

The Cold War is Heating Up: Implications for Israel

Eldad Shavit, Udi Dekel, and Anat Kurz | February 23, 2022

The events surrounding the Ukraine crisis – irrespective of whether Russia continues to realize its threats to invade, or the NATO countries and Russia reach agreements that at least for now remove the threat of a Russian full-scale attack against Ukraine – already pose challenges to the international order that has existed for the past three decades. Similarly, they have direct and indirect, immediate and longer-term consequences for the Middle East in general, and for Israel in particular. In any case, and even if Israel prefers to sit on the fence, it must side with Washington's position in light of the special relations between them and the American commitment to its security. Inter alia, it is recommended that Israel refrain from a confrontation with the administration, certainly in public, even if a new nuclear agreement with Iran is achieved. At the same time, at this stage Israel should maintain channels of dialogue with Moscow to the extent possible – including due to the essential need to avoid military friction in the northern arena. In addition, Israel should continue to bolster its relations with the region's countries and convey positive messages, in order to prepare for the possibility of the internal shocks they may confront resulting from the international crisis, and in order to prevent regression in the normalization process.

The international system is preparing for the possibility that for the first time since World War II, Russia, willing to confront the West led by the United States, will launch a large-scale military campaign in Europe. Russian President Vladimir Putin has deployed a massive force around Ukraine in order to signal that the Kremlin sees the pro-Western change in the former Soviet republic as a serious threat that must be halted, even at the price of war. It is clear to the Western countries that Russia's military activity surrounding Ukraine, beyond the desire to ensure tighter control of events in Kiev, aims to effect substantial change in the world order and address Putin's ambition to restore Russia's former glory and its standing as a superpower, which it lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This joins Putin's drive to reverse or at least to curb the eastward expansion of the NATO alliance,

which is necessarily at the expense of Russia's interests in the post-Soviet region and poses an increasing threat to its security. Undoubtedly, the events surrounding the Ukraine crisis, whether Russia's threats of invasion are realized or whether the NATO alliance countries and Russia come to agreements that for the time being will remove the threat of a Russian all-out attack against Ukraine already pose challenges to the international order that has existed for the past three decades. They also have direct and indirect, immediate and longer-term consequences for the Middle East.

Even before Russia sent “peacekeeping” forces into Ukraine’s eastern provinces whose sovereignty was recognized by Moscow, it was clear that countries in the Middle East, including Israel, are interested in maintaining a neutral stance as much as possible and refraining from the need to choose a side regarding the conflict. On the one hand, despite the understanding that the United States is reducing its involvement in the Middle East, most of the region’s countries still see good relations with the US administration as a central element of their security concept. At the same time, they are also interested in maintaining their relations with Russia, which have deepened in recent years, and today include expanded military relations and the advance of deals to acquire Russian weapons. This is beyond Russia's deep involvement in the war in Syria.

It is still too early to estimate all the global implications of the crisis in Europe, yet it is clear that the military and political developments, including the arrangements that will subsequently be determined, will have an impact on the risks and opportunities facing countries in the Middle East. While the region’s countries do not have the ability to prevent a military deterioration in Eastern Europe, they will have to formulate policy and act quickly in order to contain ensuing possible risks.

Israel, like other countries in the region, is currently laboring to navigate the situation gingerly and refrain from expressing a stance on the developments. Israel was forced to call on its citizens to leave Ukraine, lest they be caught in a war, and was condemned by the authorities in Kiev after it was publicized that it had approached Russia for assistance with evacuating Israeli citizens from Ukraine. However, from Israel's perspective, the main implications of the crisis will focus on three spheres: globally, in the regional arena, and in its closest neighborhood – the northern arena.

Vis-à-vis the global arena: The longer and more complex the crisis grows, and particularly if war breaks out and is prolonged, it is expected that President Biden and the US administration, interested in consolidating and demonstrating the United States' leading standing in the international system, will demand openly

