

Russian Activity in Current Crises in the Middle East: A View from Israel

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Introduction

Russia has of late been involved in a set of different international crises that are affecting the global system, shaping the regional and global order, and creating new challenges for Russia. The situation has made it necessary for Russia, as well as for all major powers, to adjust its policy to the new challenges.

Last year Russia experienced an unstable period, being forced to cope with the consequences of its domestic economic crisis, along with international criticism of its policy in the FSU arena, especially in Ukraine, and its policy in the Middle East. Russian foreign policy is therefore directed at protecting its interests and strengthening its standing in the international arena, while containing the direct threats confronting it. Among the complex of international challenges, the Middle East issues have major implications for the international arena in the visible future. Russia has an important role in charting the direction of those developments, and in fact, over the past year Russia managed to deal quiet effectively with the constraints emerging from the tumult in the Middle East, even expanding its presence and involvement in the region.

The International Arena

The main event of 2014 that affected the international system and was the core of the tension in Russian-Western relations was the crisis in Ukraine.

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Actually, this crisis was another stage in the ongoing competition between Russia and the West. Both in the past and the present, Western policy toward Russia, as reflected in the relations between the world powers, is based on the West's perception of Russia's actions in the international arena as a concrete threat. Russia's effort to bolster its influence in Eastern Europe arouses anxiety, and the West has striven to find ways to deter Russian geopolitical ambitions. However, it was Russia that pointed the accusing finger at the West, feeling threatened and negatively affected by the Western reaction to the events in Ukraine and recognizing the crisis as a battle for its vital interests. Russia perceives the Western policy as aimed at generating instability and regime changes in the framework of the "color revolutions" and thwarting Russian ambitions to regain superpower status. In face of Western activism, Russian policy is laboring to foil Western efforts, including through the use of force.

In practice, however, the West succeeded in disconnecting Ukraine from the Russian sphere of influence. Ukraine's intention to join the Western system is regarded by Russia as a concrete threat, which thus finds it difficult to accept any development in this direction. The West's response to Russian belligerent involvement in Ukraine was a gradual implementation of economic sanctions, which together with the precipitous drop in oil prices had a ruinous effect on the Russian economy that might well erode governmental stability. That forced Russia to find a solution that according to Western assessments could bring Russia to make significant concessions.

For Russia, the dilemma is ceasing its involvement in Ukraine in order to have sanctions revoked or continuing its policy of actively impeding Ukraine's move toward the West. Russia is working to create a "frozen conflict" in Ukraine, as it did in other crises along its border with former Soviet countries. It can be expected to leverage it later to prevent Ukraine from joining Western organizations. All of this is intended to undermine the pro-Western government in Ukraine and restore the country to Russia's sphere of influence. The US strategic goal vis-à-vis Russia is continuation of the pressure to promote Russian abandonment of an assertive policy in the entire arena of the former Soviet Union. At the same time, it seems that the US and Europe disagreed about how to confront the challenge presented by Russian policy.

Despite the grave economic crisis, Russia will likely not capitulate to Western pressure. Moreover, it seems that part of Russia's strategy in its

confrontation with the West is to extend the competition to other arenas, first and foremost the Middle East.

The Middle East

Russia is stepping up its drive for influence in the Middle East region, eroded in recent years because of the political turmoil in the Arab world, in order to press the West to ease its policy in Eastern Europe. As part of these efforts, Russia has established a variety of collaborations with countries in the region, including in weapons sales.

Russia is a veteran player in the Middle East and in recent years has faced considerable challenges in the region. First the status of Bashar al-Assad, Russia's ally in the Arab world, has been weakened by the prolonged civil war in Syria, and this development is a direct threat to Russia's clear interests in the Middle East. Second, in opening direct negotiations with the Western powers on the nuclear issue, Iran has turned its back on Russia. Third, the appearance of the Islamic State, with the organization's conquests in Iraq and Syria, has highlighted the growing threat of radical Islam, which threatens to spread to the area that Russia regards as its sphere of influence and a security buffer zone. Finally, Russia itself is a target of radical Islam, which is acting to create a new geopolitical situation and is directly threatening Russian interests.

Against this background, Russia, like other powers, has paid special attention over the past year to the Middle East, and the region has joined Ukraine as another critical arena of Russian-Western tension. The dilemma currently facing Russia in the Middle East is that of other international players involved in the region: how to best maneuver among the local players in order to influence the creation of a new regional order, while positioning oneself as a significant element. Feeling its way in the Middle East morass, Russia has displayed a relatively "soft" approach toward regimes and organizations – for example, Iran and Hamas – that have incurred a tough response from Western countries.

In order to promote its goals in the Middle East, Russia is operating on several levels. It has continued its significant involvement in Syria, calling for summits to advance a solution to the crisis acceptable to Damascus and Moscow. In addition, it has continued intensive activity vis-à-vis Iran, despite Tehran's engaging in a direct dialogue with the West while abandoning its close cooperation with Russia. Russia is doing this in part through economic

proposals to Iran, particularly in oil exports, which can make it easier for Iran to cope with the sanctions imposed on it. It has also sought to improve relations with Middle East states that in recent years were not among Russia's supporters, while taking advantage of the deteriorating security situation in the region since the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the tension created between certain states and the US, following what those states regard as American failure to stand by its allies. The most significant of these countries is Egypt, with which Russia advanced a series of deals on cooperation. In an extensive use of "weapons diplomacy," Russia signed important deals on arms supplies with Egypt, including various weapons that it hitherto refrained from supplying. At the same time, Russia is making preparations to repair its standing with additional Sunni countries, among them Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Turkey, with which Russia has a long economic agenda and is a party for coordination on policy in the Black Sea region, is also on this list. Most of these achievements are still on paper, and it remains to be seen whether various arms transactions discussed by Russia with Middle East countries are actually concluded.

