

The Involvement of the United States and Russia in the Middle East

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The last months of Barak Obama's presidency were marked by uncertainty and helplessness as to how to deal with the three-pronged challenge posed by Russian President Vladimir Putin – in Ukraine, in Syria, and in the realm of cyber warfare. However, a retrospective look at the eight years of the Obama presidency reveals the root of the problem: a misunderstanding of President Putin's strategic motivations and guiding ideology, and the administration's unwillingness to act on the conclusions derived from a correct reading of the situation. Russia's economic weakness did not prevent its sole ruler, Putin, from trying to repair what he sees as a historic aberration: the collapse of the Soviet empire over 25 years ago. While during 2001-2009 the Republican administration under President George W. Bush projected a willingness to use military force in order to defend American interests and thus created a certain level of deterrence among US adversaries, including Russia, President Obama, especially during his second term, exhibited an aversion to the use of American military force.

Four years were enough for Putin to learn that he could advance the cause of destabilizing and undermining the situation created in Europe and Eurasia after the fall of the Soviet Union and could increase Russian activism in the Middle East. In a series of test cases, Obama chose the option of not using American military force, sometimes not even threatening to use it. The response by the United States and by NATO to Russia's invasion of portions of eastern Ukraine amounted to sanctions on Russia. Painful as they may be, these sanctions are not part of the deterrence and response arsenal that

also includes hints of military action. In Syria, at the last moment the US administration refrained from using force in response to the Syrian regime crossing the red line set by President Obama regarding the use of chemical weapons, instead preferring Russian diplomatic mediation, which in effect saved the Assad regime from being undermined and perhaps even eliminated. On Iranian military nuclear development, Obama's rhetoric on the military threat softened and became more veiled over time, and this palpable change in America's stance was understood in the Middle East and in Moscow. In addition, so far the United States has not taken any significant action in response to accusations made during the presidential elections of Russian agents hacking into important American websites.

In all three arenas – Ukraine, Syria, and cyber warfare – reasonable explanations can be given for the policy adopted by the administration that do not necessarily connote American weakness and lack of determination to confront challenges. Entering the ring and threatening to use military force, followed by actual use of military force, did not seem justified in the case of the Ukraine crisis, nor did they seem like steps that would receive unconditional support from the United States' European partners. The internal schism in Ukraine, whereby eastern Ukraine supports Russia, challenged those who supported forceful American-European intervention in the crisis. In addition, the US administration can portray the removal of chemical weapons in Syria without use of force, even at the small price of recognizing Russia's dominant presence in Syria – a presence that has existed for decades, and contains little that is new – as an important achievement. In this case, it is not as though the administration gave up on overthrowing the Assad regime through military means, since from the beginning this option did not exist.

The explanation for America's actions on the Iranian nuclear issue is more complex, but in this case as well, the outgoing administration can present a set of reasonable arguments in favor of the nuclear agreement signed in the summer of 2015, which mandates the complete cessation of Iranian military nuclear development, at least during the fifteen years of the agreement. Above all, President Obama succeeded in reading American public opinion, which displays an unwillingness to be bogged down in long

term fighting in conflicts with questionable implications – and certainly questionable benefits – for United States security.

Unlike Obama, President-elect Donald Trump presented a decisively negative stance toward the agreement with Iran during his election campaign. Ostensibly, he now has the opportunity to try to change the situation that was created the agreement with Iran was reached, by exploiting reports – including false reports – of Iranian violations of the agreement. The United States' partners in negotiating and signing the agreement, and especially Iran, would presumably oppose the attempt to reopen negotiations on the issue. Trump could, of course, tighten American sanctions on Iran, assisted by the Republican majority that continues in Congress, and hope that Iran would see this as grounds for renouncing the agreement. Even then, however, he would likely encounter opposition to cancellation of the agreement from the United States' European allies and Moscow.

What appears to be Russian use of cyber warfare within the United States peaked during the presidential campaign – too late for a coherent response from the outgoing administration, especially considering the inherent difficulty in attributing cyber activity to states. Thus, dealing with this issue will be left to the new administration of President Trump.

The war against the Islamic State was the backdrop for a minor conflict between the two US presidential candidates. Republican candidate Trump presented the struggle against the Islamic State as a central objective, justifying, in his view, the US overlooking the (problematic, to say the least) conduct of Russia and the Syrian regime toward the Syrian population that refuses to accept the authority of the Assad regime, using the war against the Islamic State as a cover for attacking civilians. The question of restarting relations with Russia arises within the context of the struggle against the Islamic State. Trump as a candidate and as President-elect has given the impression that the end – the defeat of the Islamic State – justifies the means, and that he is willing to cooperate with Russia. How the negotiations between the United States and Russia will play out regarding cooperation on the war in Syria, if the talks are renewed, and what “give and take” issues will underlie them, are open questions, as well as the scope of this cooperation.

The successes achieved since the beginning of the Iraqi army's campaign against the Islamic State in the Mosul region in the summer of 2016, with

close American assistance and advice, have improved the balance of power for the US in the Middle East. However, despite these achievements, the Trump administration will be left with the task of dealing with the Islamic State, mainly in Syria, with all of the political problems that accompany this challenge – especially on the issue of US-Russia relations. Moscow's linkage between cooperation with the United States in the Syrian arena and demands to remove the sanctions imposed on it after its invasion of Ukraine will create a difficult dilemma for the next administration. Even if Moscow decides to return to the framework of coordination with Washington, it will only be for limited and short term goals. In the view of Washington and its main European partners, such limited coordination would not justify softening their stance on the sanctions. It is clear that the United States and Russia disagree on the desirable and practical long term political solution to the crisis in Syria, especially on the role to be played by the current Syrian regime. Moreover, while in the case of the war against the Islamic State in Iraq the United States can enlist both the Iraqi government and the considerable Kurdish military force, the circumstances in Syria are different. Russia's goals in Syria are straightforward, but those of the United States are complicated, and advancing them requires maneuvering between all the actors that would participate in shaping Syria's future. The ability to find a basis for cooperation with Russia in the Syrian arena is undoubtedly an important element for the United States, in both the short and long terms.

President Trump will have to decide on the strategy that will guide him in addressing major issues in the Middle East. Although at present it appears that the struggle against the Islamic State is at the top of the agenda for the US administration and the American public, it will not necessarily remain there over time. As with any new president, Trump will seek to create an overarching foreign policy strategy, and as part of it, decide the weight to be placed on the Middle East compared to other areas of the world. The relative importance of other regions and global issues will also indirectly influence the dilemma regarding the United States approach toward Russia and its apparent neo-imperialist awakening.