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## **How Identity and Role Influence Russian Foreign Policy Behavior in the Middle East:**

**A Focus on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

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Master in International Studies

Supervisor:

PhD, Giulia Daniele, Researcher and Guest Assistant Professor  
ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon

November, 2020



SOCIOLOGIA  
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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## **Resumo**

Seguindo a premissa de Tsygankov (2012) em que as ações de política externa são inseparáveis do seu contexto social, este estudo aplica essa abordagem construtivista ao comportamento da Rússia no Médio Oriente com um foco no conflito Israelo-Palestiniano. O estudo analisa a) qual a identidade e as concepções de papel Russas que têm sido estabelecidas, b) como essas têm evoluído com o tempo, e c) se existem discrepâncias entre a autopercepção Russa e a percepção externa da mesma. A análise de discurso serve como estrutura analítica avaliando o comportamento da política externa Russa em três níveis: estatal, social e internacional. Estes estão refletidos nos documentos oficiais publicados pelo governo Russo, como também na cobertura dos meios de comunicação Russos e Ocidentais.

A análise conclui que a política externa Russa no Médio Oriente é modelada através das estruturas sociais de cooperação cuidadosamente criadas pela Rússia com os atores regionais, o que permite à Rússia assumir o papel de mediador-equilibrador nos conflitos locais. Entretanto, a sua relação com o Ocidente continua a desempenhar um papel dominante na construção de identidade da Rússia, o que se reflete no seu comportamento de política externa em todo o Médio Oriente. Enquanto ambos os meios de comunicação não-estatais Russos e Ocidentais destacam a identidade de Grande Potência no discurso Russo, as autoridades Russas não realçam o poder como uma motivação para as suas ações no conflito Israelo-Palestiniano. Por outro lado, em contraste à sua importância na região do Médio Oriente em geral, a oposição firme da Rússia a mudanças de regime externas e a sua multiétnica identidade Euroasiática não parecem influenciar o comportamento Russo no conflito Israelo-Palestiniano em particular.

Palavras-chave: Política externa Russa, Médio Oriente, Conflito Israelo-Palestiniano, Construtivismo, Role Theory, Identity Theory

## **Abstract**

Following Tsygankov's (2012) premise that foreign policy actions are inseparable from their social context, the present study applies a constructivist approach to Russia's behavior in the Middle East, with a focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It analyzes a) which Russian identity and role conceptions have been established, b) how they have evolved over time, and c) whether discrepancies between Russia's self and external perception exist. A discourse analysis serves as analytical framework, evaluating Russian foreign-policy behavior on three levels: state, society and international. These are reflected in official documents issued by the Russian government, as well as Russian and Western media coverage.

The analysis concludes that Russian foreign policy in the Middle East is shaped through Russia's carefully created cooperative social structures with regional actors, which enable Russia to assume a mediator-balancer role in local conflicts. Meanwhile, its relation to the West continues to play a dominant part in Russia's identity construction, which is reflected in its foreign-policy behavior throughout the Middle East. While both non-state Russian and Western media stress the great power identity in the Russian discourse, Russian authorities do not emphasize power as a motive for their actions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the other hand, opposed to their importance in the Middle Eastern region in general, Russia's firm opposition to external regime change and its Eurasian multi-ethnic identity do not seem to influence Russia's behavior in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, Middle East, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, constructivism, role theory, identity theory

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## Glossary of Acronyms

FPA	Foreign-Policy Analysis
G7/G8	The Group of Eight/The Group of Seven
I:AEI/AEI identity	Against external influences and forced regime change as part of Russian identity
I:GP/GP identity	Russia's great power identity
I:GRA/GRA identity	Good relations to all actors in the region as part of Russian identity
I:ME/ME identity	Russia's multi-ethnicity as part of Russian identity
I:MM/MM identity	Russia's Muslim minority as part of Russian identity
I:WSO/WSO identity	The West as Russia's significant Other as part of Russian identity
IPD	Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
IR	International Relations
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MT	The Moscow Times
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NRC	National Role Conceptions
NYT	The New York Times
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
PA	Palestinian Authority
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
Quartet	The Quartet on the Middle East
R:AH/ AH role	Russia's anti-hegemonic role
R:CPP/ CPP role	Russia's role as a co-patriot protector
R:MB/ MB role	Russia's mediator-balancer role
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Major Research Question

Since the seventeenth century and the Russian Empire's creation, Russia was considered to be different from other nations. Therefore, Russian foreign policy has, from the start, been a "highly controversial and hotly disputed subject" (Kreutz, 2007, p. 1). Western mainstream media often call Russia a disrupting force around the world, including in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> For instance, in his famous speech on 8 March 1983, President Ronald Reagan called the Soviet Union an "evil empire" (cited in *This Day in History*, 1983). Even though Russia is no longer called that, the vocabulary related to Russia's international role has not entirely changed. In 2017, the US newspaper *Politico* accused Russia of "destabilizing [Europe] on every front" and of exacerbating the immigration crises in the EU "by its malign influence" (Kirchick, 2017). In his influential writing *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said pointed out the ethnocentric assumptions of Western perception and media analysis, attaching to the countries of the "Orient connotations to radicalism, terrorism, and oppressive regimes." David Foglesong (2007) revealed similar biases by the US towards Russia since the late 19th century. On the other hand, many Middle Eastern countries do not seem to feel the same about Russia (Katz, 2018), which will be of great significance throughout this study.

Before the Soviet Union's fall in 1991, Soviet authorities had created strong ties with the Arab world. They held relatively good relations with Algeria, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, and the Palestinian Authority (PA). The Soviet Union was seen as a counterbalance to the American capitalist presence and, therefore, an appealing alternative (Kozhanov, 2017, p. 103). Under President Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), Russian diplomacy became more Western-oriented, and due to domestic issues, the development of relations with the Middle East did not further improve. Israel has been the only exception, whose ties with Moscow never ceased to develop (Kozhanov, 2017, p. 103; Cherif, 2019, p. 15).

As soon as President Vladimir Putin first came to power in 2000, he visited several Middle Eastern countries. The main goal was to find convergences with his counterparts and possible similar interests in security or concerning economic issues (Lovotti and Talbot, 2019, p. 8), which led to improved ties with almost all regional actors (Sladden et al, 2017, p. 2).

When Putin started his third presidential term in 2012, he acknowledged the Middle East's importance in terms of political, economic, and security goals. He increased Russian presence in the region, and the intervention in Syria in 2015 can be considered the first relevant military action in the area since the Soviet Union's fall (Kozhanov, 2017, p. 105), which reopened a geopolitical front door for Russia (Lovotti and Talbot, 2019, p. 7).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, the term "Middle East" will be used based on Nizameddin's (1999) definition, which includes the Arab Gulf states, Turkey, Iran, Israel, and its neighbors.

Historically, another important focus has been represented by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict identified as a proxy war between the US and the Soviet Union since the 1950s, with the US supporting mainly Israeli interests and the Soviet Union being a principal for the Palestinians. Since the US moved its embassy to Jerusalem in 2017, recognizing it as the legitimate capital of Israel, US-Palestinian relations have not only deteriorated, but interactions were completely cut down (Levingston and Wainer, 2019). Adding to this, the long-awaited Trump administration's Middle East Peace Plan, which was released on 28 January 2020, has been rejected by the PA as "failing to meet the minimum rights and aspirations of the Palestinian People" (United Nations, 2020).

Meanwhile, Russia has kept a neutral position in the conflict, maintaining good relations with both sides. Putin has endeavored to implement Russia's perception of inheriting a mediating role in the conflict through visits to both Israeli and Palestinian officials and calling for peace talks. In February 2019, for example, delegations of 12 Palestinian political parties – including Fatah, Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad Movement – were invited to Moscow for the third time to discuss a possible intra-Palestinian reconciliation (Belenkaya, 2019). Various scholars, such as Asseburg (2017; 2018), have stressed the importance of the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas as an essential step to successful democratization in the Palestinian Territories and for any Palestinian negotiation team's legitimacy in future peace talks. In May 2020, Russia proposed to host a meeting between the US and Palestinian leaders to help renew their ties (Staff, 2020).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the world's most persistent conflicts, which caused the need for support for approximately 5.6 million Palestine refugees. Despite various attempts to foster peace, none of them have led to a long-lasting settlement so far. According to United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres, the conflict even "remains key to sustainable peace in the Middle East" (Guterres, 2020). Multiple different actors have been involved in hosting Israeli-Palestinian summits or attempts to broker peace agreements. One of the leading organizations in the mediation of peace negotiations is the Quartet on the Middle East. Founded in 2002, it consists of the US, the European Union, the UN, and Russia, which strengthens the assumption that Russia may be a crucial actor in the peace process. Statements made by several key figures in the conflict, such as from the PA President Mahmoud Abbas further strengthen the relevance of this topic. He claimed that "It is not possible to resolve the Palestinian issue without Russia's real participation" (Abbas, 2017a),

The myth of Russia's "return" to the MENA region of the past years has attracted growing interest among policymakers throughout the region and beyond (Lovotti and Talbot, 2019, p. 7). However, Russian foreign policy is usually examined from a realist perspective (Cherif, 2019). Dannreuther (2012) argues how media discusses Russian foreign policy still comes from Cold War patterns, which he calls "Cold War Paradigm," deriving from realist assumptions of the balance of power and anarchy.

This thesis follows authors like Tsygankov (2016), who claims that Russian foreign policy can or maybe even should be analyzed through a constructivist lens since part of Russia's interest in the Middle East region may come from its identity. As Schimmelpennick van der Oye (2014, p. 86) explains, some

Russians have identified themselves more with the East than the West, conscious of their own Asian roots. Early followers of the Eurasianist ideology of the 1920s saw Russia as a distinct Eurasian country, belonging neither to Europe nor Asia (Neumann 1996, pp. 110-116). Since the Soviet Union's dissolution, the idea that Russia forms an "Eurasian" continent, combining the East and the West, has witnessed a significant revival (Laruelle, 2008). The Eurasian narrative identity, as well as a hint of Said's (1987) Orientalism, appears essential, as Russia has continued to strengthen its ties with Said's Orient, the supposedly "weak" states". Rangsimaporn (2006, pp. 371-372) argues that the Eurasian identity has often been used in political discourse to justify meddling with the affairs of regions adjoining its territory.

Based on this background, this thesis aims to uncover the influence of Russia's constructed identities and roles on its foreign policy towards the Middle East and, more specifically, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The study applies a "constructivist foreign policy analysis", using insights from identity theory, focusing on the behavioral implications of identities and role theory. This process must be analyzed differently from its behavior in different regions of the world and should not be done in a zero-sum understanding of international politics. Instead of focusing on power and economic interests as sole explanatory factors for Russia's interests in the region, this thesis will shed light on the influence of Russia's identity and role in the Middle East on its policies and behavior.

As a result, the main research questions are: Which national identity and role conceptions have been established in the Middle East since the Soviet Union's dissolution? How have they evolved in Russia's current positioning and discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Are there any discrepancies between identities and roles implemented by the Russian ruling elite and public domestic or foreign opinions?

## **1.2. Theoretical Framework**

### **1.2.1. Introduction**

This analysis starts from the theoretical assumption that states are not preconstituted political entities but in a constant formation process and that evolving identities and states' roles influence their foreign-policy behavior. Foreign policy provides a tool for the ongoing self-definition process for a national collective constituted by the state. It offers a pathway to interact with the external world and provides proof of how the collective is viewed and evaluated by the outside environment. It serves as a means of establishing self-perception through interest-driven objectives and as a means of verifying its appropriateness (Campbell, 1992). Foreign policy can be interpreted from the perspective of the state or the society, and other actors in the international system may support it or not (Tsygankov, 2012, p. 1).

The (neo-) realist International Relations (IR) theory fails to explain why countries like China, India, or the former Soviet Union, have shown loyalty towards certain values, imprinted in their foreign policy decisions, even despite additional economic or diplomatic costs. Likewise, the Russian backing of separatism in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and eastern Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimea did not

lead to favorable outcomes for Russia, from a realist or rational perspective (Rezvani, 2020, pp. 4-18). This highlights the need for other possible explanations. Instead, this study is based on Tsygankov's (2012) constructivist premise that every foreign policy behavior is a social phenomenon and that foreign policy agents cannot be separated from the (social) context in which they are embedded. Therefore, through the use of a "constructivist foreign-policy analysis" and role theory, the hypothesis is that Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular, is at least partially identity- and role-based. Thus, at the core of this thesis's analytical framework stand two key concepts: identity and role.

### 1.2.2. Constructivism

The end of the Cold War undermined neorealist theory in two ways: First, the Soviet bloc disintegrated, as opposed to the expectations that the bipolarity of the international system would persist. Second, the change did not follow any neorealist theoretical proposition since it was not the result of a "hegemonic" or system-wide war, the result of different alliances, or the emergence of a new "superpower" (Kosloswki and Kratochwil, 1994, p. 217). Alexander Wendt (1999, p. 4) emphasizes that these difficulties came from IR materialist and individualist orientation, which eventually led to the revival of constructivism.

Many scholars consider Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999) as the true nature of constructivism (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 202). As a first step, Wendt argues that social rather than material forces influence the structure of the international system. He claims that identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed instead of being determined by the international environment, and the logic of the anarchy in the international system is formed within the interaction of actors (Wendt, 1999, pp. 20-21). For this work, all three steps are likewise necessary.

Wendt (1999) focuses his analysis on states and the state system since he considers them to be key actors regulating organized violence, being one fundamental problem of international politics. Therefore, system change happens ultimately through states. Similarly, this thesis explores the notions of "state identity" and "national role conception", leaving aside other important influencing actors such as social movements or non-state-actors. This should not be interpreted as a claim of the state's primacy in IR theory.<sup>2</sup> By speaking about national "interests," "needs," or "responsibilities," the decision-makers of a state constitute themselves and each other as agents (p. 10). Therefore, this study defines states as agents, being the basis of the analysis.

Constructivists emphasize the importance of structures, as they can shape social and political actors' behavior, whereas normative and ideational structures are just as important as material structures. In contrast to neo-realists, stressing the material structure of military power's balance and Marxists,

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<sup>2</sup> Just as Wendt (1999), I will follow the Weberian approach (instead of the pluralist or Marxist approach) to define a "state" as an organization that owns sovereignty and that "successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order" (Weber 1978:54).

focusing on the material structure of the capitalist world economy, constructivists claim that “systems of shared ideas, beliefs, and values also have structural characteristics and that they exert a powerful influence on social and political action” (Reus-Smit, 2005, p.196). Checkel (1998, pp. 325-326) argues that constructivism is an approach to social inquiry based on the assumptions that the environment in which agents/states act is social *and* material and that this setting provides agents/states with comprehension of their interests. Agents and structures are in constant interaction, and they are mutually constructed (Checkel, 1998, p. 326; Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 198).

### **1.2.3. Identity Theory**

The notion of identity is completely bracketed by neorealism and neoliberalism. Constructivists, such as Wendt (1992, p. 398) or Reus-Smit (2005, p. 197), agree that identities are the basis of state interests. These interests shape a state’s behavior, being the central concept of the constructivist school of thought. Through interaction with other international community participants, states build belonging, ties, and their own identities. Some international actors are more important for a state’s Self than others. Through these significant Others, the national Self determines its characteristics and suitable actions. The mere presence of the Self cannot exist without the acknowledgment of the Other. Thus, national identity is a framework of meanings that reflects the Self’s emotions, cognitive and judgmental orientations towards its significant Other. The significant Other provides the relevant context for the existence and evolution of the Self and consequently has a crucial impact on the Self, which can reinforce or undermine the identity of the Self. These influences can encourage the Self to cooperate or resist, depending on whether the Self perceives them as an extension or devaluation of its acceptance (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 15).

Identity theory’s goal is to comprehend how social structures affect the Self (or the social structure of the Self) and how the Self affects social behaviors (Stryker and Burke, 2000, p. 285). By collectively constructing identities, society permanently discusses the question of who “we” are (Orvis and Drogus, 2018), which may be used to guide political action and basic worldviews (Aggestam, 2004, p. 82).

As realists see foreign policy as a result of a unitary state’s power advances, and liberalists consider it as the process of a specific entity seeking modernization. On the other hand, for constructivists, “the role of a coalition is to put forward a particular image of national identity that will speak to the existing local conditions and be recognized by the significant Other” (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 16). Therefore, both influences from the international system and the domestic realm affect a state’s evolution of the national Self and, consequently, its foreign-policy behavior (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 17). While Wendt’s (1999) systemic constructivism completely brackets the domestic realm, I agree with Tsygankov (2016) and introduce the Russian domestic situation as part of the analysis.

The way to connect identity and action through motivational arrangements is through roles. Therefore, roles become a medium of passage between identity and action, revising the presumption that identity alone determines the interests that a state pursues in the international system (Wehner and

Thies, 2013, p. 418). A state's identity is, therefore, connected to behavior through the conception and exercise of roles.

#### **1.2.4. Role Theory**

Much of the constructivist work on identity, self-images, culture, and norms is closely related to the literature on national role concepts. While constructivists such as Wendt (1999) focus on the structural explanation of roles, this analysis acknowledges the importance of creating a balance between agency and structure to explain Russia's foreign policy behavior.

Role theory originally appeared in sociology and psychology to "understand the behavior of individuals" (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012, p. 6; Le Prestre, 1997). Role theory in IR focuses on the roles, which actors (individuals, states, and others) enact on the international stage. They refer to an organized group's social positions and socially accepted categories of actors (Wehner and Thies, 2014, p. 411). Role theory made its first appearance in foreign-policy analysis (FPA) in the 1970s with K. J. Holsti's study of "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy", when researchers began to identify the regular patterns of behavior of states in the bipolar structure of the Cold War, such as "non-aligned" or "allies." Since then, an increasing number of role theorists have acknowledged the existence of various social roles – such as leader, mediator, initiator – in the development of the social structure of international relations (Wendt, 1999). However, according to Breuning (2011, p. 22), the potential value of role theory in understanding non-material aspects of foreign policy behavior has not been adequately acknowledged, especially among US academics.

Roles refer to anticipated behavior patterns, defined by both the own conception of an actor and other agents' expectations. Roles are a learning and socialization effect in interactive negotiation processes in which self-understanding is confronted with the Others' expectations (Elgström and Smith, 2006, p. 5).

##### **1.2.4.1. Roles as Qualities that States Attribute to Themselves and thus as Properties of Agents**

K. J. Holsti (1970) argues that the Self might hold various beliefs about the role of a state. He focuses mainly on leaders of states and therefore, creates the notion of "national role conceptions," the NRCs. NRCs include a policymaker's "own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions, suitable to their state," and the functions, if any, "their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems" (Holsti, 1970, p. 246). Holsti was the first to go beyond the assumption that each state can have only one single role in the international system. He identified 17 different roles in his study by analyzing state leaders' speeches between 1965 and 1967, such as regional leader, mediator-integrator or faithful ally (Ibid.).

According to Holsti (1970), Walker (1987), and Grossman (2005), NRCs are not influenced by the Other to a great extent. They believe that foreign policymakers will behave following what they believe is their country's role in the international system (Grossman, 2005, p. 336). Therefore, researchers working with NRCs are often prone to lean on self-defined role concepts, leaving the Other's role



prescriptions behind (Ibid.). To overcome this limitation, I will additionally use Wendt's (1999) constructivist application of roles as social structures' properties.

#### **1.2.4.2. Roles as Properties of Social Structures**

Contrary to foreign policy role theorists, such as Holsti (1970, p. 243), who mainly talk about roles as domestically constituted beliefs of individuals or the elite (unit-level properties), Wendt (1999, p. 257) sees roles as attributes of structures and not agents, which cannot be reduced to individuals. This argument seems valid since, according to Stryker and Statham (1985, p. 330) and Barnett (1993, p. 274), role theory can be applied to individuals as well as corporate identities. Wendt (1999, p. 259) distinguishes between role identities and roles. He argues that role identities are subjective self-understandings, taken on or discarded by individuals (such as Holsti's NRCs). Roles instead are "the objective, collectively constituted positions that give meanings to those understandings." Wendt proposes that the international system's anarchic structure can have at least three different kinds of structure at the macro level, based on which role – enemy, rival, or friend – dominates the system. These roles are adopted through social interaction and by representations of the Self and the Other and may dominate the system, producing three different "political cultures" of anarchy: Hobbesian (enmity), Lockean (rivalry), and Kantian (friendship).

Wendt (1999, p. 149) defines "culture" as the subset of social structure, created by shared ideas. The notion of "social" structure follows the assumption that actors take each other into account when choosing their actions and roles in the international system. Wendt acknowledges that system structures do not wholly construct state agents; however, he argues they are constructed by them to a significant extent (Ibid., p. 246). To Wendt, a "logic of anarchy"<sup>3</sup> does not exist per se, since what gives anarchy meaning are the people who live there and the structure of their relationships (Ibid., pp. 308-309).

The Hobbesian culture and the notion of enemy are constituted by the Other's representation as an actor who does not have the right to exist autonomously. Violence between enemies has no limits, and enemy states will try to destroy or conquer each other. The logic of this political culture's anarchy is the "war of all against all," where survival depends only on military power and security (Ibid., pp. 261-265)<sup>4</sup>. The Lockean culture differentiates from the Hobbesian culture through the acknowledgement of the rival's right to exist and sovereignty. Rivals are constituted by representations about Self and Other with respect to violence as well. However, this violence is less threatening and the goal is not to conquer or dominate the Other. While rivals expect the Other to use military force to settle disputes, there are certain limits in using force, which leads to limited security concerns (Ibid., pp. 279-282).

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<sup>3</sup> While a materialist and individualist approach led neorealist Kenneth Waltz (1979) to the assumption that the international system is a sphere of anarchy, resulting in a conflictual, "self-help" world, Wendt (1992) concludes that "anarchy is what states make of it".

