Russia's Pragmatism in Syria: Accepting Al-Julani 00:14:19 The Russian Roots of Zionism & Early USSR-Israel Ties 00:25:13 The Chechen Factor: How Past Wars Shape Views on Israel 00:29:11 Why Russia is Passive on Gaza: The Ukraine War Constraint 00:36:00 "Our Gaza": Why Russian Liberals Tend to Support Israel 00:44:00 The Absence of Anti-Zionist Discourse & Literature in Russia 00:51:56 Relations with Gulf Monarchies: OPEC & "Shady Business"

#Pascal

Last week, I did an interview with a young Chinese academic about China's approach toward West Asia, and especially Palestine. Today, we want to do the same for Russia, to understand the complex relationship Moscow has with this region. Here to help with this task is Dr. Maria Kicha. Dr. Kicha holds a PhD in law and is currently serving as an associate professor at the Russian State University of Justice in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. Dr. Kicha, welcome. Welcome.

#Maria Kicha

Hello, Dr. Lottaz. Thank you so much. Hello.

#Pascal

Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. You were recommended to me by our colleague, Dr. Jakob Rapkin, because you've researched West Asia and Russian policy for a long time. Could you maybe give us an overview now of what Russia's relationship is—not just with Palestine, but also, let's say, with the new Syria since the fall of Bashar al-Assad—and this relationship extending even to Iran? Where is Russia at the moment?

#Maria Kicha

So actually, Russia has always been involved in the Middle East in general. I mean, Russia has always wanted to take part in Middle Eastern affairs. In some ways, this goes back to the Soviet

period, because the USSR first supported Israel in the late 1940s and early 1950s. But then the USSR realized that Israel was completely pro-American. And, of course, there was competition and a real struggle—a Cold War—after the Second World War between the USSR on one side and the United States of America on the other. That meant the USSR and the United States each had different states, countries, and social movements as their partners.

So the world was actually divided into a pro-American side and a pro-Soviet side. Israel was on the pro-American side, which is why the USSR began to support Arab regimes—but not all of them, only the republican Arab regimes, like Syria and sometimes Iraq. It supported the Palestinian movement and so on. And, of course, the United States supported the monarchies—monarchies like Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and so on—and then some republics, but more pro-Western ones, like Lebanon, for example.

And when we talk about the Cold War in the world in general, we have to understand and remember that there was also a Cold War in the Arab world—between the Arab monarchies on one side and the pro-Soviet Arab republics on the other, like Egypt and Syria. Iran is completely different, of course, because it's not an Arab country. Russia and Iran have a very long history of very difficult and complicated relations. Back in the time of the Russian Empire, our countries were neighbors. We shared a common border in the Northern Caucasus, and countries like Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were actually on that border and were sometimes even divided between us.

For example, the Republic of Azerbaijan, which you see on the map today, was actually part of historical Iran. That's why they still have some quarrels and misunderstandings even now. Anyway, it's historical destiny, and it couldn't be simpler. There was also a period of wars between Russia and Iran—Persia, as it was called at that time. And during the Second World War, Russia and Great Britain even divided Iran. There was an operation called “Agreement” in the 1940s, and one part of Iran was occupied by Soviet troops, while another part was occupied by British troops.

And that's why here in Tehran there was a famous conference—Tehran, 1943—where the leaders of the three countries, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain—Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt—met in Tehran. You know, there's one funny thing, for example. Iranians have something called a samovar. It's a special device for making tea. They love it, they use it every day, and you can find different kinds of samovars in every café and every house. It's very popular—like a cup, a plate, or a mug for us. And, you know, the funny thing is that they actually took it from Russia during the Russian-Persian wars.

#Pascal

Okay.

#Maria Kicha

So, that's it.

#Pascal

It's one of those things that was kind of a positive outcome of these interactions. They were very sad, but there was still cultural exchange, even during that war period.

