International Actors in the Middle East: Common and Conflicting Interests

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In 2017, the major actors in the international arena continued the cautious policy of recent years: a limited investment of resources in the Middle East, based on the desire to avoid falling into regional cauldrons that continue to simmer, though mostly on a low flame. Among the principal events that preoccupied the international actors were the ongoing campaign against the Islamic State, the stabilization of the Bashar al-Assad regime, and the worsening Sunni-Shiite conflict, especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Other important issues included the entrenchment of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's authoritarian regime in Turkey, the Kurdish attempt to split off from Iraq, the Egyptian anti-terrorism campaign aimed at Salafi jihadist elements in Sinai, the attempted reconciliation between the warring factions in the Palestinian arena (the Gaza Strip/Hamas versus the West Bank/Fatah/Palestinian Authority), the war in Yemen, and the regional effects of the upheavals in the Saudi Arabian political system.

This essay examines the world powers' policies on key Middle East issues and the implications for Israel's interests and policy: the complex challenge posed by Iran; the day after a decision in the campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS), especially in the context of the war in Syria and the efforts to stabilize that state; relations between Washington and Moscow in these contexts; Russian-Iranian relations and Russia's improved relations with other

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Middle East states; the European Union's regional role; China's growing involvement in the region; and relations in the Israel-India-China triangle.

From the Israeli viewpoint, the most dramatic change was the departure of the Barack Obama administration, with which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu clashed on key issues, led by Israeli-Palestinian relations and the Iranian nuclear deal. The starting points on these issues for President Donald Trump created a basis for a broad and open dialogue between the Israeli government and the US administration, and while some promises were fulfilled – e.g., the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital – others remain open, e.g., a fundamental change in the US attitude to the nuclear agreement signed between the world powers and Iran. On the Palestinian side, the concerns aroused by Trump's pro-Israel proclamations when he was still a presidential candidate gave way to an assessment that it may be possible to hold a positive dialogue with him. But this assessment, too, has changed dramatically following the new US position on Jerusalem as Israel's capital and its impact on a US initiative to promote a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, if and when it is formulated.

Donald Trump's victory in the United States presidential election in November 2016 created expectations for a significant change in US policy on key Middle East issues. As a presidential candidate, Trump made it clear that his first objectives in the region were to eradicate the Islamic State and table the nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA) with a US withdrawal. US allies in the region, notably Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan, did not hide their disappointment with what they felt was Obama's soft touch on Iran and its proxies, as well as on Russia to a certain extent, which deepened its hold in Syria and increased its ties to the region while exploiting the weakness of the Obama administration. But with Trump in the White House for almost a year, it is clear that US allies in the region feel let down by the new administration as well. The conduct of the United States in the region does not seem to reflect a clear strategy or any sign that the administration has resolved to withdraw from the JCPOA or is prepared to confront its other partners to the agreement in order to change it or, at the very least, launch a frontal offensive against the successes Iran has chalked up in the Middle East: strongholds of Iranian control and enhanced influence. Trump replaced his promise to abrogate the agreement with Iran with Congressional sanctions

that, to date, have failed to force Iran out of the agreement; furthermore, the other signatories have made it clear that they oppose the abandonment of the agreement and even changes to it.

Just a few months into the new administration, Israel and Saudi Arabia, which expressed their strong opposition to the JCPOA before it was achieved and to the Obama administration's policy on Iran, recognized reality and adopted new emphases in the campaign over international stances on Iran, and changed their rhetoric. Israel and the regional Sunni states now stress Iran's subversive activities and the aid it extends to terrorist organizations, its entrenchment in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon via Iranian elements (the Revolutionary Guards and militias), and Iran's weapons development, including long range ballistic missiles. But the change in emphasis in Israel's anti-Iran campaign, waged primarily vis-à-vis the US administration, does not ensure success. Even if the US administration agrees with the Israeli assertions, supported by other regional states, about Iran's intentions and the negative ramifications of Iranian activities, it seems that at least at this stage Washington has not formulated a strategy for dealing with Iran – neither on the nuclear issue nor on its conduct in the Middle East. The recently published National Security Strategy on this issue, as indeed on many others, is not more than a statement of intention.

The policy of the United States on events in Syria is connected to the issue. During the campaign and after assuming office, Trump stressed the fight against the Islamic State and the need to destroy the strongholds of the radical organization. From his perspective, the demise of Bashar al-Assad's regime was not a political and/or moral imperative necessitating Assad's ouster. The almost complete fulfillment of the goal of conquering the Islamic State's strongholds in Iraq and Syria in the final months of 2017 raises questions in Washington and Middle East capitals about how the United States intends to proceed in these arenas. The current assessment is that in Iraq and Syria, the United States deploys elite units numbering about 6,000 soldiers and continues its aerial bombardment of Islamic State targets on a daily basis. It is not clear whether these forces will remain in the region and what will be their mission.

