

# Russia: Internal and External Challenges

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The challenges confronting Russia increased significantly over the past year, due to the prolonged crisis in Ukraine, which is undermining internal stability in Russia, and to Russia's involvement in Syria. These two arenas are an expression of the Russian-Western confrontation that has isolated Russian internationally and made Moscow the object of continued political pressure and economic sanctions by Western countries seeking – and succeeding – to destabilize the country. Russia's involvement in Ukraine and Syria has cost it dearly both politically and economically, even as Russia's intervention in Syria has created a new strategic situation that poses a challenge to the United States and the West in general, with consequences for local actors in the Middle East, including Israel. For its part, Russia perceives Western policy as a challenge to its ambitions to regain superpower status, an attempt to drive Russia out of the post-Soviet theater, and a catalyst for means to change the Russian government.

In the last months of 2016, Russia has tried to achieve a number of objectives by stepping up its military activity in Syria. The first is to preserve its strategic assets in Syria. Indeed, President Bashar al-Assad, supported by Russia, still rules in Damascus, Russia's naval base in Syria has expanded, and Russia is conducting a military campaign from the air in support of Assad's war against the rebels. Russia's second objective is to break through the political siege imposed by the Western countries following its invasion of Ukraine and emerge from the economic crisis that has beset it as a result of sanctions. Russia hopes to achieve this by leveraging the understandings

reached in its negotiations with the United States and its allies concerning an arrangement in Syria, and translating those understandings into greater Western flexibility on Ukraine. Underlying this policy is Russia's ambition to play the role of a leading power in the Middle East, while pushing the United States out of the region.

The statements by United States President-elect Donald Trump concerning his willingness to cooperate with Russia in the struggle against the Islamic State, plus positive statements he has made about President Bashar al-Assad, are considered by Moscow as dividends on its policy and actions in the crisis theaters. At the same time, Russia will want to see how President Trump translates the campaign rhetoric into action, and it is not clear whether achievements in Syria can be converted into achievements in the post-Soviet area, i.e., Ukraine, which constitutes an immediate strategic envelope for Russia.

### **The Ukraine Crisis: The Sanctions and their Ramifications**

The origin of the crisis with the West is Ukraine, which has become a focus of conflict between Russia and the United States following Russia's aspiration to return Ukraine to the Russian sphere of influence. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the fostering by Russia of separatist movements in southeastern Ukraine are perceived by the West as aggression and expansion. The Western response was to impose selective economic sanctions aimed against economic leaders and senior officials in Russia. Despite many rounds of negotiations between the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany since February 2014, and the signing of the Minsk agreement for a ceasefire in Ukraine, the political process has bogged down. If and when it is renewed, Russia will be negotiating with a new US President and administration. In addition, Russia has expanded its activity in Eastern Europe and other former Soviet Union states.

The Western sanctions imposed on Russia for its policy in Ukraine have caused Russia much economic damage and political destabilization, due to tensions and disagreements among the elite. These tensions are particularly evident in the power struggles between different economic and political groups. As a result of cuts in financing from the federal Russian central government, disputes have also arisen between different districts. At the

same time, there are clear signs that an opposition to Russian President Vladimir Putin is emerging among the Russian leadership, including Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu, Security Council of Russia Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, former Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia Sergei Ivanov, and many others. Widespread purges among the elite reflect growing power struggles at the top, and Ivanov, a potential competitor of Putin, was recently dismissed as chief of staff. The murder of opposition figures (including Boris Nemtsov, in February 2016) can be attributed to this struggle. Probably as a result of these alarming developments, Putin established the Federal National Guard Troops Service of the Russian Federation in April 2016 (with an estimated 400,000 troops) as the regime's "Praetorian Guard." Russian popular opinion is likewise showing signs, so far limited, of discontent. It appears, however, that Putin is still in control of the situation, and at this point the tense atmosphere among the elites does not appear to pose a threat to his rule. Furthermore, most of the leadership owes its status to Putin. In any case, to many observers, the alternatives to Putin's rule at the present time appear far worse than the current situation.

### **The Islamic Challenge to Russia**

Another challenge threatening internal stability in Russia is the growing threat of radical Islam. The Muslim population in Russia numbers over 20 million, and they are joined by a few million Muslim foreign workers. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia has waged an ongoing war in its territory and sphere of interest in the countries of the former Soviet Union against Muslim rebel groups, many of which are subject to the influence of radical Islam. Russian rule faces growing opposition among sections of the Muslim public attracted to Salafist ideas and supporters of the Islamic State. Approximately 7,000 young Muslims have thus far traveled to the Middle East to take part in the fighting in the ranks of the Islamic State. Prominent in this context is the Caucasus Emirates – the leading Muslim organization in the fight against Russia, which announced in June 2016 that it had joined the Islamic State. Since the consequences of its activity in the Middle East against the Islamic State are clear to Russia, especially in terrorism and direct conflict with radical Islam, the Russian leadership

is aware of the need to foster ties with Muslim society in its territory, in the Middle East, and beyond.