#Maria Kicha

Yes, some cultural exchange, of course. But they also remember what it is—they remember the roots of this thing. And sometimes it's not positive for them. Anyway, Iranians, like many Eastern peoples, remember such things very well. They really have a good memory of their history. And then, when the USSR broke down, of course, the position of our new country, the Russian Federation, in the Middle East changed, because the new country wasn't so big. It didn't include all the Soviet republics. And actually, the Soviet system of the world—the system of the Warsaw Agreement, or Warsaw Pact—was also broken.

It didn't exist anymore. That's why Russia began to build other relationships with Middle Eastern countries and with Western Asia in general. Nowadays, Russia doesn't want to leave its military bases in Syria, of course, because it has always had good relations not only with Hafez al-Assad but also with his son, Bashar al-Assad. Moscow's position is that Russia cares for, helps, and supports the Syrian people and Syria in general. It doesn't matter who leads it, who the ruler of Syria is, because there are strong connections between the Russian nation and the Syrian nation, and Moscow doesn't want to lose them.

#Pascal

So is this the reason why Russia also decided to welcome Mr. al-Jolani in Moscow just one or two weeks ago? It really surprised me, because Mr. al-Jolani came in and pushed out Bashar al-Assad, and Mr. Assad has long been supported by Moscow. But now Russia seems to be making up with that successor government and seems to be accepting the situation. So does that go back to the connection with the Syrian people rather than the Syrian government?

#Maria Kicha

Yeah, you know, it's a situation like with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Now they're not terrorists anymore—they're the government. They are the government. Because Moscow's position is that governments change, but the country stays, and the nation stays. That's it. And, you know, the visit of al-Jolani wasn't so unexpected for experts in Russia, because we knew something like this would happen. We saw that—it was clear it would happen one day. And actually, you know, for example, Bashar al-Assad always came to Moscow in secret.

So there were no claims that he was going to visit Moscow. We just turned on the TV and saw Bashar al-Assad meeting with our president, Vladimir Putin. But this time it was announced—announced loudly—that the new leader of Syria, al-Jolani, was coming. He's on TV, in the press, on social media, and so on. Also, our ministers—for example, the Minister of Foreign Affairs—met with Sheybani, the Iranian minister. And now it's clear, it's open, there's no secret about it. That's it.

#Pascal

But, you know, it's surprising, because when something like this happens in reverse—if a government takes over that the West doesn't like, that the United States doesn't like in a country—then they'll do anything in their power to crack down on that government. An example would be Georgia. The U.S. is really unhappy with the Georgian Dream Party governing Georgia, and there's massive pressure on them. For Russia, which for the longest time stood behind Bashar al-Assad and also has a military base there, everybody's expectation was that Russia would do the opposite—that Russia would have to leave, that its military base would be lost. But that's not the case. Russia is now making up with the new Syria, even under Mr. al-Jolani.

#Maria Kicha

Russia is staying. Yeah, that's it. Because a lot of money, a lot of resources were invested—yes, they were invested in the military bases, in the connections with the Syrian people, and so on. Actually, I think that al-Jolani is also a kind of dark horse. I think he's a much more complicated person and politician than just an ex-terrorist. Yeah. How can we call him?

#Pascal

You know, some people compared him to Mr. Zelensky in Ukraine because it looked a bit like they were both installed. I mean, they even look a little bit the same, right? Especially after he cut the beard. And it's like, okay, he's now going to be the puppet of the West in Syria. But it seems that's also not going to be the case, because Mr. al-Jolani now seems able to foster relationships with various parties—including, to some extent, well, the Israelis, the Iranians... I don't know, probably not, but at least the Russians.

#Maria Kicha

You know, I'm not sure that al-Jolani, or any Arab country in general—even Saudi Arabia—will establish relations with Israel, because I don't think the situation is right for it now. That's why the Abraham Accords are expanding to places like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. These countries aren't Arab, and they have no problems with Israel. Actually, for them, normalization with Israel isn't really an issue. That's it.