In the absence of clear goals in Syria after the full elimination of the Islamic State's presence in that country, the question arises about the continued

presence and activity of US forces there. Unlike Russia and Iran, both of which are working hard to preserve Assad's regime, which in turn is legitimizing their political and military presence in Syria, the United States has no defined interests or goals. The lack of clarity of US policy complicates the situation for Israel, which cannot operate on the assumption that its actions in defense of its interests in the Syrian sphere will receive full backing against the other players, especially Iran and Russia. Israel's ability to participate in shaping political and security arrangements in Syria is diminishing as the United States lowers its profile in Syria, especially militarily.

In the emerging reality in Syria, with the stabilization of Assad's status and regime and the deepening of Russian (and Iranian) influence in the country, and with the knowledge that Russia intends to protect what it gained in the years of the civil war, Israel is striving to find an ear in Moscow that would hopefully understand its security needs in Syria. The Russian success in Syria and the growing closeness between Moscow and other capitals in the region (notably Ankara, Riyadh, and Tehran) are especially significant given Russia's difficulties in other foreign contexts and in various internal challenges. The next Russian presidential election is scheduled for March 2018 and Putin's regime has yet to provide a roadmap for improving the nation's economy. Oil is the mainstay of the Russian economy, and its still-low price complicates a comeback. Despite President Trump's declarations of his desire to make use of Russia to resolve international crises, the US justice and legislative systems continue to take action against Russia for its suspected involvement in the US presidential election, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, and Russia's intervention in Ukraine (2014). These background issues hamper Russia from leveraging its successes in Syria (and also its limited influence on the North Korean regime) into circumvention of sanctions imposed on it by the United States and the EU because of its Ukraine policy.

At the same time, the understandings reached to date about future arrangements in Syria are of extreme importance to Israel. The backstage US-Russian dialogue with Jordanian involvement at the G20 summit, held in Hamburg in June 2017, helped create the de-escalation zones in southern Syria and led to the deployment of Russian military police in the region. Another US-Russia agreement, also assisted by Jordan, was reached subsequent to

the informal meeting between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meetings in Vietnam in November. The memorandum of principles attained was meant to regulate, i.e., prevent, the presence of foreign, non-Syrian, troops in south Syria. In practice, this document reflects the dilemmas Israel has encountered given its desire to avoid entanglement in events in Syria on the one hand, and to maintain its security interests there on the other hand. Israel has to maneuver in a setting of decreased US involvement while having Russia understand Israel's needs at a time when Russia is working closely with Iran. And while the memorandum of principles contains only a partial understanding as to the width of the security zone east of Israel's border with Syria in the Golan Heights, there is Iranian military action deep within this zone. For its part, Moscow has declared that it views Iran's presence in Syria as legitimate and will not force Iran to evacuate it forces. This has led to the creation of an unholy trinity with Russia at its center. To be sure, Israel is engaged in a dialogue with Russia on a mechanism to avoid friction and mutual casualties as well as more general topics related to Syria's future and the balance of power there. At the same time, Russia sees Iran as a key partner in the Middle East and the post-Soviet sphere in central Asia.

Relations between Russia and Iran grew closer following the nuclear agreement, which helped bolster their military cooperation and established a basis for cooperation on all topics connected to the war in Syria, especially the efforts to promote a settlement among the internal factions involved in the war to end the fighting and stabilize the nation – the Astana Process, under Russia's sponsorship. The leaders of Russia and Iran visited one another in 2017: Hassan Rouhani went to Moscow in March and Putin came to Tehran in November.

Nonetheless, relations between the two nations might hit a snag if Iran and Russia disagree about Syria's political future, and if Iranian actions in the Middle East, especially in Syria, clash with Russia's regional and global interests. While Moscow seems to be concluding that a political settlement in Syria will require the establishment of a federative regime, meaning a certain weakening of the central government, i.e., the Assad regime in Damascus, Tehran's view on this issue is unclear. Another cause for possible friction between Moscow and Tehran could be a thaw in relations between Russia,

seeking to expand its circle of influence in the Middle East beyond the Tehran-Damascus axis, and Saudi Arabia, which is also looking for a way to fill the gap created by the US withdrawal from the region. King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman visited Moscow in 2017 and a series of agreements – including a contract for Saudi military purchases from Russia – were signed between the nations.