<sup>4</sup> Enemy images are rarely found today. However, exemplary are Palestinian and Israeli fundamentalists, who claim that the Other intends to destroy or enslave the Self (Wendt, 1999, pp. 161-162).

According to Wendt, several states' relationship, especially in the North Atlantic, seems to have gone beyond the Lockean culture since World War II. A possible idealist structural has emerged in the international system, where non-violence and team play exist. Wendt calls this culture "Kantian," and it is based on the role structure of friendship. Statesmen of the contemporary world refer to each other often as "friends." In some cases, this is not only "cheap talk" but reflected in their behavior towards each other. In the role structure of friendship, states expect each other to follow two rules: the rule of non-violence – disputes are settled without war or the threat of war – and the rule of mutual aid – they will act as a team in case that a third party threatens the security of the other state. However, it is important to distinguish between friends and allies. While allies and friends behave similarly, allies do not believe that the alliance will continue indefinitely, and states prepare for the case that the relationship might go back to rivalry. On the other hand, friendship is "temporally open-ended." It continues even in case of disagreements (Ibid., pp. 297-299).

#### **1.2.4.3. Role Theory's Potential to Link Agents and Structure**

Thies (2009, p. 34), Wehner and Thies (2014, p. 412), Breuning (2011) and Aggestam (2004, p. 82) argue that role theory offers the potential to negotiate the agent-structure problem<sup>5</sup>, which has been a topic of interest in IR theory since the late 1980s. Most role theorists have assumed that roles can either be ego/agent or alter/structure-driven entities (Harnisch 2012, p. 48). Holsti (1970), Le Prestre (1997) and Krotz (2001) focus on the ego/agent-specific role components, such as personal traits or identities as "self-representations" or "self-images," while Elgström and Smith (2006) and Wendt (1999) emphasize the "alter/structure" and highlight role indications and requirements, including expectations embedded in institutions. However, according to Wehner and Thies (2014, p. 414), and Aggestam (2006, p. 12), role theory can identify the relationship between the individual (the agent) and the social structure.

Through the synthetic use of constructivism and role theory, this study attempts to combine both approaches. Based on this framework, Russia's identities and roles in the Middle East and in particular in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, will be analyzed from Russia's self-perception, including the social structure established between the involved actors, Wendt's "political culture", in which the identities and roles are embedded. By emphasizing the interplay between agency and structure, Russia's foreign policymakers are both subject to social structures and involved as agents in constructing identities and interests.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Wendt (1987, p. 337-379), the „agent-structure problem” situates agents and social structures with each other. It has its origins in two truths about social life: “1) human beings and their organizations are purposeful actors whose actions help reproduce or transform the society in which they live; and 2) society is made up of social relationships, which structure the interactions between these purposeful actors.” While human agents and social structures are theoretically interdependent or mutually implicating entities, properties of agents and social structures are both essential to explain social behavior and need to be brought into an explanatory relationship.

### 1.2.5. A Synthetic Approach Between Constructivism and Role Theory

This thesis will explore Russian identities and roles in the Middle East, viewed from an agent-perspective (micro-level) and through the social structure in which they are embedded (macro-level). While conventional constructivist analyses focus on the “broader social structural context” and the “macro-level”, FPA is mostly concerned with the “micro-level”, investigating individuals’ and policy-makers’ “learning and psychological biases” (Behraves, 2011, p. 1). Thies (2009, p. 13) argues that one of the significant advantages of role theory is its ability to cross levels of analysis, as can be seen at Holsti (1970), Breuning (1995), and Cantir and Kaarbo (2012). Role theory has been used in FPA at the individual-, state- and system-level analyses and the IR literature to link agents and structures (Thies, 2009, p. 13). While traditional role theory has so far more often been combined with a more realist tradition (Holsti, 1970; Walker, 1987), Tewes (1998), Trondal (2001) and Aggestam (2004; 2006) use role theory to concretize their constructivist interest in identities. Tewes (1998, p. 118) explains that role theory’s usefulness for FPA lies in the “conceptual tools it provides to trace the link between a state’s identity, the development of its foreign-policy culture, and the particular policies it pursues on a persistent basis.” This way, role theory serves to link Russia’s identities with the social structure between the Moscow and the Middle Eastern states, as well as shed light on attempts to enact its assumed roles in the region.

Influential writers, such as Andrei Kreutz’s work *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (2007) come close to a constructivist analysis of Russian identity formation in the Middle East. Nikolay Kozhanov (2017; 2018) describes the relationship between the Middle Eastern states’ and Russia’s role expectations. However, Russia’s foreign-policy behavior in the Middle East, and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular, has never been analyzed through a constructivist FPA combined with role theory.

### 1.3. Methodology and Thesis Overview

This thesis follows Henning Tewes’ (1998) approach of “constructivism in foreign policy analysis”. The study makes use of roles and identity as independent variables to explain Russia’s behavior in the Middle East, instead of applying Wendt’s framework, tracing the link between the practice of state interaction (the independent variable) and the constitution of state interests (the dependent variable). Simply put, whereas Wendt’s interests lie in explaining how “what states *do* affect what they *are*,” this analysis is interested in how “what a state (Russia) *is* affects what it *does*.” In other words: how do the established Russian identity and role conceptions and expectations influence its foreign policy in the Middle East and specifically in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Instead of assuming that the Russian state is a unitary actor, where all decision-makers at a particular time hold the same identity and role conceptions this study follows Kreutz’s (2007) argument that Russian foreign policy is mostly under state control due to a lack of efficient lobbies.

This thesis hypothesizes that Russia's behavior in the Middle East, and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more specifically, is influenced by its salient role conceptions, such as "anti-hegemonic" and "mediator-balancer" and the traditional multi-ethnic population as part of Russia's identity, as well as the West as its significant Other. Having good relations with all different actors as part of Russia's identity favors a cooperative social structure, in which Russia can enact its assumed roles. However, I acknowledge that while identity and role conceptions can play an essential part in foreign policy processes, they are rarely the sole explanatory factor. Instead, they are seen as intermediate variables which, once established, convey the effects of traditional underlying factors such as "capabilities, political system, socio-economic system, the international balance of power and the idiosyncratic characteristics of policy-makers" (Grossman, 2005, p. 337), through the structuring of the foreign policy debate.

While more traditional constructivists argue that constructivist research does not "depend exceptionally upon any specialized separate interpretive methodology" (Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996, p. 67), others insist that an interpretative methodology is necessary (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986; Kratochwil, 1988, 1989). In the interpretivist tradition, researchers believe that interpretations of social phenomena directly affect outcomes, and they can only be understood within discourses, contexts, or traditions (Furlong and Marsh, 2010, p. 199). Tsygankov (2012, p. 1) emphasizes that an actor-sensitive, as well as a context-specific approach, is necessary to understand how identity contestation influences foreign policy formulation. The present study rests on the interpretivist position to explore Russian foreign policy's context and traditions in the Middle East, and applies a political discourse analysis as the research method to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The second chapter of this thesis explores the historical context and traditions of Russia's identities and roles in the Middle East since the Soviet Union's dissolution. A qualitative and interpretative analysis of the existing literature identifies Russia's social structures with the Middle Eastern states, its identities and roles and their change over time. To define the NRCs, Russia holds in the Middle East, this thesis uses three of Grossman's (2005) elaborated NRCs in Russia after the Soviet Union's collapse,<sup>7</sup> and analyzes their relevance for Russian foreign-policy behavior in the Middle East.

The third chapter offers a political discourse analysis of Russian representatives' speeches and statements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, starting on 7 May 2012, with President Putin's third presidential term and ending with the US presidential elections on 3 November 2020. To this end, I use the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. After retrieving relevant documents for this study from the Russian government's official websites, they analyzed in the Atlas.ti system through an inductive method. The first step considers proof of Wendt's three different forms of social structure. Then, the documents are coded by searching statements that refer to the independent variables, such as Russia's

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<sup>7</sup> Grossman combined K. J. Holsti's (1970) and Thibault and Lévesque's (1997) 25 national role conceptions and reduced them to a total of eleven NRCs.

multi-ethnic identity or Russia's co-patriot protector role. These codes give proof of the variables' density and salience. Other concepts such as "Russia as member of the Quartet" help bring the identities and roles into context. Every time there is evidence of an identity or a role, it is taken into account. This also applies to variables that occur several times within a single document. However, codes are not considered if an argument is only the repetition or reformulation of another argument. A single sentence can contain several different codes at the same time. These co-occurrences offer further evidence of connections between codes, giving a detailed picture of Russia's identities and roles. The concept of time is essential for this analysis, since some variables show a significant change over time or appear more often in a particular event's temporal proximity.

This analytical framework serves to explore the identity and role conception in Russian foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By identifying the number of national identity and role conceptions expressed in each speech or statement, I recognize that even single leaders do not only have one opinion on their country's behavior abroad. This helps avoid the issue that NRCs usually suggest unity and agreement among elites, even if this is not the case (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012, p. 8).

The fourth chapter discusses whether the Russian elite's identity and role conceptions are in accordance with external/other players' opinions. From a social constructivist perspective, mass media contribute an essential part of popular identity (Campbell, 1992; Tsygankov, 2015). The analytical framework of Chapter 3 serves to analyze the discourse in newspaper articles on Russia's current position in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from Russian (*The Moscow Times*) and non-Russian media (*The New York Times*).

The final discussion compares the identities and roles identified in Chapter 2 to 4 and defines where they con- or diverge. The analysis will demonstrate how Russia's identity and role conceptions and expectations in the region have evolved since the Soviet Union and whether they are still valid at present.

As pointed out in "Contested Identity and Foreign Policy: Interpreting Russia's International Choices," there are three interrelated levels necessary to understanding foreign policy decisions: state-based, society-based, and international (Tsygankov, 2012, p. 1). For role theory, the same three levels of analysis can be explored. Wehner and Thies (2014, p. 412) call them "states, people and the international system." Therefore, this study analyzes Russian identity and role construction in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from state-level (analysis of official documents), society-level (Russian newspapers), and international-level (international media).

As Furlong and Marsh (2010) argue, researchers need to be aware of their own partialities and consider them when interpreting qualitative data. After recent developments, such as the poisoning of Alexei Navalny and the following deterioration Russian-German relations, I acknowledge my own bias. However, this thesis attempts to understand Russian foreign policy and its implications for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a neutral perspective without judging or defending it. Due to existing language barriers, this analysis must rely on official translations or newspapers that publish their content in English.

## **2. Russia in the Middle East**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Russian foreign policy has been analyzed from various analytical angles and has led to disagreements among scholars and policymakers. The perceptions of Russia's actions, be it in relation with its neighbors, Western countries, or Asia and the Middle East, are interpreted either as largely accommodationist and nonthreatening to the West or as expansionist and disrespectful of established international rules (Tsygankov, 2012). The debate on how to treat Russia and which policies should be used cannot be answered without taking a closer look at how Russia perceives itself in the international system and which identities and roles they have adopted over time that influence their behavior. In recent years, the Kremlin has become one of the most important external powers capable of engaging in dialogue with all regional and external actors involved in Middle Eastern affairs through its political engagement and a successive diplomatic stance.

From the very beginning, Russian foreign policy showed a significant difference to foreign policy action of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union's class struggle as the main driver for foreign-policy behavior did not spill over to the "new" Russia (Kreutz, 2007, p. 3). The first president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, tried to integrate Russia into the European economic and political sphere, and establish good relations with the US (Thibault and Lévesque, 1997, p. 20; Cherif, 2019, p. 14; Kreutz, 2007, p. 4). On the other hand, he never made an official visit to Middle Eastern countries (Dannreuther, 2018). Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia suffered from internal political, economic, and security problems, while there was a significant number of conflicts in former Soviet states (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 3). Therefore, the Westernist school of thought's ideological dominance did not last long and was soon replaced by a more decisive foreign policy, focusing on Russia's national interests (Thibault and Lévesque, 1997, p. 21).

When Yevgeny Primakov replaced Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev in 1996 and then became Prime Minister from 1998 to 1999, Russian foreign policy showed a renewed interest in the Middle East. As Foreign Minister, Primakov visited the region three times and attempted to deepen Russia's role in the Middle Eastern Peace Process (the Palestinian and the Syrian tracks). However, Primakov recognized that Russia was, in terms of material capabilities, not yet able to defend its interests in the region (Cherif, 2019, pp. 14-16).

The Chechen war and its danger of overspilling to the North Caucasus region, as well as the color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia had a profound impact on Putin's geopolitical perspective in the

first years of his presidency.<sup>8 9</sup> They led Putin's administration to develop a strategy for the Middle East and the Islamic world (Roussos, 2019, p. 348; Rezvani, 2020, p. 4) and created a strong reluctance to forced regime change through foreign assistance or direct intervention, as part of Russia's identity. The Chechen war proved to Putin that brute military force was insufficient to resolve conflicts. As a consequence, he started co-opting other local actors within the war (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 4). However, despite Putin's engagement in visiting Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the UAE from 2005 to 2007, the Kremlin was still preoccupied with domestic political and economic stability (Dannreuther, 2018). In 2007, in the context of the color revolutions and EU/NATO expansions, Putin's speech at the Munich Conference of Security Policy would later be considered the turning point in Russian-Western relations. Putin claimed that the US had "overstepped its national borders in every way" and criticized the NATO expansion as "serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust" (cited in Chausovsky, 2019, p. 5).

In the 2010s, clearly defined strategies started to get visible in Russian foreign policy that circled three major principles: the emerging multipolar world, the regionalization of world politics, and Russia's firm opposition of regime change by force instigated by external actors (Stepanova, 2016, p. 2). According to Dannreuther (2018), the Arab Spring presented a clear turning point for Russia's presence in the region. Opposed to the West, seeing the revolts as an "inexorable process towards democracy", the Russian narrative was that the Arab Spring would result in a more traditional Islamic identity. Leading up to the 2011-2012 parliamentary and presidential elections, Russia experienced significant internal domestic political problems and conflict within the Russian elite. The global recession of 2008-2010 had led to a significant obstacle for the population and the legitimacy of the Russian leadership, which in turn affected political stability (Dannreuther, 2018).

At the time, politics in Russia became increasingly active and more competitive, which is visible in the appearance of oppositional Alexei Navalny (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 8).<sup>10</sup> The announcement of then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dimitry Medvedev to "swap jobs" again, which led to Putin's third term as a president, was judged by many Russians a political manipulation. After the parliamentary elections in 2011 and the presidential elections in 2012, massive protests arose over the alleged electoral fraud (Chausovsky, 2019, pp. 8-9).

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<sup>8</sup> In 1991, the republic of Chechnya was autonomous and sought independence. Three years later, Yeltsin tried to bring Chechnya under Russia's control and started a two-year-long armed struggle. While Yeltsin and Chechen leader Maskhadov signed a formal peace treaty in 1997, terrorist attacks became more frequent and resulted in another war in 1999.

<sup>9</sup> The color revolutions were Western-backed peaceful uprisings against the corruption of current regimes in the post-Soviet space, such as in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005 and 2010). The uprisings were considered by Russia as external-made and instigated by the US (Stepanova, 2016, p. 3).

<sup>10</sup> Alexei Navalny represented the part of Russian society, which was young, urban, and had enough of the corruption and "top-down ruling style" of President Putin (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 8).

The events of the Arab Spring interacted with these political tensions. Problematic was the Western-led UN Security Council resolution that intended to protect Libyan civilians. Opposing to Egypt or Tunisia, the Libyan regime had refused to capitulate and threatened to crush the opposition. While Medvedev was in favor of supporting the initiative, the Russian Foreign Ministry and then Prime Minister Putin recommended to veto it. Medvedev decided to abstain from Resolution 1973, which was consequently passed. Putin spoke out against the resolution as “deficient and flawed.” It would lead to allow “basically anyone to do anything that they want – to take actions against a sovereign state” (Dannreuther, 2018). The resulting NATO air attacks supporting the Libyan opposition and the Libyan regime’s beheading caused great humiliation for Medvedev and moved the public and elite popularity towards Putin. Furthermore, after the Western intervention in Libya, Putin said: “instead of the affirmation of democracy, instead of defending the rights of the minority, there was increasingly the expulsion of the enemy, coups d’ état, where the domination of one side becomes an every aggressive domination of the other” (Putin, 2012, cited in Dannreuther, 2018). Therefore, Putin concluded that the West had a significant negative impact on the Middle East events and that the “Libyan Scenario” should not be repeated (Dannreuther, 2018).

Consequently, when it came to the Syrian crisis, Russia used its veto power to oppose the UN Security Council resolution to introduce sanctions or permission to use military measures against the Syrian regime. The deterioration of Russian-Western relations following Crimea’s annexation in 2014<sup>11</sup> and the imposed sanctions led to a riskier Russian “Syria strategy”. Subsequently, in 2015, Russia supported the Assad regime with direct military engagement. While this strategy was well received in Russia, leading to increasing approval for Putin, externally, it led to discourse on Russia’s return to its great power position (Dannreuther, 2018; Stepanova, 2016, p. 1). As Lovotti and Tafuro Ambrosetti (2019, p. 77) emphasize, Russia’s mediation in the Astana process – the Russian-Iranian-Turkish joint initiative to reach a diplomatic settlement to the Syrian conflict – occupies an important place in the EU debate on Russia’s foreign policy activities in the region. Although the Astana talks did not result in any sustainable solution, Moscow’s efforts heightened Moscow’s perception as a “powerbroker” (Borshchevskaya, 2019, p. 3).

The historical overview above displays the significant influence Russian domestic issues had on Moscow’s foreign policy behavior in general and towards the Middle East in particular and provides the basis of the context-specific approach for this analysis. This chapter focuses on applying the theoretical framework to Russia’s foreign policy behavior in the Middle East, namely the construction of the social

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<sup>11</sup> The Ukraine crisis started with Kyiv’s demonstrations in November 2013, following then-president and Moscow-ally Yanukovich’s decision to stop negotiations over entering a free trade agreement with the EU. After months of protests, Yanukovich was overthrown and replaced by pro-Western political opposition. For Russia, the so-called “Euromaidan” events were seen as an “unconstitutional coup d’ état against a democratically elected leader”. Consequently, Russia annexed Crimea and supported the pro-Moscow rebellion in the East of Ukraine, which has continued until today (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 10).



structure between Russia and the regional actors, as well as Russia's identity and role conceptions. The following section discusses Russia and its position in the Middle East from a constructivist perspective, focusing on Wendt's three forms of political culture. The third part identifies Russia's identities and roles and how foreign policy decisions in the Middle East can be explained through them. I adduce the NRCs and state identities from a variety of historical and secondary source materials. The level of analysis in this chapter is the state, as well as the social structure, in which Russian identities and roles are embedded.

## **2.2. Constructivist Theory Applied to Russia in the Middle East**

Following Tsygankov (2016, p. 11), I argue that other mainstream IR theories analyzing Russian foreign-policy behavior, such as neorealism, offer only little room for other explanations than power, such as ideas or cultural beliefs. Neorealism tends to overlook or misinterpret significant changes in Russia's foreign policy, while neoliberalism neglects the social structures affecting a state's identity and interests and the constitutive impacts which they exert on one another (Wendt, 1999, p. 4). Both liberalism and realism are ethnocentric and offer a view on Russia biased by a Western cultural lens, without considering Russia's indigenous history and perception systems (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 14). On the other hand, constructivists investigate how ideas and the interplay of agents and structure form identities and interests. Ideas are defined as the social context within which the materiality is situated (Checkel, 1998, pp. 325-326).

The constructed intersubjective relations between Russia and the Middle East states have resulted in a social structure of balance and reciprocal recognition of the respective other's interests and identity. Through its interactions with the Other in the region, Russia has diligently built its identity and role by creating social structures that then return to influence Russia and the Other's behavior. For several years, Russia and the Middle Eastern states have contributed to establish specific ideas about each other and to support specific institutions. They have also developed structures in which their intersubjective understanding of each other has resulted in the assignment of specific ideas about the Other's material reality and power (Adler, 1997, p. 322). However, all established structures do not necessarily have to be cooperative. Wendt (1999, p. 288) emphasizes that "enemy" can be as much a role as "friend," which means that shared ideas can be not only cooperative but also conflictual. The social understandings within these structures are the ones that define how they determine a state's identity, interests, or perceptions (Wendt, 1994, pp. 385-386).

This variance in cooperation and conflict with different actors can be observed in Russia founded on varying social structures and collective perception of the Other. Whereas Russia and China, for example, have succeeded in creating a close relationship in recent years, the US and Russia have maintained their conflictive, albeit sometimes strategic, relationship. Russia and China share a related narrative discourse that enables them to reduce false perceptions in their signals and establish specific

identities. In contrast, the US and Russia retain a long tradition of mutual misinterpretations (Krebs, 2010, p. 29).

In a long process, Russia has established its identity and a social structure as a reliably rational actor that can collaborate with all key players in the Middle East. This enables them to serve as a possible mediator between the different sides, which is easier to achieve through stable relations with all Middle Eastern states.

Already in March 1994, the special envoy to the Middle East and head of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the North Africa and the Middle East Department, Victor Posuvalyuk, stated: “Russia occupies its own broad niche in the Mid-East region, a niche owing to Russia’s unique identity – primarily historical and spiritual – that no one else can lay claim to“ (Posuvalyuk, 1994, cited in Kreutz, 2007, p. 55). After first coming to power, Putin made great attempts to open Russia to the Muslim world. He emphasized the peaceful coexistence of Orthodox and Muslim communities in Russia. He promoted the inclusion of Russian Muslims into the national discourse, for example, in the maintained dialogue with Hamas (Roussos, 2019, p. 349). Both Jordan and Russia agreed that Yasser Arafat was “a legitimately elected leader of the Palestinian people”, up until his passing in 2004. The traditionally Western-oriented Jordan king declared at the beginning of the 21st century that “Jordan and its neighbors consider the [Russian] role to be the voice of rightful reason.” The *Jordan Times* published that “it is undeniable that when it comes to crucial Middle East issues such as Iraq and the Peace Process, Jordan and the Arab World in general have been sharing identical views with Russia over the past few years” (cited in Kreutz, 2007, pp. 42-43).