#Pascal

Let's talk about that. Let's switch to Israel now, and Russia's relationship with it—which must be very complicated because of geopolitical interests, but also because of the Russian diaspora in Israel—and then Russia's relationship with Palestine. Can you talk about that a little bit?

#Maria Kicha

Oh, yeah, of course. You call it the Russian diaspora in Israel, yes? And do we call them Russian Jews in Israel, or maybe the Israeli diaspora in Russia, or something like that? Because in Russia there are a lot of nationalities, and one of them is the Jewish nationality. In the 1940s, the USSR, as I said, supported Israel very strongly, because many Zionists came from Russia—from the Russian Empire, from territories that included not only what is now Russia, but also Poland, parts of Moldova, and so on. Actually, the majority of the first Zionists, the first Zionist pioneers, had Russian roots. For example, David Ben-Gurion—his real name was David Gruen—and Golda Meir, whose original name was Golda Mabovitch. Then she married and became Golda Meir, and so on.

Leo Piskner and many, many others—theoreticians and active members of the Zionist movement—were from Russia. They immigrated from the Russian Empire, from Tsarist Russia. Later, when the Soviet Union appeared, they thought it would be a great idea to talk about getting help from the new Russia, from Soviet Russia, because they had a lot in common with the new Soviet government. Many of the Zionists who left the Russian Empire still remembered the anti-monarchist movement. Hmm, yes, yes. And also, there was something called Labor Zionism.

#Pascal

A left-wing labor government—a kind of communist version of Zionism, yeah.

#Maria Kicha

Actually, it wasn't a communist version of Zionism because, for example, it meant there would be no Arabs in the Palestinian system of labor—no Arabs at all. So, no proletarian solidarity, none of those things that were popular in the Soviet Union. But the other things, the other Soviet ideas, like collective farms—kolkhoz, yeah—those they took. And then there were the liberal Zionists, who actually weren't that liberal, including in their attitude toward the Arabs, for example. But they tried to build the economy of a Jewish state using all these Soviet ideas—like the kolkhoz, the kibbutz. They called it a kibbutz. And in the Kremlin, in Moscow, the Soviet government saw this and decided that maybe it was a good idea to support these guys, because they were from Russia, they had struggled against the Russian Empire, and they were like us—they loved our ideas.

They loved our ideology—Al-Quds, kibbutz—it was all together. That's it. But later, of course, the government eventually realized that it wasn't good. It wasn't good because Israel made a deal with the United States as well. And actually, it was a trick—a trick when Israel and the Zionist movement tried to build a friendship with the Soviet Union. Because, in fact, only two states—two very powerful

states after the Second World War—supported Israel and did everything for it to become a member of the United Nations. Those states were the United States, of course, and the USSR. There is a very, very—well, I’m trying to find the right word because I respect this academic very much—a very respectable academic from the United States, from Ohio University, as I remember, named John Quigley.

And he’s a researcher on Palestinian statehood. He’s also an expert in international law. I’ve read his books, and I think he’s a brilliant scholar. In his work, he describes the process of how Israel became a member of the United Nations, because many countries rejected it. Many didn’t want to see Israel in this new international organization. Even in the 1940s—1948, 1949—people already knew about the Nakba. They knew about the ethnic cleansing in Palestine. But that didn’t stop the USSR from supporting Israel. And the USSR was a country that had just recently crushed the Third Reich. Mm-hmm. So I think it’s one of the most tragic moments, one of those episodes in history when a country didn’t understand what was happening, what was coming.

#Pascal

So what you’re referring to is that the Zionist ideology—which, of course, wants an ethnically unified state—and today’s Israeli constitution defines Israel as the state of the Jews and not of anyone else, that this exclusive nationalism is actually very reminiscent of the exclusive nationalism the Soviet Union had just defeated in Europe?