Russia's improved status in the Middle East is likewise visible in its relations with Turkey, after a period of chilly relations following Turkey's downing of a Russian plane in 2015. This thaw was made possible by Moscow ignoring Recep Tayyip Erdogan's tyrannical domestic conduct and not sharing in the sharp criticism he incurred in the international arena, especially in the EU. Furthermore, Turkey was invited by Russia to participate in the process aimed at reaching a settlement in Syria. Ankara will presumably not oppose the establishment of a federation in Syria should Moscow be intent on it, because such a regime would allow Turkey to expand its influence on the Syrian side of the Turkey-Syria border.

Given this complex of strengthening bonds between Russia and regional states, despite the enmity between some of them (e.g., Saudi Arabia and Iran), Israel has to examine its continued efforts to forge closer relations with Moscow. A dialogue with Moscow is an Israeli strategic asset, despite inherent limitations and constraints. Here Israel must also be mindful of the views of the US administration and Congress, which dictate cautious progress, shaped by Russia's willingness to consider Israel's security needs and by developments in US-Russian relations. An improvement in Moscow-Washington relations will facilitate a US understanding of the Israeli-Russian dialogue. A worsening in relations between the two global powers would force Israel to examine a possible negative reaction from Washington to a more intense Israeli dialogue with Russia. The difficulty in assessing the long term trends in US foreign policy and the uncertainty projected by the US President exacerbate the difficulty in formulating an Israeli policy vis-à-vis Russia on regional issues important to Israel, especially its ability to preserve freedom of action in the Syrian sphere and especially given the challenges posed by the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis.

The EU, under pressure of internal crises in its member nations, including the 2017 general elections in key states such as France and Germany, and

within the EU as an organization, continued to curb its involvement in the Middle East, while losing what was left of its influence in the region. Most European activity was focused on the war in Syria and its effects, especially the millions of Syrian refugees, many of whom have reached Europe's shores. In April 2017, the European Council (the EU institution that comprises the heads of state or government of the member states) adopted a strategy on the crisis, based on working toward a political settlement presupposing Syria's unity, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence. The EU reaffirmed its support for the Syrian opposition and the country's civil society organizations. Seeing itself as the major donor of aid to Syrian refugees, it declared at the same time that it will help rebuild Syria only when a political transition process is launched that includes all parties, as stated in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of December 2015. This resolution adopted the announcement of the states formulated in Geneva in late June 2012 in the presence of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; the heart of that announcement was the vision of a pluralistic, democratic Syria, conforming to international standards on human rights and equality of opportunity without regard to ethnicity, religion, language, and other differences. The various forums created over the years to try to promote a settlement for Syria have for the most part left the EU outside the group of influential actors, even though the EU will likely become an active partner once again in guaranteeing the future political and economic aspects of the solutions for Syria.

The EU's limited involvement in the process to determine the future of Syria cannot help Israel pursue its long term security interests in this arena. The EU is aware of Iran's negative role in the Middle East, but it has scant desire to confront it and its regional proxies. Moreover, the political-strategic dialogue between the EU and Israel, which even in better times in the past was limited, turned sour toward the end of the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear deal (2015) and then petered out. The Association Council, the formal institution for managing bilateral relations and a political dialogue between the EU and most of Europe's neighbors, including Israel, has not met in a long time. The rift is partly the result of profound disagreements between Israel and the EU on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the political deadlock in that arena. These disagreements have been expressed in the

implementation of the EU policy that distinguished between Israel of pre-1967 borders and the post-1967 Jewish settlements in the West Bank (e.g., by imposing duties on exports from the West Bank) or in aid provided to various organizations acting, according to the Israeli government, against Israeli interests. Following Trump's declaration on Jerusalem the differences sharpened, as the EU came out strongly against it. These differences are liable to deepen further if and when the US administration announces – as it has said it intends to – an initiative to renew the political process, and if Israel is perceived as rejecting it.

For several years, Israeli governments have preferred to work bilaterally with European nations and bypass the EU Brussels institutions. This practice may promote Israel's interests as long as the governments of the EU member nations cooperate with it and as long as the central EU institutions in Brussels are preoccupied with other burning issues, some of which may affect its future (e.g., Brexit and the impact of negotiations with the UK on other member nations inclined to weaken the organization's frameworks). In such a state of affairs, it is doubtful that Israel will find a sympathetic ear for its regional strategic concerns in these institutions. The exit from the EU by the UK, the major member closest to the US, and the not-much-more-than-correct relations between Israel and the two other leading EU members, France and Germany, also lower Israel's expectations from the European players in the Middle East.