### **The Russian Involvement in Syria**

Beyond its direct interests in Syria, Russia's involvement in the Middle East is a result of its conflict with the United States, particularly regarding Ukraine. In response to the challenges before it, and subject to increasing economic and political pressure, Russia must offset the damages caused by Western subversion – as Moscow sees it – and thus it embarked upon military intervention in the Middle East. The military involvement in Syria was meant to consolidate the Russian presence in an important area as a central international platform. In addition, it was designed to divert attention away from Eastern Europe, create leverage and bargaining power against the West by driving it out of the Middle East and thereby gain concessions on the crisis in Ukraine, and combat the Islamic State, which is challenging both the Russia-allied Assad regime and Russia itself.

Russia's direct intervention in the civil war in Syria began in late September 2015 as a limited military move, ostensibly against the Islamic State. In practice, it aided the Assad regime, which at the time seemed on the verge of collapse. Russia stationed a force of 50 warplanes and helicopters in Syria, including maintenance teams; air defense systems (these were reinforced with a unit of S-400 anti-aircraft missiles after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane); command, control, and intelligence groups; and a battery of military advisors integrated into the Syrian army. The Russian forces are deployed in naval bases in Tartus and Latakia, and in the Russian airbase in Khmeimim next to Latakia. Russia operates in Syria in the framework of a coalition that includes the Syrian army, which is loyal to Assad; Iran, which has sent 2,000-3,000 soldiers to Syria; Hezbollah, which has deployed a large proportion of its fighting force in Syria; and fighters from other Shiite militias brought to Syria by Iran. These forces constitute the coalition's land forces, while Russia provides assistance from the air. The Russian operations are aimed at defeating the forces rebelling against Assad and ending the civil war. Together with its use of fighter planes, Russia uses heavy bombers and launches cruise missiles from ships (in the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea). There has also been limited use of Russian heavy

bombers from Iranian territory, which was discontinued following a dispute between Moscow and Tehran.

The months of bombing of opposition targets and massive military pressure by Russia and its allies brought about the capitulation of the anti-regime front, and prompted it to take part in a dialogue designed to reach a settlement between the parties in the civil war. This process was led by Russia, the major powers, and the UN, albeit amid disputes and a crisis atmosphere. In the course of the negotiations, ceasefire agreements were signed and a roadmap was formulated for ending the war and solving the conflict within 18 months. At this stage, it appeared that Russia had obtained its objectives, but the ceasefire quickly collapsed. On March 14, 2016, Russia announced that it was withdrawing its forces from Syria, but this announcement was partly true, because Russia actually withdrew only some of its aircraft and left all of its military apparatus in Syria. Russia thus in effect made it clear that western Syria would remain under its influence after the fighting stops. Indeed, in late 2016 the fighting in this area continued, with Russian participation against the last pockets of resistance, especially in Aleppo.

Russia's policy in Syria has aggravated the tension with the United States. This raises the question of what will happen to Syria after the Islamic State is defeated. It is not clear whether Russia will support the division of Syria, while leaving the coastal area under its control, or will act to preserve the country's integrity within the pre-2011 borders, in cooperation with other regional and international players. It is also unclear whether Russia will insist on defending Assad, or will "concede" his rule for the sake of implementing a settlement formulated with the West and the Syrian opposition. Russia would presumably accept a compromise with the West if its interests in Syrian territory are preserved, and may even accept a federative arrangement in the divided country's territory if its influence in the western region is ensured, including the consolidation of the Assad regime or a replacement regime acceptable to Moscow.

In the regional theater, Russia is striving to prevent friction with other actors, in part by arousing tensions between them and the West. In recent years Russia has improved its relations somewhat with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Jordan, which has resulted in arms deals and political coordination. Russia cooperated with Iran in operations in 2016, and while

Russian air missions from Iranian territory were halted, this indicated a step up in relations, even though Moscow and Tehran do not see eye-to-eye on the future settlement in Syria. While Iran insists on maintaining the Assad regime as is, Russia is probably not necessarily committed to this. Either way, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, Putin's representative for Middle East Affairs, visited Iran in September 2016 and again in early December for extensive discussions about cooperation between the countries (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was mentioned as one element on the Russian-Iranian agenda). It was also reported that President Putin planned to visit Iran. Russia's relations with Turkey likewise improved, partly as a result of Turkey's defiance of the West. Turkey learned from the severe crisis with Russia following the shooting down of a Russian plane in Turkish airspace in November 2015, and has searched for a way to rebuild its relations with Moscow and cooperate with it in order to weaken Iran, Turkey's main regional rival.