Another example of a long historical tradition of mutual trust is Yemen. Moscow’s role in the unification of Yemen in 1990 has been met with gratitude by the Yemeni regime. In 2004, a Russian commentator on *Radio Mayak* claimed that since the 1920s, “Russian-Yemeni relations have been developing as traditional friendly ones” (*Radio Mayak* (in Russian), 2004, cited in Kreutz, p. 2007, p. 143).

Russian-Saudi relations had a difficult start. Among the Russian elite, the perception existed that Saudi Arabia posed a direct threat to the new state. This was mainly due to the Saudi support for Chechen separatists and other Muslim groups in the Northern Caucasus that emphasized a radical anti-Russian stance (Kreutz, 2007, p. 129). However, after the US-intervention in Iraq, Russia managed to build cooperative bilateral relationships with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, mostly due to the countries’ joint disapproval of the intervention (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 552). In September 2017, Saudi Arabia’s King Salam bin Abdulaziz Al Saud was the first ruling Saudi monarch to visit Moscow (Dannreuther, 2018).

Iran was long considered as a hereditary enemy of Russia as well. However, a surprising rapprochement between Moscow and Teheran took place in the 1990s (Cherif, 2019, p. 24). These friendly relations continued until 2006 but suffered a setback when Russia showed more substantial support for Western policies and sanctions against Iran in 2010 (Roussos, 2019, p. 349). Prior to

President Putin's visit to Iran in 2007, *Iran News*, a semi-official English-language newspaper wrote that "it is clear that Moscow has never been a trustworthy friend and ally of any country, especially our own." It further added: "[The] Russians, as they have already done repeatedly, are likely again to betray Iran and vote with the Western countries for a third punitive resolution against our people" (*Iran News*, 15 October 2007, cited in Dannreuther, 2012, p. 557). However, through several bilateral negotiations in 2011, the relationship between the two countries has been led to a renewed Lockean social structure, which is more stable than, for example, Russia's relationship with Turkey<sup>12</sup> (Dannreuther, 2018). As a Muslim nation, Iran has long been involved in Middle Eastern issues, particularly in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Therefore, Moscow's relations with Tehran have always been important for the social structure of Russian relations with Middle Eastern countries (Kreutz, 2007, p. 7).<sup>13</sup>

A particular case in point is Syria, being the first and only state outside of the post-Soviet Space that Russia intervened militarily (Rezvani, 2020, p. 3). At first, Russia did not play a significant role in the Syrian conflict. Despite being very costly in terms of financial resources and Russian reputation, Russia has been willing to bear these conditions and has not selected the most lucrative strategy (Ibid., p. 18). Russian-Syrian relations go back to the emergence of the Russian Federation. The two former Russian Foreign Ministers, Primakov, and Kozyrev, already considered the late Syrian president Hafez al-Assad as a respected and vital figure in the Middle Eastern region. Primakov once mentioned that Syria's "kind, friendly, and at times, cordial relations with the Soviet Union and then with Russia" were mostly due to al-Assad's policies (Kreutz, 2007, p. 25). Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Saltanov condemned the American move to impose unilateral sanctions on Syria in 2003 and reaffirmed Russia's support for Syria: "Syria is one of Russia's important partners in the Middle East and is regarded as one of the key participants in the Middle East Peace Process" (Kreutz, 2007, p. 27). When President Bashar al-Assad visited Moscow for the first time in 2005, the talks with President Putin were called "friendly and moderately successful" (Kreutz, 2007, p. 29). The al-Assad regime in Syria can be considered the most crucial partnership Russia has had in the Middle East, and Russian officials often talk about the "fidelity" of the Syrian regime (Cherif, 2019, p. 20). By intervening militarily in Syria, Russia has proven its willingness to defend its allies in the region and its capability to operate as a key player (Lynch, 2015).

Although Russia is adaptable in its dialogue with the regional actors, as outlined above, it consistently upholds what it considers to be its red lines. Russia firmly opposes forced regime change in the region (Rumer, 2007, p. 29; Stepanova, 2016, p. 3), it promotes the fight against terrorism, and

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<sup>12</sup> In November 2015, Moscow's ties with Turkey were dramatically worsened after the Turkish armed forces downed a Russian military plane that flew near the Turkish-Syrian border. However, they recovered strongly in mid-2016, after Turkish President Erdogan made an official apology and later when Putin gave Erdogan his support more quickly than the Western authorities in the coup attempted on him during the summer of that year (Katz, 2018, p. 1).

<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the Russian approach to Iran comes from a profound skepticism towards a military solution to the nuclear crisis. Russia considers the cause of Iran's demands to be the deep feeling of regional and international isolation and insecurity (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 557).

emphasizes the desire to preserve regional stability (Kozhanov, 2018, p. 24). These opinions coincide closely with the interests and values of the Middle Eastern actors. Therefore, the dialogue between Russia and a Middle Eastern state can continue, even if a conflicting situation arises, which can be observed in Russia and Iran's powerful relationship (Geranmayeh and Liik, 2016, pp. 1-2). Moscow and Tehran also share the ambition to establish and uphold a "multipolar" world order, which would allow both to be treated as significant decision-makers. The shared resistance to what they consider as US unilateralism is critical to both parties. At his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stated that "the long-term plan of the US is against the interests of all nations, particularly our two nations, which can be thwarted by closer cooperation" (Ibid).

Thus, Russia has built commitment, collaborative relationships, and open dialogue with the Middle East for several years. Russia's perception as a dependable, rational, and mediating actor is the result of a relatively long process and has not happened suddenly. While this does not imply that all of Russia's relations in the Middle East have led to "friendships" or a Kantian social structure, Russia has nevertheless succeeded in forming a Lockean system. No Middle Eastern state is treated as an enemy, and there is mutual recognition of each other's sovereignty. This is primarily due to Russia and the Middle Eastern states' similar values, such as the opposition to forced regime change, which helped build a cooperative social structure. In summary, constructivism enables the observation of the interaction process between Russia and the Middle Eastern countries, which led to a Lockean social structure, where cooperation and a continuing dialogue remain possible. Since neorealism and neoliberalism do not acknowledge the importance of identity and role formation, they fail to explain some aspects of Russia's behavior in the Middle East. Constructivism provides a different angle on Russian interactions with Middle Eastern actors by examining the social structures in which Russia's roles and identity are embedded.

### **2.3. Russian Identities in the Middle East**

Andrei P. Tsygankov (2016) highlights in his book *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, first published in 2006, the importance of studying the complex forces behind national interest instead of focusing only on power and modernization. This thesis makes use of the assumption that the state and its different levels, such as societal voices (public figures, media, academic leaders), the political elite, and the top governmental agencies, are the "producer" of the identity discourse (Kassianova, 2001, pp. 825-826). It is crucial to consider the transformation of the domestic and political situation that Russia has undergone since the end of the Soviet Union, as explained in the first part of this chapter, to understand the Russian identity under Putin. The following part goes into more detail about the different identities and roles that can be identified in Russia's behavior in the Middle East.

#### **2.3.1. The West as Russia's Significant Other (I:WSO)**

Tsygankov (2016, p. 1) argues that a big part of Russia's foreign policy and national interest can be understood in the context of Russia's relation with Western nations. Essential for the determination of

Moscow's foreign policy choices is whether Russian officials perceive the West's international actions as accepting Russia as an "equal and legitimate member of the world." Campbell (1992) explains that the constitution of an "Other" contributes to clarifying the distinctive characteristics of a state. The West, namely the US and the EU are generally seen as Russia's "significant Other," which has influenced the creation of the Russian national identity to a large extent (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 18). Russia has used this differentiation to the West to construct their own newly established identity after the Soviet Union's dissolution (Kassianova, 2001, p. 822), which can also be observed in the Middle East. The new Russian state's initial motivation was the wish to be part of the world community (Kassianova, 2001, p. 838).

The WSO-Identity carries proof of a Lockean social structure of the relation between Russia and the US, in which it is embedded. Nowadays, neither the US nor Russia consider the other party as an "enemy" without any legitimate right to exist. After the Soviet Union's dissolution, many scholars believed that Russia would move fast into the "Western camp" and cooperate increasingly with the US and the West. Boris Yeltsin and his "Atlanticist policy" did indeed support Western initiatives, such as sanctions on Iraq, to a great extent (Grossman, 2005, p. 335). However, despite rapprochements after the Soviet Union's dissolution, the ambiance has remained without trust for the other party. Obama's introduction of the "reset policy"<sup>14</sup> of American-Russian relations in 2009 is an example of the influence of Russia's relations with the West on Middle Eastern affairs, since it had a direct cooling effect on Russia's relations with Iran (Magen, 2013, p. 34).

### **2.3.2. Multi-Ethnicity (I:ME) and Muslim Minority (I:MM) as Part of Russian Identity**

If talking about Russian identity in general, one must acknowledge geography as an essential factor for interaction with its neighbors. Russia is the largest country on earth and does not have any natural barriers to protect itself against external threats. This has historically led the Russian state to spread beyond its territorial borders to create a protective buffer space around Moscow and St. Petersburg. For this reason, the country has expanded in both European and Asian directions. Russia is geographically both a European and an Asian country and shows cultural and political signs of traditions from both continents, representing a central feature of "the paradox of Russian identity" (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 3). Russia's unique eastern-oriented history is part of its identity in the Middle East and influences the roles it assumes there.

Notwithstanding the eventual move towards Statism<sup>15</sup>, there are still features of Eurasianism present in Russia nowadays, which has experienced a reappearance in contemporary Russia (Cronin, 2015, p.

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<sup>14</sup> The Obama administration's "reset" policy was an effort to enhance US-Russian ties in as many fields as possible, despite disagreements, such as on missile defense. Michael McFaul, responsible for Russia in the NSC from 2009-2011, stated that the "reset" represented a fresh start (reciprocal American and Russian dismantling of their nuclear stockpiles), a deal to shift deliveries for American troops in Afghanistan through Russia and to impose sanctions on Iran over its nuclear proliferation program (Papasotiriou, 2019, p. 242).

<sup>15</sup> Statism is the most populous and diverse group of ideologies. At its core is the conviction that Russian foreign policy must be driven by national interests that are logically determined in terms of the "geopolitical security

649). Eurasianism is a historical narrative that considers Russia as an ever-expanding land-based empire in a power struggle against sea-based Atlanticism, attributed to the US (Tsygankov 2016:8). Being part of the Civilizationist Russian school of thought, Eurasianism defines the Russian culture as created through the interaction between Slavic and Asian elements (Skotiniotis 2019:85). Eurasianists consider Russia to be a distinctive “Eurasian” continent that correlates parts of both the East and the West (Schimmelpennick van der Oye, 2014, p. 87). Therefore, Russian nationalism as an ideology includes ethnic Russians and incorporates the various minorities of the country (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 14).

Eurasianists support the belief that Russia’s interests are different and even opposing those of the West (Grossman, 2005, p. 335), correlating Russia’s multi-ethnicity with Russia’s WSO identity. For Statists, the Eurasian concept has symbolic importance, and they stress the importance of keeping a “multicultural balance inside Russia” (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 99). Indeed, Russia’s multiethnic origins and its significant Muslim minority of around seven percent in 2019 (*International Religious Freedom Reports*, 2020) helped to focus on Russia’s mix of European and Asian values and legacies. Consequently, Russia succeeded in constructing the idea that it could play an essential role in balancing the division between the East and the West and between the European and the Muslim world (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 548).

Putin has always considered Russia to be a “state-civilization” instead of a “nation-state”. Therefore, it has incorporated various traditional faiths, such as Islam, which must be protected (Tsygankov, 2016). From this perspective, Russia has a considerable advantage in the Middle East due to the narrative that it belongs to both Europe and Asia, as well as Christianity and Islam (Dannreuther, 2018). The large number of Muslims in Russia, directly and indirectly, influences Russian foreign policy behavior to “accommodate the Islamic world” (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 7-8). Essential for the ME and MM identity is, therefore, a particular image of the Russian Federation’s nature, and local conditions, directly influencing the creation and longevity of these identities.

To conciliate the intense repression of Islamist movements, be it in Chechnya or Syria, Russian officials have been careful in distinguishing Islamic “fundamentalism” and “extremism”. While Islamist extremism cannot be tolerated, Islamic fundamentalism is considered legitimate for expressing the Islamic faith (Dannreuther, 2018). In contrast to the US, the Kremlin has never spoken of “Islamic terrorism”, but only of terrorism. Furthermore, Russia has engaged with movements such as Hamas or Hezbollah that are defined as terrorists in the West (Dannreuther, 2018). This way, instead of framing them as “enemies,” Russian officials have carefully built a cooperative relationship with them. This enables Russia’s ability to maintain a dialogue with all essential parties for peace negotiations, for example in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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situation, domestic economic goals and available resources” (Kassianova, 2001, p. 825). Primakov, leader of the Statist way of thinking in the 1990s, promoted a more “balanced” and “diverse” foreign policy by creating strong alliances with China and India (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 19).

### **2.3.3. Good Relations With All Actors (I:GRA)**

During the Cold War, both the US and the Soviet Union had its own allies in the Middle East. Today, the US still considers some states in the region as friendly, but an essential amount of state and non-state rivals have appeared. On the other hand, as explored in the second section of this chapter, Russia has established good relations with all members of its network diplomacy pattern, excluding jihadist groups. This openness towards all actors in the region can be considered a part of the Russian identity.

Moreover, after the Euromaidan revolution, the opinion that the West could not be trusted became entrenched in Russia. Therefore, Moscow increased efforts to strengthen its relations with other parts of the world, namely within the Middle Eastern region. (Chausovsky, 2012, p. 11). The GRA identity further increases the possibility of a successful mediating role in the region, since, in the Syrian war, Putin made clear that Moscow would not abandon “friends” and has proven to be a trustworthy ally (Roussos, 2019, p. 357). This way, the GRA identity reflects Russia’s image of itself and is closely linked to Russia’s WSO identity.

However, keeping positive relations with all different key players in the Middle East has proven to be conflicting at times. For instance, Russia has had to reassure states like Israel that its approach to Iran and Syria, and its cooperation with Hamas, is not contradictory to its duties as a Quartet member to guarantee and safeguard Israel’s security (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 551).

### **2.3.4. Against External Influences as Part of Russian Identity (I:AEI)**

Many constructivists consider the international system as a distribution of ideas, while these ideas create a structure that influences foreign policy behavior (Adler, 1997; Wendt, 1999; Reus-Smit, 2005). Russia does not follow an overarching ideology like Soviet Marxist-Leninism, and it is no longer striving for revolutions in the world (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 14). However, Putin’s “Russian idea” demonstrates a conservative and reactionary approach that opposes Western interventionism and its regime change attitude (Dannreuther, 2018). As explained in the first part of this chapter, this opposition stems from experiences in the Chechen wars or Ukraine and Georgia’s color revolutions. The AEI identity continued to be reflected on Russia’s stance towards the Arab Spring. Russia’s intervention in Syria in 2015 intended to draw “a red line on regime change efforts” (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 11; Roussos, 2019, p. 353).

### **2.3.5. Russia’s Great Power Identity (I:GP)**

Russia is often portrayed as having an inherent and steadfast belief in its identity as a great power. These fundamental beliefs concerning this identity are summarized by Mankoff (2009, p. 63) when he states that the Russian elites are united by the common conviction that Russia should play a central role in world affairs, that it should retain a state of influence around its borders, and that equal relationships with the other great powers (especially the US) form the basis for its international conduct. The Russian core great power identity gained momentum with Primakov and the Statist school of thought

(Tsygankov, 2016, p. 99). In the National Security Concept of 1997, Russia is defined as an “influential European and Asian power.” The report further highlights “the development of equal partnership with *other great powers*” (*Russian National Security Blueprint*, 1979).

Putin has retained this concept as an essential part of Russia’s identity (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 161; Cherif, 2019, p. 13). According to Chausovsky (2019, p. 11) and Roussos (2019, p. 353), Russia’s military intervention in Syria in 2015 should display Russian capacity to be a major player in the conflict. Rumer (2017, p. 25) argues that global powers need close allies or satellite nations to maintain the great power status. This may be one reason why Russia has been working meticulously on each of its Middle Eastern relationships.

#### **2.4. Russian Roles in the Middle East**

When Putin visited Egypt, Israel, and the PA in 2005, he was “in search of a role” (Kreutz, 2007, p. 7). Despite domestic issues that prevented Russia from really paying a vital role in the Middle East, Putin wanted to show renewed interest in the region (Ibid.). The following part examines which roles are visible in Russia’s foreign policy behavior towards the Middle Eastern states. To this end, this analysis makes use of Grossman’s (2005) Russian NRCs, namely: “anti-hegemon,” “co-patriot protector” and “mediator-integrator.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the mediator-integrator role is reformulated as “mediator-balancer,” since Russia’s balancing act in the Middle East has proven an important part of its mediation strategy. As explained above, roles connect identities to foreign-policy behavior. Therefore, identities like the WSO identity are the basis for Russian roles in the Middle East, such as the anti-hegemonic role, which presents Russia as an alternative for US-hegemony in the international system.

##### **2.4.1. Anti-Hegemonic Role (R:AH)**

The anti-hegemonic role underlines the opinion that the world is no longer bi- or unipolar but multipolar. Furthermore, Russia stands up to any state that attempts to force its will on somebody else, which is visible in its AEI identity. The AH role further applies to Russia’s aim of limiting the US’s capacity to control the world system (Grossman, 2005, pp. 344-345). In Russia’s foreign policy behavior worldwide, even in countries like Venezuela, the role of anti-Western hegemony can be observed (Rezvani, 2020, p. 3).

After the Euromaidan revolution, Moscow needed to concentrate more on other areas of the world than the West to position itself to a greater extent in the international system as a counterweight against the US (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 11). According to Magen (2013), Russia has defined its foreign policy in the Middle East based on establishing an alternative regional player to the US. For instance, when Moscow started to distance itself from the US-dominated “war on terror”, condemning the US-

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<sup>16</sup> Due to the limited size of this thesis, the other roles identified by Grossman (2005) such as “member of CIS,” “active independent,” “arms control and disarmament agent” and “defender of democratic principles and human rights” were not taken into account for this analysis. This study focuses on the roles that appeared most dominant and relevant in the Middle Eastern region and the discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



intervention in Iraq as a policy mistake, Muslim and Middle Eastern actors began to perceive Russia's role as a balancer against US hegemony (Dannreuther, 2012, pp. 546-547).

The Syrian-Russian relation has often been characterized as a means to oppose the US's world hegemony and encourage a future multipolar world order (Kreutz, 2007, p. 28). Stepanova (2016) even claims that Russia's actions in Syria were an attempt to enforce a "more even, representative and realistic" multilateralism in the region. This, in turn, has inspired the rise of a "new type of multilateralism" in Syria (Roussos, 2019, p. 355). Similarly, the backing of the Al-Sisi government in Egypt can be interpreted as Russia's decision to counterbalance the US' influence (Ibid., p. 357). Since there are other regional powers, such as Iran, Turkey, or Saudi Arabia, that prefer a multilateral world order, the consequences of the Russian intervention in Syria have strengthened Moscow's position in the Middle East.

#### **2.4.2. Co-Patriot Protector (R:CPP)**

Another aspect that needs to be considered in the discussion about Russian foreign policy is the co-patriot protector role. This role underlines Russia's commitment to provide support to Russian nationals residing abroad and to ensure that they are safe from any violation of their rights (Grossman, 2005, p. 344). For example, on 31 October 2018, Putin promised the Congress of Russian Compatriots that the Kremlin would elevate support for the defense of the Russian diaspora abroad (Goble, 2018). In the Middle East, this role has become evident concerning the Russian diaspora living in Israel. In Russian-Israeli relations, policymakers often address the approximately one million Israeli citizens of Russian or Soviet origin, who want to preserve Russian cultural traditions and the Russian language (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 551).

#### **2.4.3. Mediator-Balancer (R:MB)**

Throughout the MENA region, there is no major player, including Hamas and Hezbollah, with whom Moscow does not cultivate active dialogue. The Kantian or at least Lockean social structure in the relations with all Middle Eastern states, regardless of political alignments and current disputes, enables Russia to assume a mediator-balancer role in local disagreements. A few examples of this notable balancing act are how Moscow deals with its relations to Israel and Syria, Iran and Israel, Iran and Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States, and Turkey and the Kurdish people. The MB role considers that the international system's primary responsibility is to encourage Russian cooperation with other countries and between other nations, as well as to support the non-violent resolution of conflicts. Further, this role is manifested in declarations expressing Russia's commitment to mediate in global conflicts and function as a catalyst across diverse areas of the world (Grossman, 2005, p. 343).

Scholars define two developments in the region as crucial for Russia's construction of the mediator-balancer role. First, the US distanced itself from its expansionist neo-conservative period in the 2000s, which led to disengagement in the region (Roussos, 2019, p. 356). This strengthens the argument that the WSO identity is one of the main concepts enabling Russia's MB role. Second, the local states needed

to approve of “Russia’s return”. Russia’s mediating position in Yemen and Libya (Ibid.) and its significant involvement in the Iranian nuclear agreement discussions (Geranmayeh and Liik, 2016, p. 8) serve as an example. According to Dannreuther (2018), Russia must maintain its complex balancing act to keep influence in the Middle East. Although it may not please all the region’s players, it is considered essential for the largest possible number of them.