#Maria Kicha

I think all these ideologies have a lot in common. A lot in common. Because, for example, even the founders of Israel, even the main ideologues of Israel, wrote and said things that are hard to clearly understand. It’s difficult to tell whether a quote belongs to a Zionist leader or, for example, a fascist leader. You know, there’s even a quiz on social media, like on Twitter, where users can guess the source of a quote—whether it’s from a Zionist leader or a Nazi leader. And it’s hard. It’s a tough quiz.

#Pascal

You know, the relationship between these two today seems unthinkable. But if you look at the historical record, you find this interesting medallion, right? A medallion engraved with “A Nazi Goes to Palestine,” from a visit by—not a top Nazi leader, but a mid-ranking one—who actually went on a study tour to Palestine and was shown around by a Jewish Zionist host. I forgot their names. No, was it Eichmann? No, I think it was somebody else. But I’ll put links to this in the description of the video. Anyway, there were these links, because these two ideologies are actually not mutually exclusive. They converge around the idea of getting rid of the Jews of Europe and putting them somewhere else, right? And that “somewhere else” was Palestine. Now, for the Russians—especially during the Cold War—did Russia then change its approach toward Israel and Palestine, or did it remain the same, like an uneasy friendship?

#Maria Kicha

We had rather complicated relations with Israel after the Second World War and after all those moves to support Israel. Because, first of all, Israel went into the pro-American camp—of course, that became very, very clear. And the Kremlin was disappointed about that and began to support Arab regimes, friendly Arab regimes. And then, you know, now there's this thing in Israel called **Hasbara**. **Hasbara**—it's public diplomacy. So Israel defines it as public diplomacy, but actually it's official Israeli propaganda. No problem with that fact, because every country has propaganda, okay? It's not a problem. But Israeli propaganda, **Hasbara**, includes absolutely everything—it includes politicians, journalists, diplomats, influencers.

Social media celebrities and so on. It has a real army of social media users and just ordinary people who support Israel because they think it's the only democracy in the Middle East. Because, yes, it's a small but brave state surrounded by what they see as wild and barbaric Arab countries. Because it fights Islamic terrorism. Islamic terrorism is a very painful topic for Russia because, in the 1990s and at the beginning of the new century, we had two wars in Chechnya. Chechnya is part of Russia, located in the northern Caucasus. And actually, Chechen people are citizens of the Russian Federation—they have Russian passports. But anyway, there was a terrible fight. It was very bloody for my country.

And, of course, there were a lot of soldiers of fortune who died—who were invited to Chechnya. And many of these guys were supported by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Now, of course, officially it's forgotten because of political reasons. But anyway, for example, Turkish President Erdoan sometimes opens new social facilities in Turkey named in honor of Dzhokhar Dudayev. Who is Dzhokhar Dudayev? He was the leader of the separatists in Chechnya—we called it Ichkeria. So that's it. And, you know, there's a joke in Russia that if Recep Tayyip Erdoan names any park or street in Turkey in honor of Dzhokhar Dudayev, then we should name a park or street in honor of Abdullah Öcalan.

#Pascal

Oh, petty. But okay, I understand the feelings now. Maybe let's go back a little to Russia's Palestine policy and politics, especially in recent years. I mean, Russia and your foreign minister—Sergei Lavrov—have been vocal several times at the United Nations, saying this bloodletting, this carnage, must stop. He never said "genocide," but he did say the bloodletting must stop. It seems to me that Russia tried to put pressure on Israel to stop the onslaught in Gaza. But in the end—no, sorry, that's not true—they didn't use the veto to oppose the most recent Security Council resolution. That was strange to me, because I thought they would, since this resolution is so clearly, utterly colonial in its mindset. It basically makes Donald Trump the president of a colonial administration. It's so far outside anything that I think Russia is trying to build with the entire BRICS environment around it. Can you explain that a bit?