It appears that so far, Russia's intervention in the fighting in Syria has improved its standing in the region. At the same time, this intervention has aggravated the tension between Russia and the United States and its allies, who object to Russia's stance on a possible settlement in Syria and to cooperation with it in exchange for possible flexibility on the issue of Ukraine. For their part, the United States and Europe have also refrained from cooperating with Russia in the fighting against the Islamic State. The economic sanctions imposed on Russia are still in effect, and in June 2016 the European Union extended the sanctions by six months.

The question is whether the Trump administration will act to reinforce the standing of the United States in various parts of the world, or whether its agenda will involve diverting resources to internal matters. If the latter occurs, the United States may be willing to make certain concessions to Russia that may ease the tension between the two countries. In this context, the possibility should not be ruled out that an attempt will be made to trade "assets" in the Middle East and Ukraine, including on the question of the sanctions against Russia. If taken, measures in this direction will impact on the situation in the Middle East, including Israeli interests.

## **Implications for Israel**

Russia and Israel have positive, albeit limited, bilateral relations. Russia is still far from being a leading economic partner of Israel, mostly because the two countries do not take advantage of the existing potential for cooperation in new technologies and the production and export of weapons and energy. Russia leads a coalition in partnership with Iran and Hezbollah in the fighting in Syria, and this could potentially damage Israel. Israel's interests are also liable to be affected by developments in relations between Russia and the United States and the balance of power that emerges between them in the Middle East. For this reason, relations between Israel and Russia and the coordination between them are of great importance for Israel.

As of now, Russia has a substantial interest in coordination with Israel in the Syrian conflict arena, and the two countries have implemented various mechanisms to this end. Until now, Israeli territory has been exposed to very little of the shooting in Syria, and Israel has managed to avoid becoming involved in the crisis (except for counter-terrorist actions and interception of shipments of advanced arms to Hezbollah). Russia presumably does not plan to challenge Israel in the future, and will avoid to the greatest possible extent transferring to Israel's enemies weapons that it believes will detract from Israeli military superiority. Moscow is aware of Israel's need to prevent the consolidation of terrorist groups on its border, and also of Israel's sensitivity to the Iranian presence in the border area. In this situation, a conflict of interests between Russia and Iran cannot be ruled out, although a victory for the coalition led by Russia in Syria can also be expected to have negative consequences for Israel. Continued Russian support for the Shiite axis has the potential for future conflict between Israel and the Russian-Syrian-Iranian coalition, with the addition of forces from Hezbollah and various Shiite militias. At the same time, there presumably are discussions between Jerusalem and Moscow on the future of Syria, which may have been discussed during the four visits to Russia in 2016 by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Reuven Rivlin and the visit to Israel by Prime Minister Medvedev in November of this year.

A Russian initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was on the agenda again in 2016, apparently with backing from the Arab League. As part of this initiative, intense bilateral contacts took place between Russia and Israel,

and between Russia and the Palestinians. Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas and Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki visited Moscow close to the time of Netanyahu's visit there. Russia's efforts to reinvigorate the political process were part of its efforts to improve its position in the Middle East and position itself as an important player in the region that will be taken into account by other countries, especially the United States. This initiative, however, is unlikely to succeed.

## **Conclusion**

Russia's military intervention in Syria has created a new strategic situation in the Middle East, with consequences for the international system in general. Although it is premature to summarize this development, and Russia is still far from fully achieving its objectives, it can already be said that Russia has guaranteed itself a role in shaping the future of Syria, and therefore in shaping the entire region. It is clear that Russia is taking steps to consolidate its position in the Middle East in the long term, while attempting to shunt the United States to the sidelines. As of now, the international system is confused regarding Russia's next steps, and is therefore unsure how to respond. In any case, no concessions by Russia in the Middle East are expected, certainly not before the dispute on Ukraine is settled and the sanctions imposed on Russia are drastically reduced. On the other hand, it is possible that a new administration in the United States, headed by a President who has clearly signaled to Moscow that he is willing to cooperate with it, will enable Russia to formulate arrangements on the issues constituting a focus of international tension.

Russian policy in the Middle East requires Israel to follow more closely than ever developments relating to Russia's relations with regional players, first and foremost the axis led by Iran, and international players, above all the United States. Russia's intervention in the region involves both risks and some opportunities for Israel. One of the risks that must be taken into account is that there is no guarantee that Russia will always be friendly and considerate of Israeli interests if they compete with Russian interests. On the other hand, there is a possibility, albeit remote, that Russia will be able to promote future understandings between the players associated with it in the region and Israel.