Chapter 2 serves to answer the first research question of this thesis. It illustrates Russian national identities and roles in the Middle East and it puts the main focus of this study – Russia’s foreign policy behavior the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – into historical context. The chapter highlights the traditions of cooperative relations with the Middle Eastern states, Russia has constructed since the Soviet Union’s collapse. Within a positive Lockean social structure, there is evidence for several identities, such as Russia’s Eurasian identity or the firm opposition to external regime change. These ideas facilitate enactment of the mediator-balancer role. Moreover, the West as Russia’s significant Other has proven to be of great importance in the Middle East, which influences interactions with Middle Eastern states, as well as Russia’s other identities and roles in the region to a significant extent.

### **3. Russia in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

In pre-Soviet times, when historic Palestine still belonged to the Ottoman Empire, Russians and Palestinians held good relations, especially in terms of cultural exchange (Kreutz, 2007, p. 2). On the other hand, when the state of Israel was founded in 1948, some of its founders had fled persecution in the Russian Empire and had therefore a more complicated historical relationship with the Soviet Union. Even if the Soviet Union initially promoted the creation of the state of Israel, it had issues with anti-Semitism (Rumer, 2019, p. 12). The Six-Day War in 1967, where the Israelis occupied all of historic Palestine, diplomatic relations between Russia and Israel were ended and only restored after the Soviet Union’s dissolution. Rumer (2019:12) calls the rapprochement after 1991 even the “most important development in Russia’s Middle East policy since the end of the Cold War.” The new-born Russian state, with Andrei Kozyrev as its foreign minister, had ceased to actively support the Palestinians. Instead, the Kremlin exercised a “passive acceptance” of the US dominance in the conflict and its support for Israel (Ibid., pp. 12-13).

Peaceful talks between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)<sup>17</sup> and Israel, led to the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, representing the first direct Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement. PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat promised to renounce terror as a political instrument; he made the cessation of

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<sup>17</sup> The PLO was founded in 1964 and took a more active role as a political actor in 1968. Until 1998, the self-declared secular organization’s official aim was to destroy the Israeli state and replace it with a secular democratic Palestinian state (Burstein, 2018, p. 701). So far, the PLO has not altered its goals opposing Zionism. There have, however, been shifts in the focus of resistance to Israel, namely, from the “opposition to the establishment of Israel and Israeli colonization (Shu and Hussein, 2018, p. 343).

violence the PLO's task (Shu and Hussein, 2018, p. 347). A set of two separate agreements was signed by Mahmoud Abbas for the PLO, Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev. The Oslo Accords further created the PA, a self-governing body to administer parts of Gaza and the West Bank (Baconi, 2015, p. 504). Scholars such as Palestinian Edward Said criticize the agreement, since the "highly publicized media image of the Arafat-Rabin handshake" wrongly gave the impression that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was resolved. Instead, he argues, Oslo worsened conditions for Palestinians further, since it limited, for instance, their free movement (Said, 2001, pp. 270-271).<sup>18</sup>

When Yevgeny Primakov became foreign minister in 1996 and later prime minister, a slight renewed, primarily vocal, support for the Palestinian cause reappeared. However, the first years of Vladimir Putin's presidency displayed distance to Primakov's "pro-Arab" position and showed more interest in supporting the Israeli government instead (Kreutz, 2007 pp. 53-76). The 9/11 attacks and the rise of jihadist Islam led to a closer engagement between Russia and Israel, within the concept of a united "war on terror" (Roussos, 2019, p. 350). Putin's relationship with former Prime Minister Ehud Barak played a significant role in the mutual rapprochement. Barak even called Putin "the best person who ever sat in the Kremlin" (cited in Rumer, 2019, pp. 12-13).

Nevertheless, from April 2002 on, the Kremlin started to publicly criticize Israeli aggression in the West Bank and emphasize Palestinian rights. Moreover, Arab and Islamic cooperation regained importance for Moscow (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 53-76). The consequences of the Second Intifada, starting in September 2000, led to the establishment of the Quartet on the Middle East in 2002. Until today the Quartet consists of the UN, the European Union, the US, and Russia. In a speech in June 2002, President George W. Bush first publicly supported the creation of a Palestinian state. The roadmap for peace that emerged from the speech was then supported by the Middle East Quartet which has been committed since to promote a permanent two-state solution<sup>19</sup> to the conflict (*Middle East Quartet Report*, 2002). Since then, the Quartet's principals, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, the foreign minister of Russia, the UN Secretary-General, and the US Secretary of State have met 52 times to promote their performance-based Road Map to a permanent two-state solution (*The Quartet*, 2020).

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<sup>18</sup> Eventually, the Oslo Accords failed due to years of inability to find a solution and the outbreak of the Second Intifada.

<sup>19</sup> Opposed to the two-state solution, a division of historic Palestine/Eretz Yisrael into two geographically separated states, the one-state solution promotes the inclusion of Palestinian and Israeli peoples within one single state, with equal rights and citizenship for all inhabitants, without judging ethnicity or religion. While scholars, such as Mossberg (2014, pp. 1-2), argue that there is little hope for a two-state solution, a one-state solution continues to be even more inadmissible for the overwhelming majority of Israelis for political, cultural, and demographic concerns. A considerable proportion of Palestinians are likewise unwilling to abandon the long-awaited dream of a sovereign Palestinian state.

In 2005, Russia's focus on its foreign policy in the Middle East and its relations with the Palestinian expanded. Putin travelled to Israel and the Palestinian territories at the beginning of 2005. This has been the first official visit of a Russian leader in Israel. Moreover, Putin was even the first world leader who visited the PA since Abbas had become its president on 9 January 2005 (Kreutz, 2007, p. 76). By traveling to Jerusalem and Ramallah, Putin wanted to confirm his country's dedication to reaching a settlement and emphasize Russia's continuing role in the peace process (Cherif, 2019, p. 20).

During the Second Intifada, Yasser Arafat was confined to his headquarters until his death in September 2004. Scholars such as Baconi (2015) argue that his passing created a leadership vacuum, which led to Hamas' motivation to become a political actor.<sup>20</sup> In 2005, Israel disengaged from Gaza, dismantling settlements and evacuating its army from the Gaza strip, followed by Hamas' entrance into the domestic political fray. Hamas won the elections to form a unilateral government in the PA legislative council in January 2006. On 30 January, the Middle East Quartet issued a statement, welcoming the Palestinians for its "free, fair and secure" elections. However, it also stressed the importance of a future Palestinian government being "committed to non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Road Map" (Quartet, 2006). While Fatah already recognized Israel's right to exist in 1993 as part of the Oslo peace process, Hamas has continued to follow its ultimate goal of erasing the state of Israel by military means (Wietschorke and Lukas, 2018, p. 2).

Soon after the elections, Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas rejected the vote, dismissed the Hamas-led government, and created a parallel government in the West Bank, leading to a "schism" within the Palestinian political system. Consequently, tensions between Hamas and its "historical political foe" Fatah turned into an armed confrontation (Berti and Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 1062). The clashes ended with Hamas routing the president's security forces and Fatah militias and taking control of Gaza in 2007. While the US continued marginalizing Hamas after the elections, President Putin insisted that he never called Hamas a terrorist organization (Baconi, 2018, p. 100). Moreover, in 2006, the Kremlin started to get closer to Hamas when various movement members – including then-leader Khalid Michal – were invited to visit Moscow (Roussos 2019:350). By staying in an open dialogue with Hamas, Russia managed to gain approval among Russian Muslims (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 549)<sup>21</sup> and has encouraged Russia's important role in the Middle East (Roussos, 2019, pp. 350-351).

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<sup>20</sup> While it is hard to define Hamas's accurate founding date, the group published its official covenant in August 1988. The Palestinian Hamas was formed after the internationally religiously informed Muslim Brotherhood and designed itself as the forefront of a new Palestinian nationalism, using religion to articulate its identity. The group promoted the use of force to oppose Israel and its eventual supersession by an Islamic-Palestinian entity (Burstein, 2018, p. 701).

<sup>21</sup> Even though Muslims worldwide strongly condemned Russia's behavior in Chechnya, their focus soon shifted back to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here, Muslim and Arab countries have welcomed Russia's implementation and support for the restoration of peace. In his book *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* Kreutz explains why the conflict is of such importance for the Arab Muslim world: "This conflict is seen

Following the intra-Palestinian divide, various scholars have discussed the importance of establishing unity among Fatah and Hamas (Asseburg, 2017; Berti and Gutiérrez, 2016; Byman, 2019; Frisch, 2009; Wietschorke and Lukas, 2018). Despite several attempts to promote reconciliation agreements, such as in May 2011 in Cairo, Hamas and Fatah's long-lasting peace has yet to be reached.<sup>22</sup> Other international actors, such as the EU have long called for Palestinian reconciliation. However, they have been criticized for "simply watching as events unfold," instead of actively supporting the Palestinian rapprochement (Asseburg, 2017). As it becomes evident in this analysis, Russia has made several efforts to broker the reestablishment of intra-Palestinian unity by inviting members of the rival Palestinian factions for talks in Moscow, which is proof of Russia's commitment to enact its mediator-balancer role.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Russia has taken care to endorse the broad internationally recognized principles of non-proliferation and a two-state solution. At the same time, it insists on enforcing its particular stance on issues like the importance of including Hamas in the process (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 545). The Middle Eastern Quartet's disunity about important concepts in the conflict, such as the handling of Hamas, has led to the loss of its prominent status for the peace process. Another case in point is the Palestinian bid for UN membership in 2011. Most countries of the European Union and Russia favored the initiative, but the US voted against the move (Müller, 2014, p. 472). According to Müller (2014, p. 475), Russia has continuously used its membership in the Quartet to oppose the US's dominant position and to "underscore its historic great power status." Consequently, Russia's position and interest in the Quartet can also be understood within the frame of its great power identity, simultaneously demonstrating its claim to exercising an anti-hegemonic role.

This chapter aims to answer this study's second research question. It determines Russia's identities and roles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and discovers whether they correspond to Russian identities and roles in the Middle East since the Soviet Union's collapse, which were identified in Chapter 2. Moreover, the analysis serves to derive a better understanding of the social structure of Moscow's relationship to the Israeli and Palestinian government. The hypothesis that Russia's foreign-policy behavior in the conflict is identity- and role-based, can be tested in this step on the state-level through examining Russian elite's public discourse on the topic. The second part of the analysis focuses on the social structural context and the macro-level of Russian-Israeli and Russian-Palestinian relations. Section 3 and 4 converge most with Holsti's (1970) micro-level study of NRCs, since they investigate mostly Russian policy-makers individual beliefs.

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as central to their relations with the West; it involves a dispute over sacred land and draws the Arabic people together because of their ethnicity" (Kreutz, 2007, p. 8).

<sup>22</sup> In September 2020, Fatah and Hamas negotiated a deal on Palestinian elections at the Palestinian Consulate in Istanbul, which raised hope that the years of enmity between the two parties may have come to an end (Shehada and Mahmoud, 2020).

The analysis centers on the period between 7 May 2012, Putin's third term as President, and 3 November 2020, the US's presidential elections. When Putin became the President of the Russian Federation for the third time, scholars noticed a significant shift in Russian foreign policy (Chausovsky, 2019, p. 9). Starting in 2012, Putin improved relations with Iran (Geranmayeh and Liik, 2016, p. 7), increased Russian presence in Syria (Van Ham, 2018, p. 2; Borshchevskaya, 2018, p. 6), and tried to engage with all regional players in the Middle East, a strategy that has been applied until today (Kozhanov, 2018, p. 5).

The US has long been a key player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but despite multiple attempts, no US administration has successfully contributed to a peace settlement so far. From 2013 to 2014, then-President Barack Obama relaunched Israeli-Palestinian final status negotiations. However, the talks did not achieve a significant result since disagreements over Israeli settlements or the release of Palestinian prisoners prevented a productive dialogue between the parties. After Donald Trump, the 45th president of the US, recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moved the US embassy there, Palestinian officials have ceased all communication with the US (Robinson, 2020). Furthermore, the Trump administration's "Deal of the Century," aiming to enable Israeli-Palestinian peace, has been met with criticism from Palestinian officials, as well as from other parties around the world.

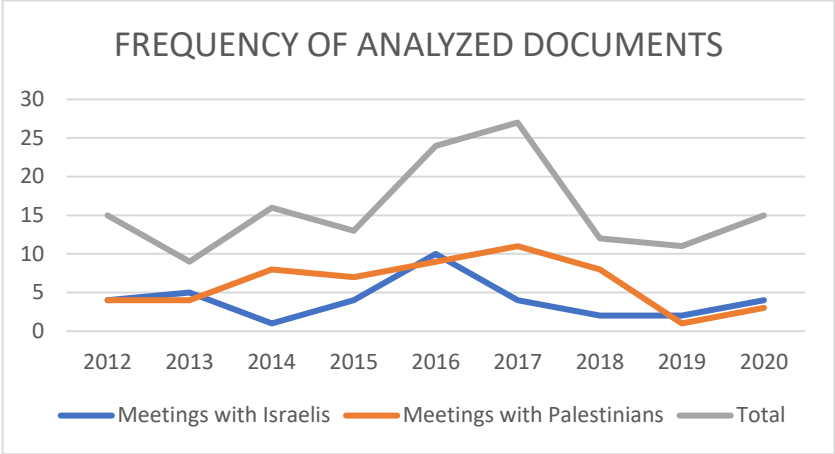
Joe Biden, who, as of end-November 2020 was president-elect, promised to return to a more balanced approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (NYT 2020). Therefore, the analysis ends with the US elections on 3 November 2020, since their possible consequences on the international system and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are yet to be seen. Moreover, it is important to note that the year 2020 has had unique influences on the situation since the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic also affected Russian foreign-policy behavior and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For instance, on 31 August 2020, after several weeks of bombarding each other, Israel and Hamas agreed on a cease-fire due to increasing COVID-19 cases in Gaza (Halbfinger and Rasgon, 2020).

### **3.2. Analysis**

Within this framework, the analysis explores a total of 142 documents from official websites of the Russian government, such as *mid.ru*, *kremlin.ru*, and *government.ru*. Keywords such as "Israel," "Palestine," "Israeli-Palestinian conflict" serve to identify relevant documents. They consist of 90 press statements and answers to media questions mostly by President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, and former Prime Minister Dimitry Medvedev. The remaining 52 analyzed documents are either press releases of the Foreign Ministry or comments of the Information and Press Department of the Foreign Ministry, abbreviated in the following with "IPD." Documents that do not contribute to the analysis in terms of expressed identity and role conceptions are not considered.

On 25 June 2012, Vladimir Putin met with former Israeli President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the first time after starting his third presidential term. In the following

eight years, 36 documents were created in the context of a meeting with an Israeli official. 55 documents were published after a Russian official meeting with the PLO, for example, with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, or Hamas, starting with the analysis of Putin’s press statements following Russian-Palestinian talks on 26 June 2012. The rest of the documents were not linked to a specific meeting with the involved parties. Interviews whose main topic is not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are only used if they specifically mention Russia’s stance in the conflict. Figure 3.1 demonstrates the frequency of Russian officials’ meetings with either the Israeli government or the Palestinians.



**Figure 3.1:** Frequency of Russian officials’ meetings with Israelis or Palestinians and the total number of analyzed documents between May 2012 and November 2020.

It is visible that the years 2016 and 2017 showed an increase in the interest in the conflict since the total number of official statements reached its high of 24 and 27. 2016 was the year in which Russian officials met most often with Israelis, such as President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, and Prime Minister Netanyahu at the beginning of the year. After former President Shimon Peres’ death in November, Dimitry Medvedev traveled to Israel, where he answered media questions and participated in a news conference on 11 November 2016. Afterwards, meetings with Israelis declined sharply. 2017 was the year most talks with Palestinian officials were held. The year started with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov meeting Saeb Erekat, Secretary-General of the PLO Executive Committee. It ended with a press release of Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov’s meeting with Mustafa Barghouti, member of the Executive Committee of the PLO and leader of the Palestine National Initiative. There was a sharp decline in Russia’s involvement in the conflict in 2018. In 2019, Russian officials only met once with Israelis and twice with the Palestinians.

The independent variables of the analysis are roles, identity, and the social structures between the actors. First, statements concerning social structure, identity, and role conception are differentiated depending on the document’s nature, the Russian official, and whether the statement was made before, during, or after a conversation with either an Israeli or Palestinian leader. Moreover, by looking at the statements and their date, important events for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as the US’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in 2017, are taken into account. In a second step, other

concepts that influence Russia's identity and role conceptions are analyzed. Hence, I introduce other codes such as "Promotion of Palestinian Unity" or "Member of the Middle East Quartet" into the Atlas.ti system. Furthermore, in joint press statements, Israeli or Palestinian officials also made statements that serve to understand how Russia's counterparts perceive Russia's role in the conflict.

### **3.2.1. Constructivist Theory Applied to Russia's Foreign Policy in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

None of the analyzed documents contains any reference to Wendt's Hobbesian culture. Since Russia supports Israel's and the Palestinians' claim to sovereignty, the political culture of anarchy does not have grounds in Russian discourse. Putin emphasized twice Russia's support for the Israeli state's creation and sovereignty, such as in 2012: "It is no accident that the Soviet Union was among the initiators and supporters of the creation of the state of Israel" (Putin, 2012b).

Putin and Lavrov even confirmed their initial support for creating a Palestinian state six times. In November 2012, Lavrov said: "Russia has no doubt in Palestine's statehood. We recognized the Palestinian state when it was proclaimed in year 1988" (Lavrov, 2012a). Moreover, this statement demonstrates the striking fact that each of the Russian officials regularly talks about "Palestine," even though a Palestinian state does not yet exist officially. Official statements by the Quartet, on the other hand, usually refer to the "Palestinians" or the "Palestinian territories."<sup>23</sup>

Overall, a constructive, positive relationship with either the Palestinians or the Israelis has been mentioned 101 times within all the analyzed documents, 94 of them in Russian officials' direct statements. There were 43 comments at talks with Israelis, mostly made by Putin, who said for instance in a meeting with the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Sochi in 2017: "Let me start today by saying that we are happy with the state of our bilateral relations" (Putin, 2017b).

In total, Russian officials made 51 comments about their positive relations with the Palestinians. Medvedev clearly emphasized Russian traditional relations with the Arab world when he said in 2015: "Relations with the Arab world [...] have a long history. Just remember that for centuries, Christian pilgrims from our country have visited Orthodox holy sites in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, and Muslims from Russia made the hajj to Mecca" (Medvedev, 2015).

However, with Israeli officials, the focus often laid on the positive "development" of bilateral relations (Putin 2018b), instead of expressing an actual "Kantian" friendship. This becomes visible when searching for the specific mention of the word "friends" in their speeches. During meetings with Palestinians, the word was used 33 times compared to only 15 times at Israeli-Russia talks. While Lavrov called the Israelis three times "friends," he used the word 17 times for the Palestinians: "We are grateful [...] for the consistent contribution of our Palestinian friends, in the solution of the tasks to reinforce the Russian presence in the Holy Land" (Lavrov, 2014a). Therefore, it seems as if Russian officials,

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<sup>23</sup> The PA officially changed its name to the "State of Palestine" in 2013 (*Haaretz*, 2013).

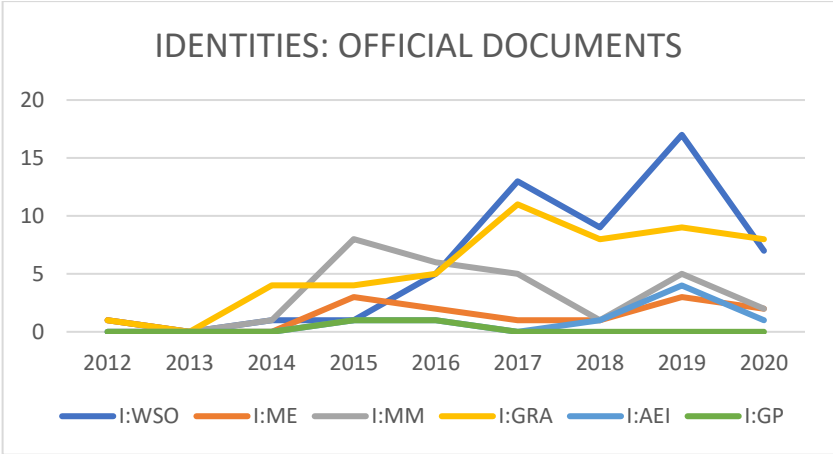


especially Lavrov, consider the social structure in their relationship with the Palestinians to be more of a Kantian structure.

Russian officials carefully avoided direct negative comments on either Israeli or Palestinian actions. The only exception was one sentence by Lavrov concerning “illegal settlement-building practices in East-Jerusalem” (Lavrov, 2015b). The IPD, in contrast, expressed criticism towards Israel 20 times. In June 2014, for example, the IPD wrote, “Moscow perceived this step by the Israeli authorities with concern. The implementation of new [Israeli] settlements [...] is a direct threat to the prospects of the resolution of the Palestinian problem by the two states” (IPD, 2014).

Since Putin’s third presidential term, Moscow has made several efforts to create cooperative bilateral relations with the Israeli government and members of the PLO or Hamas. Within the regular interactions of these actors, Russia succeeded in establishing an overall positive social structure, presented by Russian leaders as a traditional friendly one, which becomes visible through the multiple use of the word “friend.”