#Maria Kicha

I think there's something similar, like a kind of Chinese attention, because right now Russia supports Palestine, of course. Russia recognizes the Palestinian state with its capital in Western Jerusalem. In Russia, they've invited delegations from Hamas, for example. Russia has rather good, even partner-like, relations with different elements of the pro-Iranian axis of resistance. And of course, now we have very good relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran in general. But now we have our own war in Ukraine. We don't call it a war officially—we call it a special military operation. But anyway, a lot of resources, a lot of people, a lot of everything in Russia is going there. For example, my hometown is called Rostov-on-Don. It's in the south of Russia, near Donbass—near that part of the land that used to be part of Ukraine and then became part of Russia. And, for example, we feel it here. We feel the special military operation every week, and sometimes every day.

#Pascal

You mean impacts like Ukrainian drones? Or do you mean you feel it because Rostov-on-Don is also one of the important military logistics centers for the Russian army? Or do you mean impacts coming from Ukraine?

#Maria Kicha

We feel it in general—just in the atmosphere, you know. For example, our airport stopped working and was closed on February 24th, 2022. So there are no civilian flights from Rostov-on-Don. And it's a big city—Rostov-on-Don is one of the Russian cities with more than a million people. That's why it's difficult for us to go anywhere—to Moscow, to another Russian city, or abroad, of course. The security situation is okay, but still, every day you have some reminders about it, because it's near. It's really near—sometimes from drones, from everything.

#Pascal

So, to you, is this an explanation for why Russia is trying not to open another front, not to pick another fight, and therefore chose to abstain from the Security Council resolution vote—just to let it go because it's busy with other things?

#Maria Kicha

First of all, yes, I think so. And then Russia, like China, always tries to have a balanced policy—a balanced international policy. For example, of course, Russia can't make some claims like maybe certain Arab countries, because it recognizes Israel anyway. And in Israel, there are a lot of people—many people—with Russian citizenship, with Russian passports, because we had several waves of immigration to Israel in the 1990s, in the early 2000s, and even after the start of the special military operation, when people decided to leave Russia or other post-Soviet countries and try to build a new

life in a new country. Also, Zionism and sympathies for Zionism are rather popular in some parts of Russian society, because a lot of educated people, a lot of liberal people, believe that Israel is the historical homeland of the Jews, that it's a great country—the only democracy in the Middle East. People there live with all human rights. Palestinians, maybe not so much.

#Pascal

So it's a supportive mindset. But can you tell me more about that? Our Chinese colleague, Sheng Zheng, told me that the genocide in Gaza really opened the eyes of many—especially young Chinese people—who see this and sympathize deeply with the horrors in Gaza, because they recognize something of their own history, the way China was colonized for a long time during that hundred-year period of humiliation. And in Russia, this seems to be different. So, Zionism is not regarded as critically as it might be in China or other parts of the Global South, inside Russia?

#Maria Kicha

Oh, sometimes, maybe, yes. Is that it? Because... I can't say that the Middle East in general is a very popular topic of discussion in Russian society. First of all, our country is very big—actually, it's the biggest country on the planet—and we have a lot of internal things to discuss. We have a lot of things inside our country to take care of, and it takes a lot of time for us to understand what's going on, even just within our own borders, not to mention abroad. And then, for example, just imagine your friend or colleague moves to Israel for some personal reason.

I don't think you would break off all relations with him or her because of that. And maybe, when he or she says bad, terrible, even bloodthirsty things about the Arabs, you'll try to get an explanation for it. For example: "Oh, they have their own deals, their own atmosphere, their own history there. It's not my business, I don't care about it." Of course, there are some people who look for answers, who are interested in the situation in the Middle East, and who have opened their eyes to it—especially in connection with the Gaza genocide.

And, you know, they have very strong flashbacks from Nazi Germany, because it's also a very, very painful period in my country's history. In the 1940s, there was a big struggle between the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, and every Russian family has a relative—a granddad—who was killed or injured. It's really a kind of national trauma. That's why the 9th of May, which we call Victory Day, is the main celebration, the main fest in Russia. Every year, every year. It's much more important than New Year, for example. We don't celebrate Christmas; we celebrate New Year at the end of the year.