Beyond this, Russia regards the Middle East as leverage – albeit difficult to use – for promoting its global interests, which will also impact on developments in Eastern Europe. It appears that the method it has chosen to achieve this goal is to divert international attention from the area of the former Soviet Union to the Middle East. Russia believes that focusing on the turmoil in the Middle East can help in reaching a settlement on the Ukrainian question compatible with Russian interests. Russia accordingly aims to score points in the Middle East and Ukraine, thereby bolstering its global standing vis-à-vis the West.

In general, Russia finds itself in an inferior position in the Middle East regarding the West, and has been unsuccessful in obtaining relief from the economic sanctions imposed against it. It is therefore possible that Russia will try to reach an alternative arrangement with the West that will include understandings about both Ukraine and the Middle East. It cannot be ruled out that these understandings will include Russia's abandonment of its support for Assad as well as active Russian participation in the military straggle by the Western-Arab coalition led by the US against the Islamic State. This may be the background to the rebel groups in Syria, Hizbollah, Iran, and Turkey. This activity is apparently aimed at promoting the idea

of an international conference on Syria, in part to determine the future of the Assad regime.

Russia and Israel

Russia's relations with Israel, which play a key role in Russia's Middle East policy, have been positive and stable for quite a few years. Russia regards Israel as a desirable partner due to its international weight, both political and economic, and as a strong regional actor. Furthermore, the two countries share a range of similar interests, based on the joint threats and challenges emanating from the current regional situation.

At the same time, there are clear differences between the two countries' views on the regional situation. For many years, Russia and Israel have taken opposite positions with respect to the Iranian nuclear program, and with respect to the threat to Israel posed by the Iran-Syria-Hizbollah axis. The two countries also have substantial differences regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Moscow takes Israeli interests into account in this context, although at times to a limited degree. Beyond that, Russia pushed more strongly over the past year, with an anti-Israel tone, for convening the international conference on the weapons of mass destruction free zone, as announced at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. This joined the new strident support for the Palestinians, along with the criticism, albeit restrained, following the attack on weapons convoys in the Damascus area attributed to Israel. Criticism of Israel by nationalistic and pro-Islamic groups that cooperate with the Russian government is also being sounded in Russia. There have been hints of a possible sale of S-300 missiles to Iran, yet given the fierce objections by Israel and the US, it is doubtful whether such a transaction will take place. On a more positive note, Russia helped reach the agreement to remove the chemical weapons stores from Syria, therefore preventing escalation in the region.

In the challenging Middle East reality, Israel and Russia seek points of convergence and ways of tightening cooperation between them – including in the political and security spheres – in order to promote stabilization processes. Russian efforts in this direction were to some extent welcomed by Israel, reflected in part by Israel's policy on Ukraine. Israel has refrained from criticizing Russia publicly, despite the pressure to do so from the West. In unusual fashion, Russia refrained from criticizing Israel during Operation Protective Edge. In addition, Russia has clearly been interested

in substantially expanding its economic cooperation with Israel, mainly in the technological realm. Russia sees Israel's edge in this area as a source of assistance that will help it cope with the widening technological gap with the West. Russia is also beginning to show some degree of interest in both the economic and political dimensions of the Israeli energy sector, including the transport of energy, and has exerted efforts to join forces with other regional players, including Israel, Cyprus, and the Palestinian Authority.

The regional developments in which Russia is involved (which include most developments) can be expected to have an impact on Israel's interests. Finding compatible points of convergence can benefit Israel and Russia, as well as the entire region. Cooperation with Russia, as long as it does not interfere with Israel's relations with the US, is in Israel's interest.

Conclusion

Two main processes occurring last year in the international arena threaten international stability. These crises have the same common denominator and became critical events in the global system. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, it is too early to assess the result of the Russia-West competition. On the one hand, the effectiveness of the economic sanctions is evident, and it is doubtful that in the long run Russia will be able to live with this situation. On the other hand, it seems that Russia will continue to maintain the Ukrainian crisis in order to undermine the pro-Western orientation of the Ukrainian government, prevent Ukraine from joining the Western system, and attempt to restore the country to Russia's sphere of influence.

Regarding the Middle East, Russia has increased its activity there, both to establish its standing in the region and to rehabilitate its status there, eroded in recent years because of the political turmoil in the Arab world. At the same time, its policy aims to expand the competition with the West to other arenas, first and foremost the Middle East, in order to press the West to ease its pressure over Russian policy in Ukraine.

In the current situation in the Middle East, Russia has reached a crossroads with regard to its regional policy, at a time that regional crises cultivate the growing instability. However, in these circumstances, Russian efforts reaped a variety of achievements on the ground in the Middle East. These have proven Moscow's abilities to increase its influence and will have significant implications for the region's future, and at the same time serve

as a counterweight to the tension with the West resulting from the ongoing crisis in Eastern Europe.

It seems that that despite the grave economic crisis and political pressure, in the visible future Russia will not capitulate to the West in the general FSU region, while in the other arenas, and especially in the Middle East, Russian international activities will continue to grow. In this context, in the Israeli view, Russia remains an influential regional and global political player that is able to contribute to the design of the future regional order.