**3.2.2. Russian Identities in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

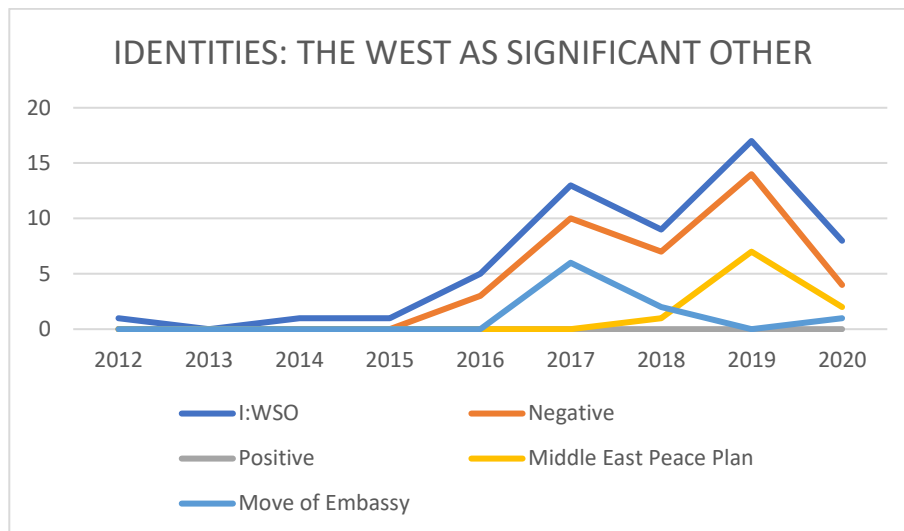


**Figure 3.2:** Frequency of expressed Russian identities in the analysis of official Russian documents per year.

Figure 3.2 demonstrates the frequency of all identities, found in Russian official documents. At first glance, it is visible that there are some significant discrepancies regarding this identity-related statements’ frequency. Some, such as the great power identity (I:GP) or comments concerning the multi-ethnic nature of Russia’s population (I:ME), show a less frequent use than others and seem therefore, less important for Russia’s self-perception. The fact that Moscow has good relations with all important actors (I:GRA) and the West, as Russia’s significant Other (I:WSO), were the most dominant, with an increasing trend starting in 2016. The following section will explain the occurrence of these identities in depth.

### 3.2.2.1. The West as Significant Other (I:WSO)

As explained in Chapter 2, Russian foreign policy has been, to a large extent, influenced by its relation to the West. This can be observed in policies and statements to get closer to the West, or contrarily because the Russian government seeks distance from the US and the EU in particular. In the analysis of the 142 documents, the WSO identity appeared 55 times, when Russian officials commented on the West's foreign policy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its implications.



**Figure 3.3:** Frequency of the WSO identity and other important factors influencing Russia's position towards the West per year.

When looking at the development of the Russian Western-oriented identity construction, it is evident that statements referring to the WSO identity increased from 2016 to 2020. Although they were almost not present from 2012 to 2015, there was a spike in 2017 and 2019. Figure 3.3 demonstrates this development. Overall, it is noteworthy that 39 of these comments were with a negative connotation, such as one of the earliest statements in February 2015, when Foreign Minister Lavrov expressed regrets over the failed Israeli-Palestinian peace talks initiated by the US (Lavrov, 2015b). The WSO identity appeared only twice before or after a meeting with an Israeli official. Both of these statements included criticism of the US. For instance, at a news conference after traveling to Israel and the Palestinian Territories in 2016, Medvedev said: "The stance of other countries in the process will be crucial including the position of the United States, which has not been particularly active in this issue" (Medvedev, 2016e). In contrast, during meetings with Palestinian officials, the WSO identity appeared 20 times, while 12 were negative. An example is Lavrov's opening remarks at a meeting with intra-Palestinian dialogue members in February 2019. He said: "We see the greatest danger in the stance of the United States [...]" (Lavrov, 2019a).

The other statements were almost all neutral, mostly in the context of Russia's joint commitment with the US, the EU, and the UN within the Quartet. The Crimean Crisis and its following Western sanctions on Russia had no direct impact on the statements made in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict's context. As will be elaborated in the fourth chapter, local and international media did see a connection

between Russia's annexation of Crimea and the discussion on Israel's annexation of settlements in the West Bank and the Golan Heights.

In 2016, Medvedev expressed hope that the new US administration under Trump would be more involved in the conflict (Medvedev, 2016c). However, US President Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017 led to an increase in talking about the US, but the discourse on the West did not become more positive. On 6 December 2017, Trump gave an official statement recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and directed the State Department to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Trump, 2017). This decision was met with notable criticism in the international arena and resulted in escalating tensions in the West Bank and Gaza. Sergey Lavrov met with then-US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on the sidelines of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Vienna on 7 December 2017, where he expressed his discontent over Trump's decision. He highlighted the negative consequences of this development on the UN's efforts in the Quartet's framework and the growing fear among Arab and Muslim countries in general (Lavrov, 2017b). Putin expressed his worries after a meeting with Turkish President Erdogan: "[...] the US administration's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and to relocate the US embassy there does not do anything to help settle the situation in the Middle East and is instead destabilizing an already complicated situation." He further added: "This may, in fact, ruin the prospects for the Palestine-Israel peace process" (Putin, 2017c). This was the first and only time Putin directly criticized the US.

These developments led to a sharp increase of the WSO identity. In 2017, Trump's decision was mentioned six times. In February 2018, President Putin met with Mahmoud Abbas. While Putin claimed that "there is no need to describe the depth and quality of our relations", he then remained neutral with regard to the US and even sent President Trump's "best wishes" (Putin, 2018a). In Mahmoud Abbas' words, meanwhile, the escalating frustration towards the Trump Administration was evident. He called the decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem "a slap in the face" (Abbas, 2018).

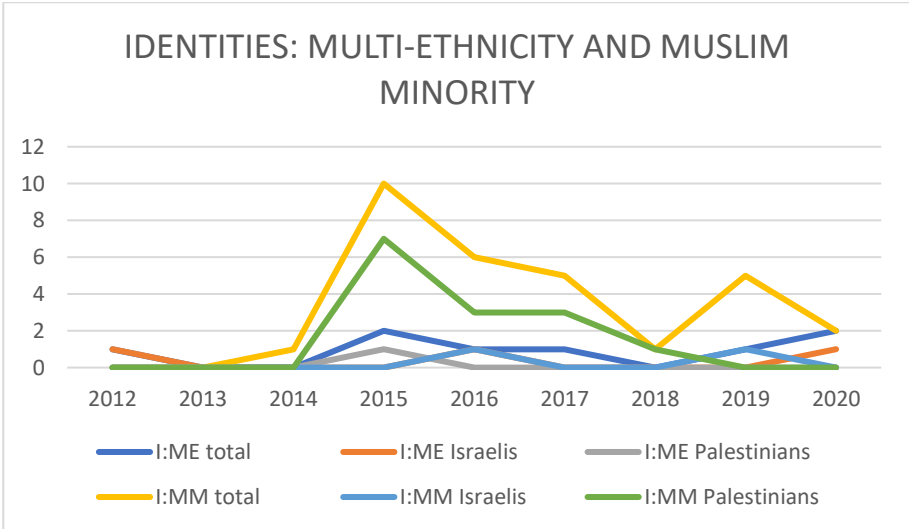
In 2019, the Trump administration's so-called "Deal of the Century" was expected with impatience. For example, Lavrov said in March: "We have noticed that our American colleagues, who are preparing the widely publicized 'deal of the century' that is taking too long [...]" (Lavrov, 2019b). In January 2020, the Trump administration published its Middle East Peace Plan under the name "Peace to Prosperity." While the US traditionally insisted on creating a Palestinian state based on boundaries pre-1967, the plan proposes annexing most Israeli settlements in the West Bank, such as along the Jordanian border. The plan promises Israeli settlers to keep their current homes, and it envisages a Palestinian capital in "East Jerusalem", while Israel would have sovereignty over the entire city.

Moreover, to ensure Israel's security, the "limitations of certain sovereign powers in the Palestinian area" are accepted (*Peace to Prosperity*, 2020, p. 3). After the draft was published, Mahmoud Abbas called it an "illegitimate, one-sided proposal that rewards Israel's occupation" and condemned that his people's land had turned into "Swiss Cheese" (Gladstone, 2020). He furthermore declared that his government would cease all bilateral relations with the US. Foreign Minister Lavrov also denounced the

plan, arguing that the dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians should not be put in danger by any unilateral deal (Lavrov, 2019d), emphasizing the importance of dialogue and social interactions. In a recent interview with the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov reaffirmed Russia’s position on the issue: “We believe that Israel’s annexation of a portion of Palestinian lands would not only obviate the prospects for a two-state solution but also would most likely provoke a new dangerous spiral of violence in Palestine [...]” (Bogdanov, 2020).

**3.2.2.2. Multi-Ethnicity (I:ME) and Muslim Minority (I:MM)**

The next paragraphs analyze Russia’s Eurasian or multi-ethnic identity and Russia’s approach to Islam due to the Muslim minority living in Russia. Figure 3.4 highlights the evolution of the ME and MM identities over time, considering their appearance in the context of a meeting with either Israeli or Palestinian officials.



**Figure 3.4:** Frequency of the ME- and MM identity in official Russian documents per year.

The ME identity appeared eight times in total, of which three were in the context of conversations with Israeli officials. Lavrov’s meeting with then-President of Israel, Shimon Peres, in November 2012, serves as a good example. The occasion was the opening of the Russian Jewish Museum of Tolerance in Moscow. Lavrov expressed the belief that the museum will “[...] help to advance the values and ideals of inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation, which are now in demand” (Lavrov, 2012b). Putin and Medvedev made statements in the context of the memory of World War II, condemning racism and xenophobia (Medvedev, 2016b; Putin, 2020a), which is an indication for Israel and Russia’s shared values and beliefs.

When Lavrov answered questions during the Valdai International Discussion Club’s panel on Russia’s policy in the Middle East, he precisely referred to the ME identity. He highlighted Russia’s aspiration for “security and coexistence of cultures, civilizations and religions.” He added: “None of Russia’s actions in the Middle East which we undertake for some reason or other have brought about disunity or the division of ethnic, religious or civilizational groups” (Lavrov, 2019c). This quote does,

at the same time, reflect Russia's support for Muslims around the world, which may be related to the significant Muslim minority living in Russia, as explained in Chapter 2. Proof for this identity can be mainly found in Lavrov's statements, where they appeared 20 times. Besides, Figure 3.4 makes it evident that there was a sharp increase in MM identity statements in 2015. This rise is mostly due to Lavrov's interview after talks with the delegation of the OIC Ministerial Contact Group, where he made five independent comments referring to the MM identity. For instance, he emphasized Russia's wish to strengthen "friendly ties with our partners in the Islamic world" and further noted:

I would like to say that the position of our partners from the Arab and Islamic world converge with Russia's stance on many international issues. [...] I strongly believe that in this respect our cooperation is in line with the objective movement towards a multipolar international order with the Islamic world as one of its centers (Lavrov, 2015b).

Here, Lavrov highlighted Russia's anti-hegemonic role (which will be explained in-depth in the third part of this chapter), but also Russia's GRA identity.

### **3.2.2.3. Good Relations With All Actors (I:GRA)**

After the WSO identity, the fact that Russia maintains good relations with all Middle Eastern actors is the second most frequently expressed identity – appearing a total of 49 times. Only one statement was made in the context of meetings with Israeli officials. Following Russian-Israeli talks on 7 June 2016 in Moscow, Putin highlighted that the Kremlin welcomed each rapprochement process between the various Middle Eastern states, such as Israel and Turkey (Putin, 2016b).

On the other hand, the GRA identity appeared 22 times in talks with Palestinian officials. An emphasis was especially on Russia's relationship with its "partners in the Islamic world" and the close cooperation with the OIC (Lavrov, 2015b). It seems that the self-conception of having good relations with the OIC is accurate and present until today. In June 2020, the OIC Secretary-General, Dr. Yousef A. Al-Othaimen, stated that "the OIC accords great importance to its relations with the Russian Federation and looks forward to continuing dialogue and strengthen existing fruitful cooperation between the two parties" (OIC, 2020a). Furthermore, he highlighted the close consultation of the OIC and Russia, especially regarding the "Palestinian cause" (Ibid.).

Another critical part of the GRA identity is Russia's relation to Fatah and Hamas members, as was explained in the introduction. Otherwise, it would not be possible for Russia to arrange intra-Palestinian reconciliation talks. Lavrov, who used the GRA identity 30 times in total, said, for instance, in 2018: "In 2017, we held a multilateral round of intra-Palestinian dialogue. Today, we discussed the possibility and feasibility of holding this dialogue again in 2019 with the participation of all Palestinian forces, including Fatah and Hamas" (Lavrov, 2018b). Just in September 2020, the IPD reaffirmed its willingness to host another pan-Palestinian meeting to "facilitate the overcoming of the intra-Palestinian split" (IPD, 2020b).

Moreover, the GRA identity contributes significantly to a Lockean or even Kantian social structure in Russian-Israeli or Russian-Palestinian relations. While historically, the Soviet Union had different allies than the US, the situation seems to have changed since Russia holds good relations with *all* actors in the conflict. Russia has carefully established its GRA identity, strengthening its mediator-balancer role, which is reflected in the GRA identity's co-occurrence with the MB role variable 28 times. Russian officials have used the willingness to host intra-Palestinian as well as Israeli-Palestinian meetings several times to highlight their MB role. Furthermore, the anti-hegemonic role (AH) co-occurs with the GRA identity in 19 statements, such as when Lavrov confirmed in 2016 that Putin "repeatedly referred to the Arab Peace Initiative as a generally acceptable basis for future efforts" during talks with Netanyahu (Lavrov, 2016b).

#### **3.2.2.4. Against Externa Influences (I:AEI)**

As explored in the second chapter, Russia strongly criticizes external Western interventions with regional affairs. While Moscow acknowledges the US's important position in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it strongly condemns unilateral steps and significant interference. However, the AEI identity has been found only seven times in this analysis. The first comment was when Putin met Benjamin Netanyahu on 25 June, 2012. He reaffirmed Russia's firm opinion that "democratic transformation must take place in civilized fashion and without outside interference" (Putin, 2012a). At meetings with Palestinians, the AEI identity became visible four times. After talks with the Palestinian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Riyad al-Maliki on 21 December 2018, Lavrov said: "Such revisionism as regards international law and attempts to replace it with some rules that Western countries are inventing and trying to impose on others, point to a very dangerous trend" (Lavrov, 2018b). He referred to Washington's apparent alignment with Israeli interests, calling the US' recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the decision to move the US embassy there "attempts to undermine the international legal foundations of the Palestine-Israel settlement, which are fixed in UN resolutions, including binding ones" (Ibid.).

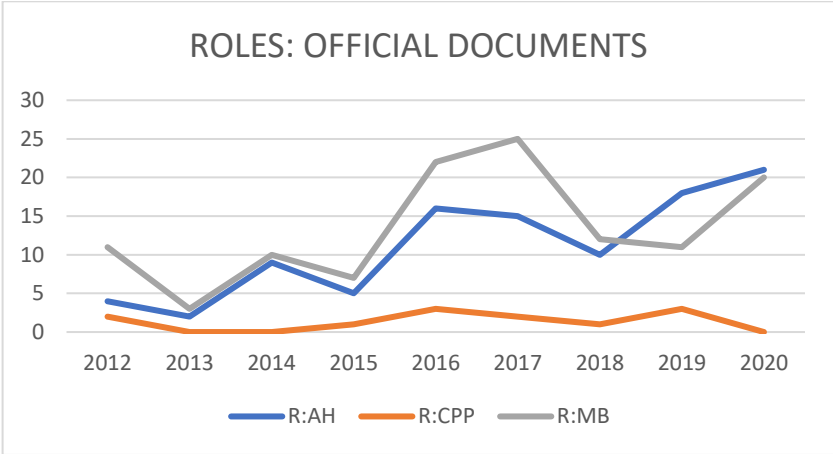
While two comments referring to the AEI identity were broader and highlighted that Russia would not "impose anything" on the Palestinians (Lavrov, 2019a), all the others related directly to the West in a critical way. Namely, in 2016, Medvedev criticized the "irresponsibility and egoism of other leaders, who decided that they had the right to interfere in the internal affairs of others in order to achieve their own ends" and their negative impact on the Middle Eastern region in general, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Medvedev, 2016c).

#### **3.2.2.5. Great Power Identity (I:GP)**

Moscow has been rather modest in expressing its great power identity. In the 142 analyzed documents, there are only two references to the GP identity. In 2015, when Lavrov gave answers to media questions after talks with the OIC Ministerial Contact Group's delegation on Palestine and East Jerusalem, one question concerned "OIC's perspective on Russia's contribution to regional and global peace and

stability”. Secretary-General Iyad Madani answered first, and then Lavrov continued: “First, I would like to thank the Secretary General for his assessment of Russia’s global role” (Lavrov, 2015b). In this case, Lavrov did not mention Russia’s aspiration to the GP identity per se, but welcomed an external opinion on the topic. In November 2016, Dimitry Medvedev published an article titled “Russia and Palestine: Moving forward.” He stressed the importance of the conflict’s resolution for “regional and global powers,” and claimed that Moscow had always treated the conflict as a top priority (Medvedev, 2016c). This is probably the most striking finding of this part of the analysis. As was explored in Chapter 2, Moscow’s wish to return to its great power status is presented as the striving force in Russian foreign policy. However, this view was not reflected in the Russian elite’s discourse.

**3.2.3. Russian Roles in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**



**Figure 3.5:** Frequency of expressed Russian roles in official Russian documents per year.

First of all, it is noteworthy that Russian officials expressed its role as a mediator-balancer and its anti-hegemonic role by far more often than all other variables, including the identities. There was a general upward trend in the last years. The MB role experienced its highest point in 2017, while the AH role peaked in 2020. In contrast, Russia’s co-patriot protector role appeared rarely. The most crucial identities for Moscow discussed above, especially the WSO identity and the GRA identity, serve as prerequisites for performing these roles.

**3.2.3.1. Anti-Hegemonic Role (R:AH)**

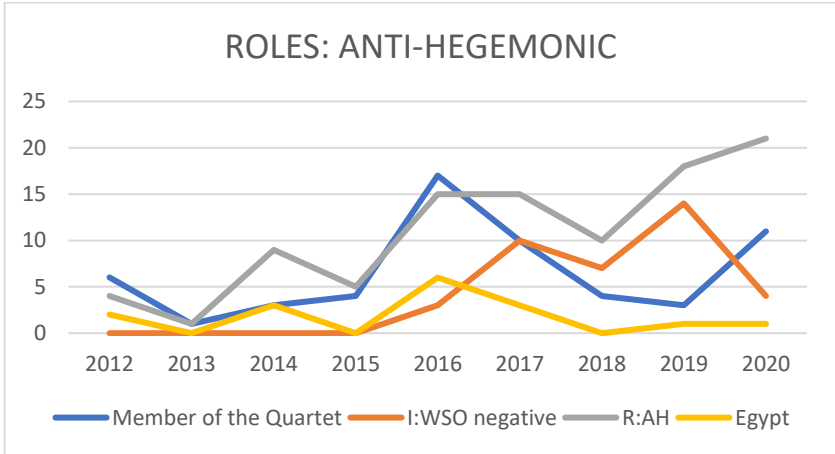
As outlined in Chapter 2, Russia’s behavior in the Middle East often demonstrates its opposition to the US’s world hegemony while pressing for a more multilateral order of the international system. Since the AH role was the second-most-frequent variable in this analysis, this thesis argues that the Kremlin also holds an AH role conception concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, in the context of talks with Israeli representatives, the AH role only appeared three times. For example, Lavrov said to the Israeli Foreign Minister on 26 January 2015: “We are convinced, and we see eye to eye on this issue, that the leading Arab countries should play a more active role in the common search for an all-embracing solution” (Lavrov, 2015a). In alter/structure-driven role theory,

roles refer to anticipated behavior patterns, defined by both the own conception of an actor and other agents' expectations (Elgström and Smith, 2006, p. 5). This serves as an explanation for Russia's low expression of the AH role in the interaction with Israeli representatives. Since Israel does not oppose US hegemony, Russia does not reflect the Other's expectations by emphasizing its anti-hegemonic role.

On the contrary, when Moscow had meetings with Palestinian officials, proof of the AH role was revealed 35 times. After Lavrov met with the OIC, he claimed: "I strongly believe that in this respect our cooperation is in line with the objective movement towards a multipolar international order with the Islamic world as one of its centers." Moreover, he mentioned that the international system's multipolarity would guarantee the world to be more sustainable (Lavrov, 2015b). Since Russia and Palestinian officials hold the belief that the international system should be a multipolar world-order, the AH role reflects these shared values.

The most relevant co-occurrence of the AH role is with Russia's mediator-balancer role conception. The roles overlapped 45 times, such as in 2016, when Lavrov praised Qatar's efforts and "Egypt's readiness to resume its role" to restore intra-Palestinian unity. To emphasize Russian commitment to this issue, Lavrov further added: "We are also ready to contribute. In the past, we received various Palestinian groups in Moscow. Today, we are also ready to conduct another round of intra-Palestinian dialogue" (Lavrov 2016a). Moscow has continuously referred to Egypt's importance in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This opinion co-occurred with statements expressing the AH role 16 times. To give another example, the Information and Press Department said in 2012: "The Russian side supports the peacemaking efforts implemented by the different parties, especially Egypt" (IPD, 2012).



**Figure 3.6:** Frequency of the AH role and other relevant concepts in Russian official documents per year.

Figure 3.6 demonstrates the significant rise of the AH role in 2016. Apart from an increasing reference to Egypt, the year saw a rise in addressing Russia's membership within the Middle Eastern Quartet. For example, Maria Zakharova, the Spokesperson of the Russian Ministry, said on 19 May 2016: "As a party to the Middle East quartet of international mediators, Russia actively supports the involvement of key regional players, first and foremost, Cairo, in steering the peace process out of the present impasse" (Zakharova, 2016a). The Quartet co-occurred a total of 26 times with the AH role.



US President Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem affected the year 2017 to a significant extent. It is visible that, while the focus on Egypt diminished, Russian officials increasingly made negative comments about the West, mostly the US. As a response to the US's initiative, Putin stressed in December 2017 that "the agreement on Jerusalem's status [is] the subject of direct talks between Palestine and Israel" (Putin, 2017c). This way, the WSO identity had an important impact on the AH role.