#Pascal

So overall, what I'm taking away from what you're saying is that Gaza hasn't been as big a topic compared to other issues inside Russia over the last two years. And although the foreign ministry has a certain line on it, Russia wouldn't want to sacrifice something important over this topic and

therefore just goes along. But that doesn't mean it supports the Zionist cause—not at all, right? It's more of a "well, that's just how it is" approach.

#Maria Kicha

I think that Russia tries to have a balanced policy—just a balanced international policy—for many reasons. And, for example, I'll try to explain one interesting thing. I'm a researcher; I've been working at the university for about 20 years. And, of course, I have a lot of former students. Now they're not boys and girls anymore—they're adults with families and their own kids. Some of them are Jewish, of course, and some of them moved to Israel. Just imagine: you're scrolling through social media and you find that your former student—a very nice girl, you remember her as clever and cheerful—who moved to Israel, has posted a picture with her Israeli friend and wrote, "Our kids will live in our Gaza."

And you look at it and you think, what? You're Gaza? My dear, you're from Taganrog. Taganrog is a town near Rostov-on-Don. You're from here. Your parents are from here. Your roots are here. Of course, you can go anywhere—it's not a problem. You can live anywhere. You can meet a boyfriend from any country you want. It's your personal life, no problem with that. But you're Gaza? And she doesn't even think that in Gaza there are other girls like her, with other boys like her boyfriend, and they also want to have kids in their Gaza, because they live there.

#Pascal

But this is—I mean, this is the incredible power of this Zionist ideology, right? That people from somewhere outside Rostov-on-Don start identifying with a mythical 3,000-year-old population of Israel. The true and honest owners, so to speak. So she, in that mindset, saw Russia as just a period within her long, long history, which all goes back to Israel, right? So it's also that many Jews, or Jewish families, in Russia are actually susceptible to this worldview problem.

#Maria Kicha

Yeah, there are a lot of Jewish families in Russia, and a lot of Jewish people for whom Zionism feels like a kind of patriotism. For them, it's a genuinely patriotic ideology.

#Pascal

But, you know, in the United States we also have Jewish intellectuals like Jeffrey Sachs, in Canada Rabkin and others, and the Orthodox Jews in general who oppose Zionism—the real believing Jews who oppose it—and also secular Jews who oppose it. In Russia, do you also have Jewish opposition to Zionism? Visible? Yes.

#Maria Kicha

No, no, no, no. Unfortunately not, because I think the brightest person in this field is Professor Rabkin. He's Russian-speaking, from the USSR—Leningrad, as far as I remember, St. Petersburg now. But, of course, fortunately, his books are regularly published in Russia and in Russian, though I don't think that causes much discussion on the topic. For example, you know there's a major branch in Israeli historical studies called the "New Historians," like Benny Morris, Avi Shlaim, and so on. Of course, Benny Morris is a Zionist, but some of his books are very interesting because he really tried to understand what happened and how it happened. So they're valuable—really valuable books. Anyway, in Russia, unfortunately, none of these researchers' or academics' books are published. No Tom Segev books, no Avi Shlaim books—absolutely nothing like that.

#Pascal

How about the—what's his name? He's in the UK. Ilan Pappé?

#Maria Kicha

No, no, no, no. Absolutely not. For example, we're just discussing these academics right now, but in Russia these names aren't even mentioned. And, of course, there are no books by Palestinian authors published in Russia—like Rashid Khalidi, Walid Khalidi, Nur Masalha, and so on. Actually, you know, I'm now writing a book about the Arab-Israeli conflict, and I'm using the works and books of all these authors and many others. I've found a lot of documents about that period, and it's very interesting for me. But I think it will be one of the first books of this kind in Russia.