China is still a bench player on the Middle East political field. Its involvement in the region is felt primarily in the economic realm and, to a certain extent, in arms sales. China is using the Belt and Road framework as a foundation for its economic penetration of the region and is also providing the financial means through the Chinese-created Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. China's drive includes paving roads and laying rails, developing ports, and in certain cases, such as Israel, investments in other fields. Over the last decade, China has invested in the region (i.e., including North Africa, excluding Israel) more than $120 billion, i.e., 10 percent of its foreign investment. In this sense, 2018 may witness one of the most significant economic events if Saudi Arabia issues 5 percent of ARAMCO's assets and the buyer – if there is a single buyer – is China. In that case, China's involvement in the decision making of a company that symbolizes, more than anything else, the decisive

effect of Saudi Arabia on the global energy market will have far reaching economic and political implications. As the exporter of some 10 percent of the world's energy consumption, Saudi Arabia is the most influential factor for oil prices set by two cartels, the more visible one being OPEC. A possible Chinese presence in the decision making process in Saudi Arabia could affect the price of oil in the international markets, the income of the oil-producing countries, and their ability to assist those economies of Middle East states on the verge of collapse. China's increased activity in the economic realm can, of course, be explained in simple economic terms: a desire to find markets for its products and its production and construction capacity surplus, for example in the field of infrastructures. Another explanation is China's need to import energy sources with a high level of certainty and continuity, and hence its desire for stability, including economic stability, in the Middle East. On the other hand, the construction of Chinese ports in the Indian Ocean, for example, raises the possibility that China's intense activity is designed to gain dividends that are not solely economic in nature. Chinese weapons sales to Middle East states also net it profits that go beyond the purely economic.

At the same time that China forged closer relations with Iran and the Arab world, it did so with Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Beijing in mid-2017 to mark the 25th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations and promote greater economic cooperation between the two states. Several agreements concluded during that visit testify to vastly expanded economic relations. Unlike the Chinese connection with other states in the Middle East, China, in its relations with Israel, makes a clear distinction between economic partnerships and its positions on various political issues. This pattern of relations is not essentially different from Israel's relations with other nations, except for the accelerated growth in Israel-China economic ties, mostly in faver of China, and the lack of any balance between this trend and China's votes in international forums, i.e., lack of Chinese support for Israeli policies. On the other hand, China does not translate its positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into concrete economic steps, as does the EU with regard to exports from the territories occupied in 1967, or into financial aid to organizations opposed to Israeli policies on the conflict. Moreover, during 2017 President Trump softened his rhetoric on China to a certain

degree, making it possible for Israel to pursue cooperation with China in sensitive areas, such as cyber and communications, which often can be defined as security-related. But China's (and other nations') interest in these fields where Israel is a leading country will obligate Israel to calculate its moves in order to protect national interests and assets.

In tandem with developments in Israel-China relations, 2017 saw a breakthrough in Israel's relations with India. The absolute separation between economic relations and politics – China's policy vis-à-vis Israel – was even more noticeable with India. While under US pressure Israel severed all security relations with China, Israel-India cooperation in security was not vetoed by the US and continued to expand, even though India has not relaxed its anti-Israel voting pattern at all, which remained similar to China's (with the exception of the Security Council, in which India is not a permanent member). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel in July 2017 was more than a formal one, since it marked the budding of a more balanced approach to Israel. India has changed its votes in several international organizations and moved from automatically voting with the Arab side to abstaining. There is a similarity between the pattern of India's economic relations with the Arab states and that of China, especially when it comes to import of energy sources from the Middle East. While India does not have enormous investments in Iran and the Arab world, its economy derives great benefit from remittance transfers of millions of Indians employed in the Arab world, especially the oil and gas producing states. The change in India's policy on Israel is therefore encouraging. Israel must monitor the development of India-China relations, as an escalation in that region caused by border disputes or competition in the Indian Ocean is liable to result in a conflict of interests between these two that could have an impact on Israel's ability to maintain and develop relations with both simultaneously.

The analysis of relations between Israel and the international actors that maintain military, political, and economic involvement in the Middle East shows stability and even improved relations resulting from the entry of a new, more friendly President to the White House in January 2017, the enhanced dialogue with Russia, and the expanded relations with India and China. Furthermore, the reduced importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East and international agendas and the fact that this year saw no

significant security incidents on Israel's borders, added to this improvement (it is too early to assess impact of Trump's declaration on Jerusalem). At the same time, this positive balance might tip into the negative side largely as a result of developments linked to US Middle East policy on key issues, primarily the deployment of both local and foreign forces on Syrian soil, a US initiative to revive the political process and its consequences, and above all, the US two-pronged policy toward Iran on JCPOA-related issues and on Iranian regional activities.