Furthermore, Russian officials often referred to the Arab Peace Initiative in the context of the AH role. On 19 May 2020, the IPD released a statement concerning the Palestinian withdrawal of all agreements with Israel and the US. It proposed to hold direct talks between Palestinians and Israel representatives, including "interested Arab countries and the League of Arab States" (IPD, 2020a). Moreover, in 2020, Bogdanov made several statements on the AH role that attach the AH role closely to the AEI identity. For example, he said: "Our foreign policy, based on respect for international law, does not include hegemonic attempts to impose any external will on independent states, or interference in their sovereign affairs" (Bogdanov, 2020).

### **3.2.3.2. Co-Patriot Protector (R:CPP)**

As explained in Chapter 2, the CPP role is foremost visible regarding the more than one million Russians living in Israel. However, the CPP role was, in comparison to the AH role and the MB role conception, relatively negligible: It appeared only 10 times. During meetings with Israelis, Russian officials expressed the role eight times. For instance, after talks with Netanyahu, Vladimir Putin said: "It is common knowledge that over 1.5 million former Soviet citizens live in Israel. We have always considered them our people, our compatriots" (Putin, 2019). This role highlights Moscow's role expectations vis-à-vis the Israelis. However, Putin also mentioned the CPP role once during a meeting with Mahmoud Abbas, when he claimed: "I want to thank you, Mr. President, for the attention that you pay to Russian-Palestinian relations and for the support you give to our compatriots living in Palestine and those who come to the holy places as pilgrims" (Putin, 2017a).

Furthermore, the co-patriot protector role shows a significant co-occurrence with signals for a cooperative social structure. According to Russian officials, many Russian-speaking people who live in Israel have positively influenced Moscow's relations with the Israeli and Palestinian governments. During talks with Reuven Rivlin, Putin highlighted that Russian speakers had brought their relationship to a "special dimension" (Putin, 2016a).

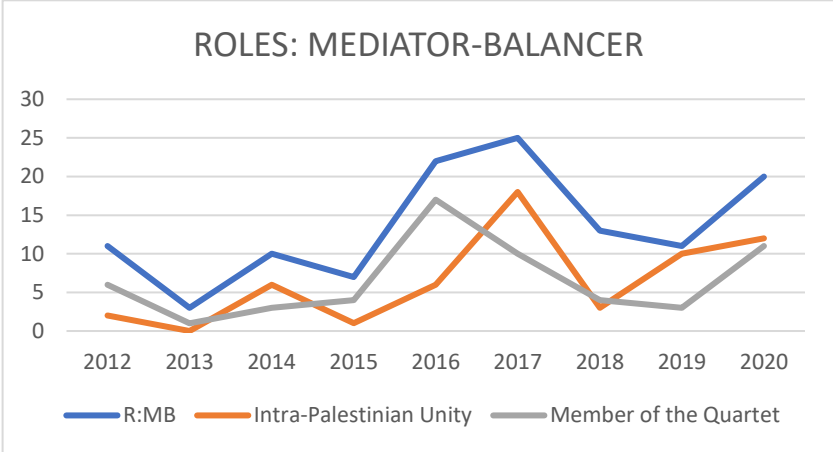
### **3.2.3.3. Mediator-Balancer (R:MB)**

The mediator-balancer role was, by far, the most used variable in the findings of this analysis, occurring 122 times in total. For instance, Medvedev emphasized in 2016: "Our country is ready to act as a mediator" (Medvedev, 2016e). During talks with Israeli officials, only 10 comments referred to the MB role, mostly when Russian officials called for the resumption of negotiations, such as in 2012, when

Putin said: “The only way to settlement is through dialogue and Russia calls on the parties to return to the negotiating table” (Putin, 2012c).

On the other hand, the MB role appeared more than 60 times in the context of direct talks with Palestinians. For example, at Lavrov's opening remarks in a meeting with Riyad al-Maliki (Lavrov, 2016a), or when Putin promised Abbas in 2013 that Russia would do “everything in [its] power to facilitate” the positive development of Israeli-Palestinian relations (Putin, 2013). This difference can be explained through the Palestinian need of an additional mediator in the conflict. Since US-Palestinian relations experienced a major setback with the US embassy’s move to Jerusalem, Abbas said in 2017 that “[...] the Russian Federation plays a key role in the arena and in the efforts to achieve peace in our region” (Abbas, 2017b). To confirm Russia’s willingness to mediate in the conflict, Lavrov said for instance: “We will continue to do all we need to do to put the process back on a constructive course, which would facilitate the beginning of negotiations [...]” (Lavrov, 2017c). However, Russia's MB role was already well perceived among Palestinians before that incidence. For instance, Mahmoud Abbas emphasized in 2014, after talks with President Putin: “For a number of reasons we would also like to see Russia playing the leading role in establishing peace in the Middle East” (Abbas, 2014).

The relevant co-occurrence of the MB role with the AH role has already been explained above. Moreover, it converged 20 times with the WSO identity. For instance, in Russian-Palestinian talks in 2016, Medvedev highlighted Russia’s willingness to hold direct negotiations with both parties in the conflict. He then added: “As mediators, we will continue our efforts. We hope to get some help from other actors, including the new US administration” (Medvedev, 2016d). However, ten of these co-occurrences displayed criticism towards the US. Examples can be found in Lavrov’s statement, who, in 2018, highlighted that all members of the Quartet should be as proactive as possible, but complained with regards to the US that “this has not been the case so far” (Lavrov, 2018a).



**Figure 3.7:** Frequency of the MB role and other relevant concepts in Russian official documents per year.

Figure 3.7 demonstrates the frequency of the MB role in relation to the concepts “member of the Quartet” and “intra-Palestinian unity.” It is visible that the MB role was most dominant in 2016 and 2017. In 2016, there was also an increase in the mentions of Russia’s membership in the Quartet. In total,

the concept of the Quartet co-occurred with the MB role 51 times. For example, in 2016, Lavrov said: “We are working actively within the Quartet of international Middle East mediators and other formats monitoring the Palestinian-Israeli problems” (Lavrov, 2016b).

In 2017, intra-Palestinian unity replaced the Quartet in terms of importance. In total, it co-occurred with the MB role 32 times. It is noteworthy that Russia tried vigorously to contribute to Palestinian unity. Over the years, Russian officials emphasized in 57 comments that the intra-Palestinian divide was one of the main obstacles to finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In January 2017, Moscow held a meeting for various Palestinian groups to “meet and discuss their differences of opinion, agree on a common platform to ensure unity of all Palestinians and facilitate direct negotiations” (Lavrov, 2017a). In the following months, Russian officials highlighted these efforts and their importance several times. In May 2017, the IPD commented that “Russia has always stood for the restoration of Palestinian unity” and that the “settlement of intra-Palestinian differences will create the necessary conditions for finding a fair negotiated solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and for the implementation of the legitimate right of the Palestinian people to an independent state of their own” (IPD, 2017).

After declining in 2018 and 2019, the MB role re-experienced a significant rise in 2020. However, it has to be noted that there were also significantly less published documents in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in these years. In 2020, the hosting of an Intra-Palestinian meeting (Lavrov, 2020) has remained one of the major aspects. Moreover, Moscow proposed an Israeli-Palestinian summit as soon as the situation regarding the Corona pandemic would have improved (Vershinin, 2020) and promised to be “ready to have a dialogue with the key regional players in other formats and to encourage them to join the efforts of the Quartet” (Nebenzya, 2020).

However, it has to be noted that the Russian elite did not necessarily express intentions to replace the US as the key mediator in talks between Abbas and Netanyahu, as was made clear by a 2016 interview with *Channel 2*, an Israeli TV-channel. However, he also referred to the Quartet and highlighted the process of multilateral decisions between the four members (Medvedev, 2016b).

Finally, Chapter 3 answers the second research question of this study, illustrating the evolution of Russia’s beforehand defined identity and role conceptions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the introduction demonstrates that there was no single trend that Russia had followed since 1991, supporting at times increasingly the Israelis and at times more the Palestinians, the analysis highlights that since 2012 Russian officials have presented their relations to all parties in the conflict as positive, even “friendly.” The Russian elite presented this political culture even as a Kantian social structure. The most dominant identity conceptions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are Russia’s GRA identity and the WSO identity. As Russia’s significant Other, the West has a crucial impact on enacting the two prominent assumed roles: the mediator-balancer and the anti-hegemonic role. As Tsygankov (2016, p. 15) notes, the significant Other can either encourage the Self to cooperate or resist. In the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict, Russia has mostly established a negative opinion of the West, which leads to the assumption of its AH role. In contrast, the MB role demonstrates a willingness to cooperate with the West, displayed through multiple references to the Middle Eastern Quartet's importance.

#### **4. External Opinions**

Many scholars, like Tsygankov (2016, p. 17), stress the importance of local and international conditions when analyzing foreign policy formation and change processes. International impacts through the Other provide the relevant framework in which the national Self develops and then determines foreign policy. In the following, the domestic and the international stance on Russia's foreign policy and its identity and role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are investigated through a media analysis of the Russian newspaper *The Moscow Times*, being the society-level of analysis, and the American Newspaper *The New York Times*, the international-level of analysis. This way, this section will answer to the third research question, namely how Russia's identity and role conceptions were perceived from external opinion within the analyzed timeframe.

##### **4.1. Within Russia: *The Moscow Times***

###### **4.1.1. Introduction**

Since the Soviet Union's dissolution, Russia has increasingly considered Israel's needs for security and its concerns about acts of terrorism directed against the public by radical Islamist regional groups. Simultaneously, the Russian Federation is committed to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the two-state solution, allowing two peoples to coexist peacefully. A large part of the Russian mass media shares this stance on the conflict. During Soviet times, it was unimaginable to oppose the government's opinion; today, the public often discusses Russian foreign policies. Russian views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are divided into two broad groups: pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian (Nosenko, 2015, p. 53).

The massive influx of immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union and the interaction between the two countries has been a significant factor in the spread of pro-Israeli sentiments in Russia. Diverse connections between Russian citizens and residents of Israel promote the public approval of Israeli perspectives. Russian speakers living in Israel do not disguise their resentment of the Arab population, considering it a security menace. In recent decades, Russia has had problems with terrorist attacks, which were particularly assumed by Caucasian nationals in Islam's name. Therefore, this substantial prejudice against Islam meets fertile ground among the Russian population (Ibid.:54).

Additionally, there are the advocates of the Palestinian cause. These include the Eurasian ideology's supporters, promoting a Russian particularism rooted in specific values and traditions. Eurasianists often denounce Jewish people for propagating a terrorist image of Arab countries and Muslims in general with the reported objective of demolishing Russia and disrupting its historical bonds with the Islamic world population (Ibid., p. 55).

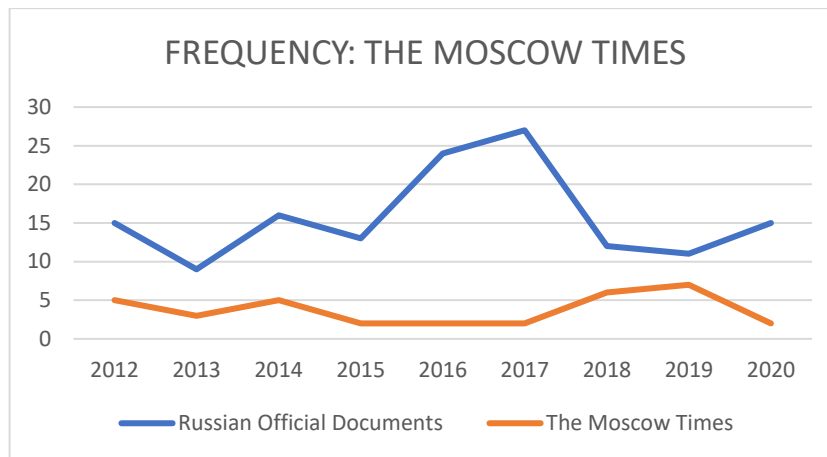
As researchers have long recognized, the media perform an undisputed social function, confirming, shaping, questioning, or criticizing various commonly held prejudices and stereotypes. From a social-constructivist perspective, the mass media contribute significantly to the formation of a national identity, which in turn determines the forming of crucial foreign-policy choices (Tsygankov, 2015, p. 21). Since Putin came to power, he has continuously worked on his public image through a notable state influence in the Russian mass media. The national media successfully portrayed the consequences of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Russian joining of the G7/G8 as Russia's return to its superpower status. Thanks to the media, Putin has established the impression that Russia is considerably more stable now and that its regime is dedicated to the country's welfare and prosperity (Leichtova, 2014, pp. 139-140).

To discover whether a part of the Russian public genuinely agrees with the government's identity and role conceptions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I chose not to analyze a state-run newspaper. Instead, *The Moscow Times* provides the data for this section of Chapter 4 since it claims to be Russia's leading, independent media outlet (*The Moscow Times: About us*). *The Moscow Times*, founded in 1992 was in 2014 widely criticized by pro-Kremlin supporters and experienced a number of cyber-attacks (Luhn, 2015). Therefore, *The Moscow Times* seems fit to offer a different perspective on Russian identities and roles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with a lower risk of repeating the Kremlin's propaganda.

#### 4.1.2. Analysis

To access the analysis' data, keywords like "Israel," "Palestinian," "Israeli-Palestinian conflict," "Putin," or "Lavrov" serve to find articles written on the conflict and Russia's attitude towards it. The articles are analyzed to see if there is any proof for Russia's identities or roles regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, questioning whether the authors of the publications agree with Russia's identity and role conceptions. Negative or positive comments towards either Palestinians or Israelis are not considered if they do not serve to reflect Moscow's social structure with the different governments.

In total, 34 articles are found relevant for this analysis. In the following, the articles' references will be abbreviated with "MT." Figure 4.1 shows the frequency of analyzed articles on Russian foreign-policy behavior in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between May 2012 and November 2020. The topic was quite prominent at the beginning of the analyzed time frame, with the first article published shortly after Putin's inauguration for his third presidential term. It experienced less attention from 2015 to 2017, despite the fact that Russian representatives made most official statements in these years. The frequency increased sharply in 2018, leading to a maximum of seven published articles in 2019. In 2020, the topic's attention decreased again to two articles per year, with the last published content on 31 January 2020. Figure 4.1 reflects the divergence of published documents discussing the topic.



**Figure 4.1:** Frequency of articles on Russia’s foreign policy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict per year: *The Moscow Times*.

MT articles offer two precise comments on Moscow’s importance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as on 12 December 2017: “Russia [...] is increasingly well positioned to take the lead on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, especially since Mahmoud Abbas, who heads the PA, has already said that Washington ceded its credibility in the group by recognizing Jerusalem” (MT, 2017a).

One article published in September 2016 included three statements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict’s importance for Moscow. The author claimed that Moscow would have utilized the offer to host Israeli-Palestinian talks to demonstrate that Russia was “back in the Middle East” and to point out the US’ failure in resolving the conflict (MT, 2016), which represents an apparent reference to the WSO identity’s importance for Russia’s engagement in the conflict.

In contrast, there are also some critical views on Russia’s foreign policies. Four times, it was made clear that Russia should rather abstain from interference in the conflict. An example was in 2012, when an article cited Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of *Russia in Global Affairs*, who said: “Russia can’t accomplish anything in Palestine and would be better off distancing itself from the process” (MT, 2012c). Criticism about Russia’s behavior in the conflict also appeared three times from 2015 to 2016 and entirely referred to Moscow’s relations with the Palestinians. An opinion piece by Pyotr Romanov published in October 2015 questioned the Kremlin’s support of the Palestinians and called Moscow’s attitude towards terrorist attacks in Israel “a little strange.” He further criticized how state-controlled Russian media had aired a speech of Mahmoud Abbas, where he supposedly defended the people who had attacked a 70-year-old Jewish woman as “heroes” (MT, 2015c).

#### 4.1.2.1. Constructivist Theory Applied to Russia’s Foreign Policy in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

As explored in Chapter 3, the Russian government has publicly established a well-defined positive image of their relations with the Israelis and the Palestinians. The fact that Moscow has fostered its cooperation with the Israelis and Fatah or Hamas members also attracted the attention of *The Moscow Times*’ journalists. In April 2015, an article said: “Despite its close ties to Israel, Russia has also voted

with the Palestinians at the United Nations [and] invited the Hamas Islamic group to Moscow” (MT, 2015a).

While Russian officials highlighted their cooperative and friendly relations with the Palestinians 51 times, compared to 43 with Israelis, the MT authors referred to Russia’s good relations with the Israelis 12 times and 10 times regarding the Palestinians.

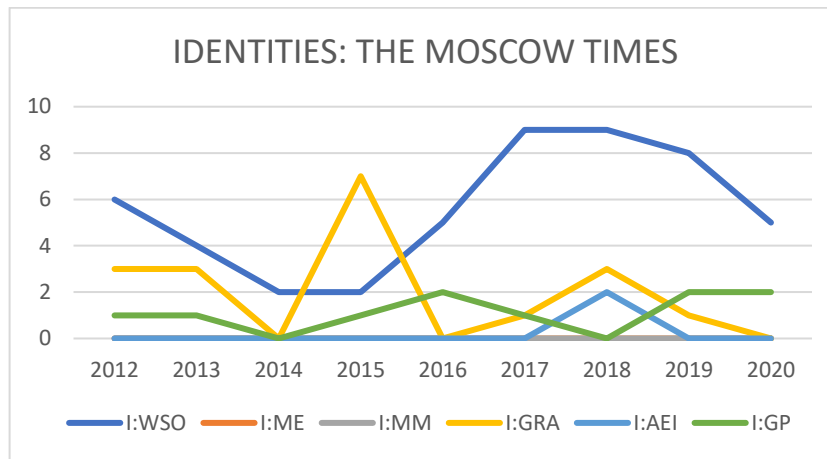
Most of all, the MT debated Putin’s personal relationship with Benjamin Netanyahu, and most of the positive comments concerning their relationship (nine) were written in 2019. For instance, an opinion piece by Zev Chafets from 4 April 2019 mentioned Putin’s grand political gesture of political support to Netanyahu before the Israeli elections on 9 April. Chafets even claimed that “Putin has a friend in Bibi Netanyahu, and maybe even a soulmate” (MT, 2019a). At the beginning of 2020, their relationship was again a topic of interest when Putin pardoned a young US-Israeli woman who had been arrested for Marijuana possession at a Moscow airport. This move was considered as a “boost for Netanyahu and as a confirmation in both countries that Israeli-Russian ties remain strong” (MT, 2020a).

However, *The Moscow Times*’s content also consists of eight statements, which indicated Moscow’s criticism of the Israeli government. In 2018, Russia’s Foreign Ministry was quoted, saying the “Israeli army’s use of force against Palestinians at protests inside the Gaza Strip was unacceptable” (MT, 2018b). Another example is Russia’s condemning of Israel’s plan to annex the Jordan valley in 2019 (MT, 2019b).

Concerning Russian-Palestinian relations, it is visible that Abbas’ frequent visits to Moscow were defined as proof of the relationship’s depth (MT, 2015a). Moreover, Russia helped to investigate Yasser Arafat’s death in 2004, which was seen as “another move certain to win Palestinian sympathy” (MT, 2020b). Furthermore, it was acknowledged that “Russia was the first major power to hold direct talks with Hamas” (Ibid.). Nevertheless, these relations were analyzed through a sceptic lens. For instance, an article published on 12 April 2015 quoted Yevgeny Stanovsky, head of the Moscow-based Institute of the Middle East think tank, who said: “To Russia, the Palestinian territories are like a suitcase without a handle. It’s burdensome to carry around, but it would be a shame to throw it out” (MT, 2015a).

Overall, it is noteworthy that the Russian officials’ portrayal of the social structure between the Kremlin and the Palestinians or the Israelis does not precisely match how the MT illustrated them. While the Hobbesian political culture did not appear in any of the articles again, the social structure was defined with more skepticism. This way, the MT gives proof of a Lockean political culture between Russia and the Israelis or the Palestinians, instead of the Kantian social structure portrayed by the Russian government.

#### 4.1.2.2. Russian Identities in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict



**Figure 4.2:** Frequency of Russian identities in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict per year: *The Moscow Times*.

Figure 4.2 gives an overview of Russian identities in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The ME identity, as well as the MM identity, did not appear at all in *The Moscow Times*. The WSO identity was the most significant identity overall, with nine references in 2017 and 2018. However, in 2015, the fact that Russia holds good relations with all key actors in the conflict was even more discussed. Since the MT published least articles from 2015 to 2017, it is interesting to observe that these years display a large amount of comments that refer to identities, namely the GRA and the WSO identity.

##### 4.1.2.2.1. The West as Significant Other (I:WSO)

The WSO identity appeared 50 times in the analyzed documents of the MT. However, most of these comments were expressing Russia’s negative attitude towards the West, especially the US. In November 2012, when the US blocked a UN Security Council statement, aiming at the condemnation of the worsening conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza, an author defined these developments as “setting the scene for a possible shutdown between Washington and Russia on the issue” (MT, 2012b).

While Russia’s membership in the Middle East Quartet appeared 12 times in total, the MT displayed Lavrov’s disapproval and criticism of the Quartet three times. In November 2012, an article claimed that Lavrov called the it an “insufficient format for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” (MT, 2012c).

From 2017 to 2019, the WSO identity appeared in 26 statements. For example, Lavrov was cited to express “serious concern” over the Trump administration’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (MT, 2017a). Tensions between the US and the Russian governments intensified, according to the MT, in 2018. Lavrov condemned Trump’s “‘persistent attempt to dismantle’ the mechanisms for achieving a peace settlement between the Israelis and Palestinians” (MT, 2018c). The same increasing trend of the WSO identity from 2017 to 2019 is also visible in the analysis of Russian officials’ documents.