#Pascal

That's very surprising—very surprising to me. So, in a sense, it explains why Russia has, in that case, less interest. It's just less of a topic than, let's say, in Europe or North America. And how about social media, though? Our Chinese colleague told me that social media in China is full of discussions and pictures of what's happening in Gaza, and that this has really educated an entire generation about what Zionism is. Is that also something that's not really happening in Russia, in your observation?

#Maria Kicha

Russian social media aren't full of content about the Palestinian cause or pro-Palestinian material. Of course, there are some social media sources that support Palestine—often, very often, they're Muslim sources. And of course, there are a lot of Muslims in Russia, and they support their Palestinian brothers. But I prefer to find something not religious, not national, but humanitarian in general. And it's a big problem to find this kind of content in society, and for society in general. I think that's very sad. Of course, any of us can say it's not our business—it's just not our business. We live in another country; we have our own things to do.

We have our own problems as people in another country. I think what Israel is doing with Palestine is absolutely unacceptable because it's a dangerous case—the method itself is terrible. And everybody can face it, unfortunately. Today it's not your business, but tomorrow you can become a victim. You can become a victim. That's why I don't understand some of my ex-students, or some intellectuals, who think—or who tell us—that there is a struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. Actually, that's the rhetoric of Netanyahu, for example. He really thinks he's a guy in white clothes fighting against world evil.

#Pascal

Yeah, no, it's an insane worldview. It's just, you know, one of the things we need to explain is why so many countries see what's going on but then act the way they do. I mean, including the Europeans, who—you know—everything that's happening in Gaza should be antithetical to their core beliefs and values. But then they excuse it away, at least the elites do. It's a different story for the people on the ground. But apparently, from what you're telling me, the way history developed, the way personal ties developed, and the way the entire view of West Asia developed—it's just less of a topic in Russia than it is, let's say, in Europe or even in China. And then Russia, combined with that, wants a balanced relationship in its near abroad. So you kind of go along while criticizing, but you don't overdo it, and you don't use your veto power to try to stop the killing. Is that it?

#Maria Kicha

I think, really—you know, I agree with our Chinese colleague. It's something like that, in general.

#Pascal

Right. Well, thank you for that, Eddie. Is there something more that really needs to be understood about Russia's approach to the Middle East—to West Asia—that we haven't covered yet? We talked about Syria, a bit about Iran, we talked about Palestine. Is there one more thing that's really important, that might help explain why things are developing the way they are?

#Maria Kicha

I think it's interesting to look at Russian, Saudi, and Emirati relations—and actually Russia's relations with the oil monarchies and Arab monarchies in general, including Jordan and even Morocco. Because, actually, that's a pro-American and pro-British camp. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are oil countries, and so is Russia. We have a lot of ties through OPEC, for example. And here, Russia also needs to maintain some balance in international relations. That's why, for instance, there are a lot of Russian citizens in Saudi Arabia now, according to Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030, because he wants to see his kingdom developed, open, and not as conservative as it used to be.

And, of course, Russian people also love to go to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for different things—for business, for relaxing, for vacations. Anyway, it's interesting that the United Arab Emirates is becoming, you know, not a second home, but a second place to stay for many Russians who may have a bit of a shady business past—some criminal affairs, something like that.

#Pascal

Okay, so overall, we can expect this multifaceted foreign policy of Russia to continue toward West Asia, because there's no reason to pick fights. It's a region where Russia would rather maintain a working relationship. This was very, very interesting. Thank you so much for this. Dr. Kicha, for people who want to find your work, where should they go? Do you post on social media, or is there a place to find your writings?

#Maria Kicha

I have a Telegram channel, for example. It has a long Russian name, but actually it's a key point.

#Pascal

If you send me the link to this via email, I'll put it in the description below. Everybody, please go and find Dr. Kicha there. Maria Kicha, thank you very much for your time today.

#Maria Kicha

Thank you very much.