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**Russia-United States Relations under the Trump Administration:
Implications for the Middle East**

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As President-elect Donald Trump prepares to enter the White House, there are growing indications of likely changes in United States policy regarding Russia. Trump's victory was received in Moscow with satisfaction and much optimism, particularly in view of his statements during the campaign about his willingness to cooperate with Russia. With Russia subject to Western pressure, it was believed that another Democratic administration in the United States would increase that pressure. It appears, however, that Trump wants to contain the confrontation with Russia and may be willing to make compromises with Moscow, provided they do not involve excessive concessions. For its part, Russia is awaiting the new President's arrival in the White House amidst increasing allegations of Russian interference in the US election campaign.

In the United States, as in the international system in general, uncertainty prevails regarding Trump's prospective foreign policies, including in the context of Russia. It is clear, however, that this will be one of the most important issues on the new administration's agenda. At the same time, there is growing anxiety among those advocating standing up to the Russian challenge and preferring continuation of the pressure on Russia. These parties include the outgoing Obama administration and its supporters; many Congressmen, including Republicans; and European countries. It appears that some of the outgoing administration's actions were designed to establish facts on the ground that will make it difficult for Trump to change the current policy toward Russia.

There is no doubt that the new administration's policy on Russia will affect the Middle East and all the processes underway there, including Russian involvement in Syria. Islamic forces seeking to augment their power are striving to exploit state governments weakened by the upheavals afflicting the region. The upheavals have also encouraged growing intervention by both regional and global powers aimed at influencing the trends and the balance of power. All of these powers want to dictate the future regional arrangement and enhance their relative power in this framework. One of the forces playing a key role in the struggle for power is Russia, whose goal is to strengthen its standing in the Middle East.

Russia's intervention in the Middle East constitutes a response to the challenges that it faces in its relations with the West, which perceives Russia's actions in the area of the former Soviet Union, especially Ukraine, as aggression aimed at consolidating Moscow's influence in this area. They have responded to Russia's actions by exerting political pressure and imposing economic sanctions that threaten Russia's stability. In addition to fortification of its standing as an influential player in the international theater, Russia's intervention in the Middle East is also designed to help breach the circle of pressures closing in on Russia, and to create leverage and bargaining chips vis-à-vis the West.

Russian intervention in the Middle East has exacerbated Russian-American tension. The United States and its partners, which interpret Russia's ambitions as aimed against Western interests, have until now objected to Russia's actions in the region. They have refrained from cooperating with Russia, while increasing pressure through prolonged economic sanctions. The Russian involvement in the Middle East, which includes upgrading relations with countries in the region, has nevertheless created a new strategic situation in which Russia is exerting increasing influence.

There are three possible policy-related scenarios for the new US administration:

- a. Continuation of the Obama administration's policy, i.e., the continuation and even the heightening of the tension between Moscow and Washington in the Middle East theater;
- b. Some changes in the new administration's policy toward Russia, while moving carefully toward reciprocal concessions. It is likely that this will ease the tension between the United States and Russia, and also lead to cooperation between these two powers in the Middle East.
- c. Full American-Russian cooperation in the international system, which will have far reaching consequences for designing a regional order in the Middle East.

Of these possibilities, it appears that the second – specific understandings and compromises – is the most likely, as this best approximates Trump's declared intentions. Furthermore, Russia will presumably prefer compromise with the West, as long as its strategic interests are maintained. It is therefore likely that measures will be taken early in the new administration's term by both Russia and the United States to reduce the tension between them, including reciprocal concessions. If this happens, this trend will leave its mark on the Middle East.

The related question concerns Russia's relations with Israel, which are currently positive. Russia regards Israel as a partner, and is aware of Israel's deterrent capabilities. Over the past year there were four high level Israeli visits to Russia by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Reuven Rivlin, and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev visited Israel. The Russian intervention in the region may also lead to some chance, however small, that Russia will try to promote understandings between Israel and the regional actors close to Moscow.

At the same time, relations between Israel and Russia are affected by both regional events and the tension between the global powers. The Russian presence in Syria as part of a coalition of Israel's principal enemies – Iran, the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and their supporters – has confronted Israel with new constraints. Russia wishes to avoid damage to its relations with Israel, and will certainly continue to contain any potential for military conflict with Israel. For its part, Israel seeks to maintain its freedom of action in the Syrian theater, given the threats to its security emerging there. For these reasons, both Russia and Israel should devise a suitable response to this potential. The security coordination apparatus formed by Moscow and Jerusalem in order to prevent friction between them has so far proven to be reliable and effective.

At the same time, Jerusalem cannot always assume Moscow will take Israel's interests into account, if these compete with Russia's own interests. Israel faces the challenge posed by Russia's coalition operating in Syria, and regards the consolidation of Iran in Syrian territory and the military buildup of Hezbollah as important threatening factors. For its part, Russia dismisses the potential Iranian threat to Israel, and its continued support for Iran and Hezbollah contains potential for future clashes between Russia and Israel.

In the current circumstances, it appears that mutual consideration by Israel and Russia for each other's interests regarding Syria will continue. Russia is expected to maintain its operational coordination with Israel, and may also reach understandings with Israel about stabilization in this theater. The Russian presence in the region, however, requires Israel to monitor Russian actions there vigilantly, as well as developments pertaining to Russia's relations with regional entities and international players.