On 25 March 2019, the Trump administration recognized the Golan Heights<sup>24</sup> as part of the Israeli State (Trump, 2019). While Russian representatives did not mention this development at all, the MT quickly concluded that this move might increase Russia's chances that the US would also recognize the annexation of Crimea, which was, according to Zev Chafetz, "at the top of Putin's wish list" (MT, 2019a).<sup>25</sup>

#### **4.1.2.2.2. Good Relations With All Actors (I:GRA)**

As shown in Figure 4.2, Russia's GRA identity was the second most dominant in the MT, appearing 18 times in total. The identity made its first appearance in 2012 when an author highlighted that despite traditional Russian ties with the Palestinians, Putin had managed to improve relations with the Israelis (MT, 2012a). Some days later, Theodore Karasik, a senior analyst at the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, was quoted in an article calling Putin's efforts to maintain good relations with Israel and Hamas an "astute diplomatic approach" (MT, 2012b). This way, the MT recognizes the difficult balancing act, Moscow has implemented over the past years.

#### **4.1.2.2.3. Against External Influences (I:AEI)**

Moscow's opposition to external interventions was only visible twice within all 34 analyzed articles. Both statements referred to Trump's decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. On 31 January 2018, Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, was quoted when he claimed that "Russia is not imposing some kind of order that it will have to sustain, like the United States" (MT, 2018a).

#### **4.1.2.2.4. Great Power Identity (I:GP)**

While the GP identity did rarely occur during the analysis of Chapter 3, the writers of *The Moscow Times* referred to it at least 10 times, making it the third most used identity. As a case in point, in 2016, an article talked about the reasons for Moscow's interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "Part of asserting yourself as a great power is doing the things great powers do," the article's author Matthew Bodner said. He further added that the attempt "to solve the infamously intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict" was another "great power classic," which attracted Moscow's attention (MT, 2016). Moreover, at the beginning of 2020, when Netanyahu visited Moscow, *The Moscow Times* observed that this visit would be "used by the Kremlin as further evidence of Russia's new leading role in the Middle East and its 'great power status'" (MT, 2020b).

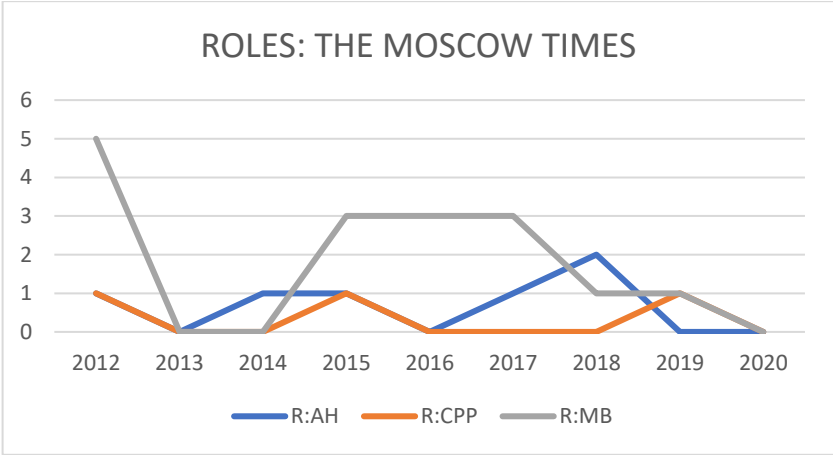
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<sup>24</sup> In 1967, Israel captured 70% of the Syrian Golan Heights and occupied this territory until today.

<sup>25</sup> However, until this date, the Russian annexation has not been recognized by the US. On 26 February 2020, the sixth anniversary of the annexation, the US Department of State published a press statement with the name "Crimea Is Ukraine." The statement confirmed that "the United States does not and will not ever recognize Russia's claims of sovereignty over the peninsula" (Pompeo, 2020).

On the other hand, Russia’s desire to construct its GP identity, also received criticism. For instance, the author of an article published in 2012, Jonathan Earle, criticized Russia’s GP identity efforts and condemned this approach as not purposeful. He further referred to a statement of Alexei Malashenko, an analyst with the Moscow Carnegie Center, who supposedly said that “Russia should put its natural link to Israel ahead of its desire to be seen as an international power player” (MT, 2012c).

**4.1.2.3. Russian Roles in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**



**Figure 4.3:** Frequency of Russian roles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict per year: *The Moscow Times*.

As in the Russian official documents’ analysis, the mediator-balancer role was the most widespread in the MT. However, Russia’s anti-hegemonic role demonstrates a significantly less intense frequency compared to Russian officials’ statements. Interestingly, while Russian officials used roles more often than identity conceptions, the opposite is true for articles published in *The Moscow Times*.

**4.1.2.3.1. Anti-hegemonic role (R:AH)**

The AH role appeared six times in the MT and did not show any specificities regarding its frequency. A good example of the Kremlin’s AH role assumption is a quoted statement of Alexander Krylov, a Russian diplomat in Israel, who stated that “U.S. dominance had led to heightened bloodshed and that a Russian resurgence in the region could promote a Cold War-style stability” (MT, 2015b). One of the two comments referring to the anti-hegemonic role in 2018 is Lavrov’s criticism of the Trump Administration’s behavior in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has been already analyzed above. It related the AH role with the WSO identity and other concepts such as the US’s decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

**4.1.2.3.2. Co-Patriot Protector (R:CPP)**

In 2012, 2015, and 2018, articles mentioned the around one million former Soviet citizens living in Israel. While in 2015, the large Russian-speaking community in Israel helped to demonstrate reasons for closer Russian-Israeli relations (MT, 2015a), an article of 2019 highlighted Putin’s popularity among them (MT, 2019a). However, none of the articles expressed the CPP role specifically or mentioned

Moscow's willingness to protect or consider these people in its foreign-policy decisions, which weakens the argument for Russia's CPP role.

#### **4.1.2.3.3. Mediator-Balancer (R:MB)**

The MB role was (again) the most used role describing Russian-foreign policy behavior in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It appeared 16 times in total, starting in 2012 with a maximum of five references. A precise reference to the MB role is an article published on 12 April 2015. It explained Abbas' visits to Moscow as crucial for the Russian government's wish to be considered as a mediator in the Middle East in general: "Abbas' presence in Moscow helps the Kremlin present itself as a key mediator on issues in the Middle East, which raises Russia's prestige on the international stage [...]" (MT, 2015a).

Nevertheless, it is crucial for this analysis that Russia's mediating-balancing attempts were criticized seven times. In 2012, a *Moscow Times* author included the comment of Vladimir Frolov, a Russian international affairs expert, who claimed that the only reason for Russia's desire to act as a mediator was to "show America and Europe that Russia is able to perform a so-called 'independent,' special role [...]" (MT 2012c). The author further argued: "Regardless of the nature of Moscow's relationship with Abbas, the Russians are unlikely to produce any groundbreaking agenda to drive a renewed peace effort" (Ibid.), observing that the GRA identity would not increase Russia's chances to become a considerable mediator. In contrast, in 2017, Alexei Khlebnikov wrote in an opinion piece that Russia was indeed in an excellent position to "take the lead on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, especially since Mahmoud Abbas [...] has already said that Washington ceded its credibility in the group by recognizing Jerusalem" (MT, 2017b).

Therefore, it can be argued that the US-Palestinian deteriorating relations may have led to a broader acknowledgment of Russia's possible MB role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This assumption is, however, not grounded with evidence, since three of the statements concerning Russia's inability to hold the MB role were published after 2017, such as this paragraph: "In 2019, Moscow [...] mediated for the Palestinians [...]. So far, however, this has not produced any results" (MT, 2019c). While the article acknowledged the Kremlin's mediating effort, it still did not consider it sufficient, bringing Russia's true capability of the MR role into question. Scholars who wrote about Russia's MB role in the Middle East and specifically in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict came to the same conclusion. To give an example, Dannreuther (2018) notes that even if Russia is "open to its inclusion as a mediator, it has not taken decisive positions" concerning the anti-ISIS campaign in Iraq or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The most important finding of this part is that, while some of the Russian elite's identity and role conceptions do indeed converge with *The Moscow Times'* discourse on the conflict, such as the dominance of the WSO identity or the MB role, there were some significant differences: 1) The MT journalists highlighted Russia's wish to be recognized as a great power, contrasting the low GP identity frequency in official documents. 2) The MM and ME identity were not mentioned at all. 3) Since more codes display signs of identities than of roles, one can conclude that even if some of

Russia's identities in the conflict are acknowledged by the public, the importance of Russia's MB and AH role enactment does not converge with Russian officials' emphasis.

## 4.2. Outside of Russia: *The New York Times*

### 4.2.1. Introduction

As elaborated above, the West as significant Other is one of the most relevant factors influencing Russian foreign-policy behavior in the Middle East and specifically in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That is why this part of the analysis explores the US newspaper *The New York Times*. The goal is to define how Western mainstream media reflect upon Russia's foreign-policy behavior in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The NYT established in 1851, has been popular in the US and beyond for decades. As one of the most prominent news websites in the US, the NYT is recognized for attracting around 70 million visitors per month each year, surpassing the performance of NBC News and The Washington Post.<sup>26</sup>

US media have a long tradition of opposing the US's values with those of the Soviet Union and, later, Russia. Even today, the mass media often judge current Russian politics by the degree to which Russia has become a Soviet-like "one-party state" led by a "KGB mentality"<sup>27</sup> and driven by propaganda, "Cold War rhetoric" and suppression of domestic opponents in order to strengthen the power of the state. It is rarely discussed how far Russia has moved away from its Soviet past. The American media influences US citizens' values, identity, and beliefs about other parts of the world (Tsygankov, 2015, p. 20). Tsygankov further comments that US media do not distinguish between Putin and the Russian political system, and he found evidence that key US media outlets "hold an overwhelmingly negative image of Russia as an autocratic, abusive, and revisionist power" (Tsygankov, 2015, pp. 30-31).

Bearing this in mind, this section of Chapter 4 will explore any similarities in how *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times* have talked about Russia in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the MT, at least some of the analysis's independent variables, such as the GRA identity or the MB role were frequently expressed.

### 4.2.2. Analysis

This part of the analysis uses the same method as in Chapter 4.1 to retrieve adequate and useful data from *The New York Times*. In the following, the articles' quotes will be abbreviated with "NYT." Within the analyzed timeframe, the NYT published 62 articles about Russia's foreign-policy behavior

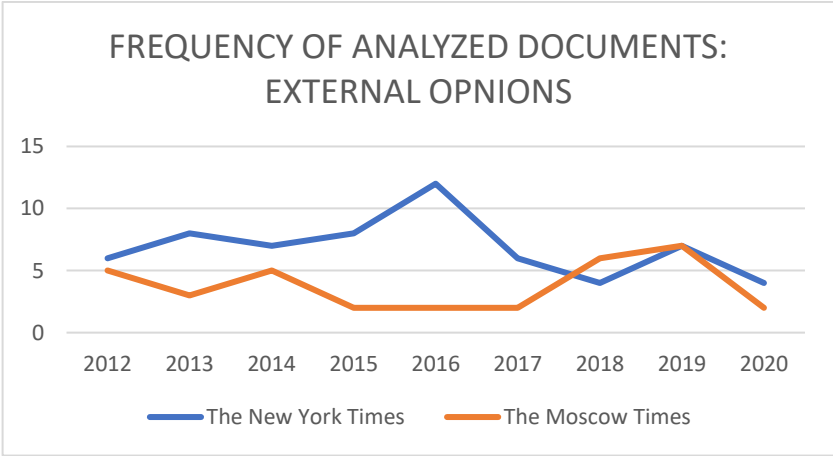
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<sup>26</sup> Like many other news publishers, The New York Times has been involved in the current discussions about whether or not to trust its published content. A 2018 New York Times credibility survey found that while the vast majority of adults surveyed had a neutral position on the issue, more people felt that the news coverage was very or relatively trustworthy than those who thought the contrary. Although the NYT is not considered as divisive as some other newspapers, its publication of Donald Trump's tax declarations in 2019 was perceived as controversial (Watson, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> The KGB was the primary security agency for the Soviet Union from 1954 until its collapse.

in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While Russia in the Middle East has been a polemic topic in the last decade, Russia’s position in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was much less discussed than the Syrian crisis or Moscow’s relations with Tehran. Just as in *The Moscow Times*, the first article appeared soon after Putin’s third presidential term, on 9 May 2012 and the last article on the topic went online on 20 January 2020. The Corona pandemic seems to have led to a decrease in coverage, despite recently renewed disputes in summer on Israel’s annexation plans for the Jordan Valley and the settlements in the West Bank.

Figure 4.4 shows that from 2012 to 2019, the publication’s frequency of the two newspapers is mostly opposed. *The Moscow Times* did not cover the issue much from 2015 to 2017. In contrast, *The New York Times* published 12 articles on the topic in 2016, followed by a sharp decrease in 2017 and 2018.



**Figure 4.4:** Frequency of articles on Russia’s foreign policy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict per year: *The New York Times*.

NYT authors started to acknowledge Russia’s importance in the Middle East in October 2016. An article talked about the fact that despite not speaking Russian, Benjamin Netanyahu “[...] seems to have found a common language with Mr. Putin, one he speaks more fluently than Mr. Sharon.” The reason for this rapprochement was found in Russia’s growing presence in the region, while Israel apparently trusted “Russia’s intention to become a key player in the region more than it trusts the US’ intention to stop that from happening” (NYT, 2016f). Later in 2017, the assumption that Russia could be a key actor in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict started to appear frequently. When Trump met with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in May 2017, he claimed that achieving peace might be “not as difficult as people have thought.” The author further called it a “notable omission” that the two leaders did not discuss “what role the Russians could or should play,” given Moscow’s growing influence in the region (NYT, 2017b).

In comparison to four comments by *The Moscow Times*, who suggested that Russia should stop trying to be influential in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, *The New York Times* only brought this argument once. The article quoted Ziad Abu Zayyad, former PA Minister, who claimed that the Russian effort did

not have “much chance either way.” He further criticized that a Russian led meeting between Netanyahu and Abbas would not bring any solution, such as the “tons of meetings like this” before (NYT, 2016d).

General criticism towards the Russian government appeared five times in total, which is, considering the US media’s traditional negative stance towards Russia, a relatively low number. One article in 2014 referred to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, stating that the resulting standoff between Russia and the West “could complicate American efforts [...] to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians” (NYT, 2014). In 2016, a Soviet document appeared, identifying Mahmoud Abbas as a former KGB agent. An article of the NYT highlighted that the members of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who made the discovery, did not want to undermine Abbas. Instead, they argued that talks with the Palestinians should not happen with the involvements of Russians, “who should not be trusted” (NYT, 2016c).

#### **4.2.2.1. Constructivist Theory Applied to Russia’s Foreign Policy in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

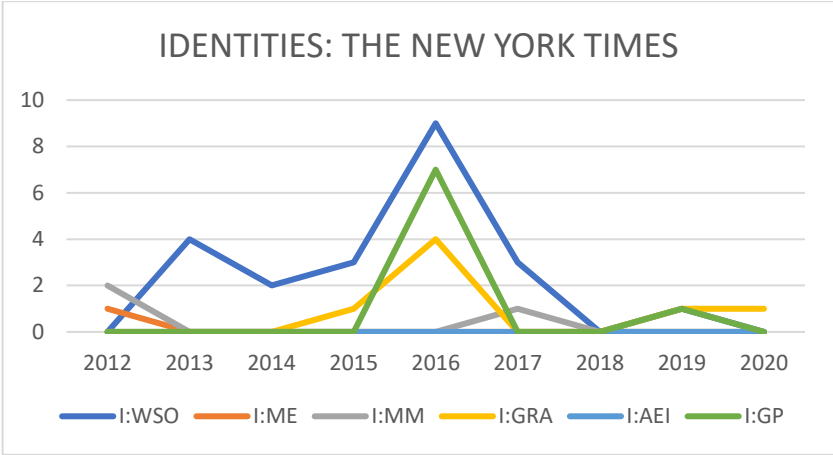
The way a favorable social structure between Moscow and the Israelis was displayed in *The New York Times* is similar to *The Moscow Times’* approach. Most of the 11 comments on Israeli-Russian constructive relations considered Putin and Netanyahu’s unique relationship and were published in 2019. For example, on 16 September 2019, Netanyahu’s good relations with President Trump and President Putin were highlighted (NYT, 2019c). Furthermore, in the context of Russian-Israeli relations, NYT authors used the word “friend” twice. However, both times, the comments expressed a form of cynicism and skepticism towards the real reasons for their relationship: “Necessity breeds friendship” (NYT, 2016f). Two comments displayed the Russian government’s criticism towards the Israelis. However, both of them included a Middle East Quartet report instead of a direct Russian official’s statement.

Around three weeks after the NYT’s first article on the topic, an author claimed in an article that “Israel [...] has reservations about Russia’s role in the long-stagnant Israeli-Palestinian peace process” (NYT, 2012c), which demonstrates that Israel might not be as content with Russia’s meddling in the conflict as Russian officials displayed on several occasions, as demonstrated in Chapter 3.

On the other hand, *The New York Times* mentioned the positive relationship between Moscow and the Palestinian government only six times. The same article describing Israel’s negative attitude towards Russia’s behavior in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict further claimed that Russia, as a member of the Quartet, “has consistently sided with the Palestinians during disputes” (NYT, 2012c). However, the NYT examined this support, generally from a more realist perspective. For instance, an article published on 9 September 2016 stated that the fact that Abbas welcomed Moscow’s influence in the region stemmed from the assumption that Moscow’s “peace bid” may serve as a “way to keep [the Palestinian] cause on the international radar screen” (NYT, 2016d). Some weeks later, an opinion piece by Shmuel Rosner even highlighted that the “Palestinian leaders are hardly enthusiastic about Mr. Putin’s

initiative,” since they “understand that Russia’s president has little interest in the plight of a people who lack political rights” (NYT, 2016f). Three times, there were signs of criticism towards the Palestinians. However, also in this case, it was the Quartet who condemned Palestinian behavior and not quotations of Russian officials: “The report, issued by the Middle East Quartet, also sharply criticizes Palestinian groups for glorifying individuals who carry out deadly attacks [...]” (NYT, 2016b).

**4.2.2.2. Russian Identities in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**



**Figure 4.5:** Frequency of Russian identities in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict per year: *The New York Times*.

The WSO identity was again the most frequent identity in the analysis. In contrast to *The Moscow Times*, the identity’s peak in *The New York Times* was 2016 (instead of 2017 and 2019). It almost disappeared from 2018 on, while Russian officials highlighted the WSO identity most often from 2017 on. The most significant difference to the identities in Chapter 3 and the first section of Chapter 4 is that Russia’s great power identity was even more dominant than the GRA identity. Nevertheless, it must be noted that in 2016, *The New York Times* published the most articles relevant for this analysis and least in 2018 and 2020, which contributes significantly to the larger amount of expressed identities and roles.

While *The Moscow Times* did not use the ME identity or the MM identity, both appeared a couple of times in *The New York Times*’ articles. However, the fact that Russia opposes external interventions in regional affairs did not materialize at all in this analysis.

**4.2.2.2.1. The West as Significant Other (I:WSO)**

The WSO identity appeared 22 times within the examined timeframe. While it was non-existent in articles written in 2012, it experienced the first increase in 2013. One of the major topics in the analyzed context in 2013 was when the Palestinians and Israelis agreed that UNESCO could be involved in the preservation of Jerusalem’s Old City. Nimrod Barkan, an Israeli ambassador, praised UNESCO’s depoliticization thanks to “joint Israeli-American effort, interestingly enough with Russian help” (NYT, 2013).

As illustrated in Figure 4.5, most of the statements referring to the WSO identity were made in 2016. These comments mostly refer to the void the US left after withdrawing from the region: “With the United States pulling back after years of frustrated efforts to break the intractable impasse between Israelis and Palestinians, Russia is stepping forward with its own drive to bring peace to a fractured land” (NYT, 2016d). The author of this opinion piece further insinuated that the only reasons for Russia’s interest in the conflict were to “demonstrate Russia’s stature and to annoy the United States” (Ibid.). Moreover, shortly after Trump’s inauguration in 2017, Trump allegedly disclosed classified intelligence with the Russian President. It was found out later that it was Israel who had provided the US with this intelligence. The NYT was the only analyzed source in this study that reported this incident, pointing out that Trump might have presented himself as a “useful idiot” who gave in to Moscow’s “authoritarian regime” (NYT, 2017a).

Additionally, *The New York Times* was the only analyzed source that pointed out that Russia had declared West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel even before Trump did. However, it was acknowledged that the Russian statement was more balanced, reaffirming Moscow’s commitment to the “UN-approved principles for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement, which include the status of East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state” (NYT, 2017c).

The only time the WSO identity appeared in 2019 was in the context of the Trump administration’s recognition of Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights. An article published on 26 March 2019 illustrated that it was difficult for the US government to distinguish between the annexation of the Golan Heights and the Russian annexation of Crimea. From today’s standpoint, the author wrongly concluded that the Golan Heights’ annexation might lead the US to “acquiesce to Russian sovereignty over Crimea” (NYT, 2019a).

While *The New York Times* did not include many comments on the Russian government’s criticism towards the US, NYT authors lamented the US’s foreign policy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict three times, all of them after Trump was elected the 45th president of the US. These remarks were only present in opinion pieces, such as this one: “Trump’s [decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem] was a silly, reckless gesture” (NYT, 2017c).

#### **4.2.2.2.2. Multi-Ethnicity (I:ME) and Muslim Minority (I:MM)**

In *The New York Times* the ME identity (one comment) and the MM identity (three comments) were not of great importance. The only statements referring to Russia’s acceptance towards all ethnicities and peoples were already published in 2012 and reflected how Jewish people “have never felt as comfortable in Russia as today” (NYT, 2012c). Exemplary for the MM identity is also an article from 2012, whose author claimed that the fact that 20 million Muslims live in Russia “has had divergent effects on Russian foreign policy,” reinforcing “Moscow’s support of Palestinian statehood.” Moreover, the MM identity allegedly resulted in Moscow’s acceptance of Hamas as a “social service organization and a legitimate



political player” (NYT, 2012b). This way, the NYT argued that the MM identity seemingly influenced the Kremlin’s support for the Palestinians.

#### **4.2.2.2.3. Good Relations With All Actors (I:GRA)**

The GRA identity appeared seven times in total in the course of this part of the analysis. Similar to the WSO identity and Russia’s great power identity, it experienced a peak in 2016. It rose for the first time in 2015 when an author observed that Putin had met with the leaders of Turkey, Israel, and the PA within one week. The article then quoted Nicolai Petrov, a political science professor at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, who said that “all these preparations are aimed at attracting more attention to Putin. It helped change Obama’s mind about meeting Putin [...]” (NYT, 2015). With these remarks, the author brought the GRA identity in relation to the WSO identity, claiming that the cautious cultivation of relations with various actors stemmed from the desire for a dialogue with the US.

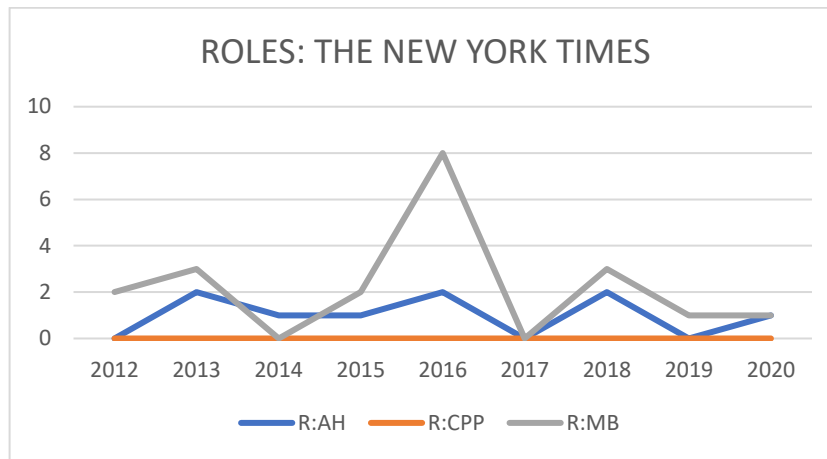
Another article from 2016 challenged whether relations with various states in the Middle East really contributed positively to Russia’s constructive influence in the conflict. The author even argued that Russia’s allies like Iran or Hezbollah would do everything in their power to prevent a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (NYT, 2016f), limiting Moscow’s MB role as a consequence.

#### **4.2.2.2.4. Great Power Identity (I:GP)**

With one exception in 2019 (“Russia is dead set on being a great power” (NYT, 2019b), all other GP identity statements appeared in 2016, such as in one article by Andrew Higgins on 10 September. Higgins quoted Dmitri Trenin, who claimed that Russia had inserted into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to send out the message “that Russia is a global power” (NYT, 2016e). From this perspective, the West as Russia’s significant Other appears to be of great importance to Russia’s GP identity. This argument seems valid, since, as was explained in Chapter 2, for a great power, relations with other great powers, such as the US forms the basis of their international conduct (Mankoff 2009, p. 63).

While the GP identity appeared eight times in total, the NYT mentioned Russia’s regional importance twice, such as in 2017, when an author acknowledged the dominance of Russia’s position in the Middle East (NYT, 2017b). Moreover, one publication insinuated that Russia was not a great power. According to the author, Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital was a break with “all major powers.” *Instead*, the US President joined President Putin in his approach to Jerusalem (NYT, 2017c).

### 4.2.2.3. Russian Roles in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict



**Figure 4.6:** Frequency of Russian roles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict per year: *The New York Times*.

Figure 4.6 demonstrates that, the MB role is the most dominant Russian role among *The New York Times*' publications, followed by Russia's anti-hegemonic role. When the mediator-balancer role had its peak in 2016, there were, however, fewer indications of it than of the WSO identity. As in *The Moscow Times*, the MB role was non-existent in 2014, despite a relatively high amount of analyzed articles in that year (seven) and less prevalent in 2019 and 2020. However, in contrast to *The Moscow Times*, none of *The New York Times*' authors referred to the CPP role within the analyzed timeframe.

#### 4.2.2.3.1. Anti-Hegemonic Role (R:AH)

The AH role frequency demonstrates a relatively constant low level, with modest peaks in 2013, 2016, and 2018, despite the fact that 2018 was the year in which least articles on the topic were published. One of the most precise comments concerning the AH role was, however, made in 2015, when an author of a news analysis wrote: "Mr. Putin has claimed repeatedly in recent years that the chaotic state of the world, particularly the level of violence in the Middle East, is because the United States is the solitary power." The writer further added that it might be Russia's goal to include these arguments at the UN, to ensure a more balanced, anti-hegemonic world order (NYT, 2015).

It is noteworthy that two articles from the beginning of 2018 quoted Mahmoud Abbas, who had "ruled out any absolute American' monopoly'" in the peace process (NYT, 2018a) and "proposed the creation of a 'multilateral international mechanism' and the inclusion of other partners in the process." While he did not mention Moscow in this process specifically, he noted that he was willing to consider a Russian offer to meet with Netanyahu in Moscow (NYT, 2018b). Through these statements, Moscow's AH role in the conflict is further strengthened since, over the years, the NYT demonstrated Russia's self-perception of the AH role and included statements of the role expectations by other actors, in this case, the Palestinians.

#### 4.2.2.3.2. Mediator-Balancer (R:MB)

A total 20 comments regarding Moscow's MB role were found in *The New York Times* articles after the start of Putin's third presidential term. Most of them were written in 2016, such as on 10 September: "[President Putin] has inserted Russia not only into Syria but also into the even more intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with Russian diplomats working frantically to organize a meeting in Moscow between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the leader of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas" (NYT, 2016e). This willingness to offer talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis has been the most dominant argument for Moscow's MB role, which also appeared in three statements in 2018.

As was already observed in Chapter 3 and the first section of Chapter 4, the MB role strongly co-occurred with the Russian membership in the Middle East Quartet. For instance, the author of an article published on 1 July 2016 highlighted a report issued by the Quartet, which was an "attempt to nudge the Israelis and Palestinians to resume negotiations, which broke down more than two years ago" (NYT, 2016a). Furthermore, as explained in the section about the GP identity, journalists of *The New York Times* concluded that Russia's motivation for the MB role was closely related to the desire for a Great Power status and identity.

There is also evidence of the key actors' positive attitude in the conflict towards the Russian mediating-balancing act. For instance, an article of 2012 mentioned that Prime Minister Netanyahu called upon the Russians to "urge the Palestinians to return to negotiations" (NYT, 2012a). While being tightly linked to the Kremlin's GRA identity, the statement reflects a kind of acceptance and even expectation on the part of Israel that Russia should be included in the peace process because of its good relationship with the Palestinians.

However, NYT authors expressed criticism towards the Russian MB role in the conflict nine times. For instance, a news analysis of 2016 regarding Russian attempts to host a peace summit in Moscow stated: "Never mind that nearly everyone involved here agrees that the effort will almost certainly not lead to a settlement [...]" (NYT, 2016d). The article further highlighted that, in fact, Mahmoud Abbas favored a French peace initiative and Netanyahu preferred an Egyptian initiative, while none of the actors mentioned the Russian efforts to host a peace conference (Ibid).

The most evident conclusion of this part of the analysis is that, while the US media has a traditional negative attitude towards the Russian government and its foreign-policy behavior, this negative stance was not as distinctive as one could have assumed. The NYT criticized Russian behavior in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict five times, while it criticized its own government, namely the Trump administration, three times. However, NYT authors expressed several doubts about Russia's favorable social structure with the parties in the conflict, which may argue for a Lockean political culture instead of a Kantian. The AEI identity was never mentioned in the context, and Russia's ME identity and its CPP role do not constitute a significant part of the analysis. On the other hand, NYT writers emphasized that the West plays a crucial part in Russia's foreign policy behavior in the conflict. At the same time, they also

attribute the GRA and the GP identity to Russia's identity construction in the region. The MB role was also given an important place in Russia's discourse, but some points of criticism were also included in the argumentation.

## **5. Conclusion**

Stepanova (2016, p. 2) argues that Russia needed around ten years after the Soviet Union's collapse to align with the new global realities, reassert its identity as a nation, and design its new role and position in the world. Russia is a relatively "young" state. Its identities and roles had to re-orient after the Soviet Union's dissolution, making the study of Russian identity and role particularly interesting.

This study attempts to highlight the identities and roles Russia has constructed in the Middle East since the Soviet Union's collapse, as well as the social structure between the Russian government and the Middle Eastern states. Moreover, Russia's identity and role conceptions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were analyzed at the state, society, and international level. This approach defines how Russia perceives its role in the conflict and highlights the Other's expectations of Russia's identity and roles.

While the Russian elite has shown a relatively broad interest in the topic since the beginning of Putin's third presidential term, it is undeniable that there was a significant rise in publications on the topic from 2016 to 2017. While *The New York Times'* frequency also peaked in 2016, *The Moscow Times* remained quite disinterested in the topic in this period, expressing a divergence in the Russian government's, the international as well as the public attitude towards Russia's foreign-policy behavior in the conflict.

### **5.1. Constructivist Theory Applied to Russia in the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

Chapter 2 gave an overview of the cooperative social structure Russia has been carefully building with various Middle Eastern states. Russian officials have portrayed the same for relations with Israelis and even more so with Palestinian representatives. This goes back to the creation of the Israeli state, where, according to Putin, it was "no accident" that the Soviet Union supported it. However, as pointed out in Chapter 3, Russia "recognized the Palestinian state when it was proclaimed in year 1988" (Lavrov, 2012a). This argument was strengthened when Russian officials repeatedly referred to "Palestine" when addressing the PA or the Palestinian-occupied territory. These statements lead to the conclusion that Moscow acknowledges the right to sovereignty for both parties, which excludes a Hobbesian political culture.

In total, it seems that the social structure with both Palestinians and Israelis is represented to be built on trust and friendship. The frequency of the word "friend" underlines this argument, which appeared 33 times during meetings with Palestinians, and 17 times in Russian-Israeli talks. However, Russian officials met with Palestinian representatives more often than with Israelis (55 compared to 36 times), which may be a sign of a more effort to build a good relationship with the Palestinian

government. The MT also considered Abbas' frequent visits to Moscow to prove their strong relationship (MT, 2015a).

Regarding Russian-Israeli relations, *The Moscow Times* mostly focused on the personal relationship between Putin and Netanyahu, considered as the main factor in the cooperation of these two states. However, the newspaper also included quotes in its articles that express criticism from Russian officials.

In contrast, Moscow's relations with the Palestinians have been viewed with skepticism from the MT, while there were no signs of the Kremlin's negative attitude towards the Palestinians. For instance, the fact that Russia holds good relations with Hamas was said to have "enraged Israel and members of the Middle East Quartet" (MT, 2012c). *The New York Times* published fewer comments concerning positive Russian-Palestinian and Russian-Israeli relations than *The Moscow Times*. However, it only displayed criticism towards either of the parties in the context of the Quartet without quoting Russian officials' direct statements. In 2012, the NYT did, however, mention Israel's reservation towards Russia's involvement in the conflict (NYT, 2012a).

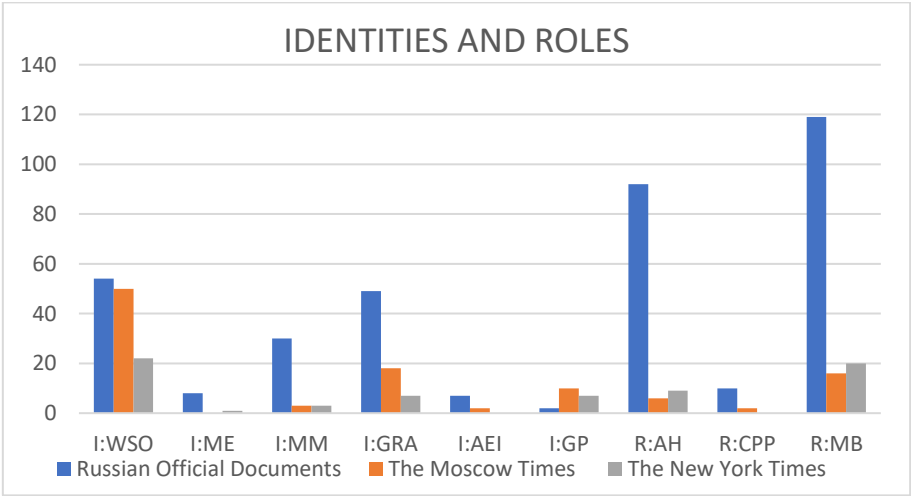
Overall, comments on the Russian-Israeli or Russian-Palestinian relations were more positive than negative, which leads to the conclusion that Russia's self-portrayed favorable social structure with both parties is valid to at least a certain extent. It would be optimistic to say that the social structures reflect authentic Kantian political cultures; however, they are far from enmity. As explored in the first chapter, the role structure of friendship follows the rules of non-violence and mutual aid (Wendt, 1999). Even if Russia and Israel's conflicting positions, for instance regarding Iran or Syria, are not directly involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they have severe consequences for their relationship and, therefore, their social structure. On the other hand, with the Palestinian government, Russia has had little real conflict within the analyzed timeframe, which is also reflected in the lack of any negative comments towards Palestinians from Russian officials' side. Also, external sources did never criticize their relation, and they were, in contrast, judging the profound commitment Russia has always displayed towards the Palestinians.

As Wendt (1999) notes, it is easier to leave a Hobbesian culture, while it is harder to get from a Lockean to a Kantian social structure. The future will show whether Russia will eventually shift its relations with the Israelis or the Palestinians from "rival" allies to "friends." Nevertheless, the overall favorable social structure serves as a sound basis for enacting Russian role conceptions such as the mediator-balancer role or the anti-hegemonic role.

## **5.2. Identities and Roles**

First of all, it is visible that not all identities and roles identified in Chapter 2 appeared identically within the analyses of Chapters 3 and 4. Least visible was the Russian approach towards its multi-ethnic nature and the opposition of external interventions. However, other identities and roles, such as the WSO identity or the AH role as well as the MB role, were quite dominant, which leads to the assumption that

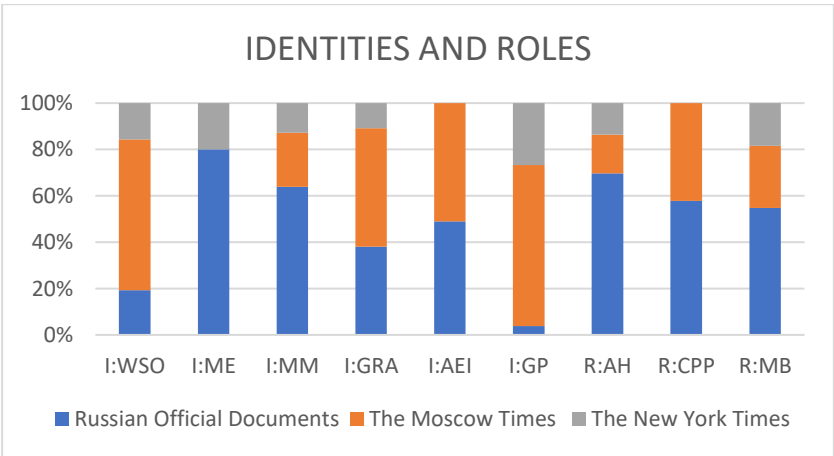
these identities and roles are not only of major significance for Russian foreign-policy behavior in the Middle East in general but in particular in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



**Figure 5.1:** Frequency of Russian identities and roles in all analyzed documents.

Figure 5.1 gives an overview of all analyzed identities and roles in Russian official documents, as well as in articles of *The Moscow Times* and *The New York Times*. The most dominant variable is Russia’s mediator-balancer role. However, while the MB role was significantly present in Russian officials’ speeches or other documents released by the IPD, it was less dominant in the newspapers. On the contrary, the West as Russia’s significant Other was found most in *The Moscow Times* and *The New York Times*.

Nevertheless, it has to be noted that within the analysis and the counting of all Russian identities and roles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, each statement was noted, without taking into account that the document group of Russian official documents offered a substantially larger amount of data (124 documents) than *The Moscow Times* (34 articles) and *The New York Times* (62 articles). To compare the statements and coding quantity, Figure 5.2 demonstrates the variables’ percentages brought into proportion with their document group size.



**Figure 5.2:** Russian identities and roles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict proportional to the document group’s size.

Figure 5.2 makes clear that how Moscow presented itself was not always reflected in external opinions. Russian officials displayed the WSO identity 54 times. However, suppose the number of MT articles is brought into proportion with the overall document frequency, it is clear that *The Moscow Times* as an independent Russian media station considers the West even more as Russia's significant Other than Russian officials themselves.

On the other hand, identities, such as Russia's multi-ethnic nature and its large Muslim minority influencing Russian foreign-policy behavior, appeared only rarely in any documents. This creates doubt about the density and legitimization of these identities.

The fact that Russia holds good relations with all involved actors as part of Russian identity was the second variable used more often in Russian media than in official documents. Since it did not experience specific attention from the NYT, this leads to the assumption that while Russia's GRA identity is acknowledged among Russian politicians and praised by (some part of) the public, it is rather neglected from a Western standpoint. In contrast to the Middle East in general, firm opposition against external interventions and regime change did not play an essential part in Moscow's discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or in external opinions.

An interesting case in point is Russia's great power identity. For Russian officials, it was the least used variable, which led to a first impression that it did not matter much within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict context. However, after analyzing *The Moscow Times* and *The New York Times* articles, it became evident that the GP identity is indeed attached to Russia's behavior in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For instance, an article in the MT defends Russian "meddling" in Middle Eastern affairs such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, since "Russia's policy differs little from the actions of other 'great' powers" (MT, 2019c). Alternatively, the NYT said: "Russia is dead set on being a great power" (NYT, 2019b).

Russia's AH role was only rarely reflected in external sources, compared to 98 comments in official Russian documents. While the MT and the NYT did mention Russia's position against US-hegemony and, for instance, quoted Putin reflecting on "better" times when the "Soviet Union was around to check American might" (NYT, 2015), most of these comments included external role expectations. An example is when Abbas proposed a "multilateral international mechanism" and then welcomed Moscow's willingness to hold peace talks (NYT, 2018b).

In contrast, the MB role was the most expressed variable in the entire analysis. Russian officials referred to it 122 times, and the NYT referred to it 20 times and the MT 16 times. Thus, Russia's central claim in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, namely to act as a mediator-balancer, was confirmed by external sources.

Tewes (1998, p. 118) argues that role theory is useful for FPA since it links state identities with foreign-policy behavior. Those Russian identities, which were proven to be relevant in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, namely the West as Russia's significant Other and the fact that Russia holds strong relations with all involved actors, have facilitated the adoption of its mediator-balancer

role, as well as the claim to act as an anti-hegemon against US dominance. These variables are embedded in an overall cooperative social structure between Russia and Israeli as well as Palestinian officials. This has provided Russia with the necessary tools and requirements for a possible future success of acting as a peace broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### **5.3. Final Remarks**

The synthetic theoretical approach applied in chapters 2 to 4 facilitates a broader range of analysis than neorealism and neoliberalism could offer. Looking at Russia's foreign-policy behavior in the Middle East through a narrow zero-sum lens could lead to a dangerous, self-fulfilling prophecy (Wendt, 1999, p. 263). With such an approach, analysts like Borshchevskaya (2018, pp. 12-13) conclude, for example, that Russia only generates profits at the expense of the US and that hence the US should be adequately defensive. Borshchevskaya thus recommends that the US should counteract Russia by safeguarding its individual interests in the Middle East. However, even non-social constructivists such as Katz (2017, p.135) stress that lacking cooperation between Russia and the West could have significant negative consequences and would "only serve to exacerbate the ongoing problems of the Middle East."

As this analysis has shown, Russia's identity is strongly related to its relationship with the West since it has consistently been its significant Other. This study made clear that the WSO identity is also deeply rooted in its behavior in the Middle Eastern region, particularly in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The present study is limited as it only analyzes Russia's identities and roles in the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the social structure in which they are embedded from the state, domestic, and a small part of the international level. Further research could be done by including other primary sources, such as official statements and interviews from Israeli as well as Palestinian representatives. Apart from this, this study only considers English sources due to linguistic barriers, missing possible significant sources in Russian, Hebrew, or Arabic.

While this study demonstrates how Russia's understanding of its identities and roles in the Middle East has long impacted its conduct, it also highlights the importance of contemporary events. The Palestinian rejection of the US's mediating role due to the US embassy's move to Jerusalem or the release of the Trump administration's "Deal of the Century," led the Palestinian to call on Russia. This heightened the degree of diplomatic influence and has underlined Russia's prominent status in the Middle East. The events have further strengthened the West as Russia's significant Other as part of its identity and the positive influence of Russia's aspiration to hold good relations with all key actors in the region and in the conflict, be it Israel, Fatah, and Hamas or external players such as Egypt – facts on the ground that the US cannot offer. In turn, these identities led to the assumption and enactment of two roles: Russia's anti-hegemonic role and its willingness to act as a mediator-balancer.

This thesis attempts to illustrate the relevance of applying a synthetic theoretical approach to reveal an alternative perspective on Russia's identity and role in the Middle East, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The tested hypothesis, namely that Russia's foreign policy in the Middle



East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at least partially identity and role-based, has been proven right. The hypothesis turned out to be correct. Not only the Russian government, but also local and international media have attached certain identities and roles to the behavior of Moscow in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

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