choosing a side. Israel will then be called on to side decisively with American moves and inter alia take part in the pressure that will be placed on Russia and comply with the sanctions that will be imposed. Under these circumstances, it is highly doubtful that the US administration will be attentive to efforts by Jerusalem to explain that Israeli interests require maintaining open channels with Moscow as well. It is likely that given reservations on the part of countries in the Middle East to demonstrate complete identification with the United States' position and its actions, the administration will ultimately hold to account countries that try to continue to sit on the fence. The crisis in Eastern Europe could actually emphasize to the United States the importance of the region as an alternative energy supplier to Russia. It seems that the administration already expects to see steps in this direction. Its attempts to identify an energy alternative have emerged with respect to Qatar, which during Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Khalifa al-Thani's recent visit to Washington was declared "a major non-NATO ally." A similar appeal by the administration to Saudi Arabia has so far been met with a cold shoulder, but going forward the Saudis will likely try to leverage the demands from them regarding the energy market in order to improve their relations with the US administration. One of the alternatives to the gas supply from Russia to Europe is from the gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean shared by Egypt, Cyprus, and Israel. Jerusalem as well as Cairo would have difficulty opposing a demand from the United States to supply gas to Europe and thereby help block the supply of gas from Russia through the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines.

Vis-à-vis the regional arena: The crisis in Eastern Europe, especially if it escalates into a military campaign, could directly influence the stability of some of the countries in the Middle East, particularly because they rely to a large extent on the supply of agricultural produce in general and wheat in particular from Ukraine and Russia. For example, Egypt, which is one of the world's biggest wheat buyers, acquires the majority of its grain from Russia and Ukraine, which is also its main corn supplier. If the crisis regarding Ukraine and its relations with the West continues, and in particular if it develops into a maritime blockade, it is likely to limit significantly the ability to transport agricultural products through the Black Sea to the Middle East. Also in this economic context are the increasing costs of energy, transportation, and shipping. These problems, which join challenges already confronting many countries in the region – stemming from demographic growth, increasing unemployment, especially among the younger generation, and the impacts of climate change – will make it very difficult for countries to prevent a deterioration internal situations. Such a reality would increase the chances that the region's regimes would again face rising popular protests and be unable to satisfy public demands. The countries whose stability would likely be undermined,

as an indirect result of the crisis between Russia and the NATO countries, are the weakest in the region: Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Iraq. Under these conditions of serious international crisis, there would also be increased concern for the stability of Jordan and Egypt. Clearly, instability in neighboring countries would add another layer to the security challenges faced by Israel. Israel itself would likely have to cope with rising energy prices and the impact on the cost of living. Another challenge, which would stem from the United States' focus on Europe, would be an acceleration of the trend by the US to move away from the Middle East and limit its military support for its allies in the region.

Vis-à-vis the northern front: The possibility that Russia might exploit the conflict theater in Syria to demonstrate to the United States that it can increase the volatility of arenas other than Eastern Europe is already materializing. Moscow has recently been making it difficult for Israel to wage its campaign against Iran's entrenchment in Syria and Tehran's efforts to transfer weapons through Syrian territory to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In January Russia's Ministry of Defense announced that Russian and Syrian aircraft had conducted a joint patrol in the skies of the Golan Heights, and that Moscow and Damascus intend to continue doing so. This was a clear message to Israel that Russia has the ability, if it chooses, to impede Israel's struggle against the Iranian axis as it presents in Syrian territory. This should also be seen as a step aimed at making it clear to Jerusalem that from its perspective there is a risk in taking sides in the crisis between Russia and NATO, and as a message to Washington that Moscow has additional points of leverage. Noteworthy here are the words of Lt. Gen. Michael Kurilla, the nominee for CENTCOM commander, during his Congressional testimony, that "If Russia does invade Ukraine they would not hesitate to be able to act as a spoiler in Syria as well." Consequently, an American response to a Russian attack on Ukraine, which would isolate Russia and deepen the sanctions imposed on it, is expected to have negative consequences for Israel. As part of the Russian response against the United States' allies, it is possible that Moscow would cut off the Russian-Israeli operational coordination and try to thwart Israeli strikes in Syria using Russian air defense systems and interception aircraft. Simultaneously, it is possible that Russia would refrain from restraining Iran and even encourage it to use its proxies, not only against the American forces in Syria, but also against Israel.

Principal Recommendations for Israel

- a. Middle Eastern countries including Israel that choose neutrality testifies to a change in the standing of the United States in the region and in the regional balance of power. However, Israel's special relations with the United States, which are an essential political-diplomatic shield for it, and

the declared American commitment to its security do not leave Israel a choice – even if it were to prefer to sit on the fence – other than to side with Washington's position fully and without any signs of hesitation. If Israel were to refrain from standing with the United States and Europe camp, the tension with the administration would increase and spill over into the American demand to reduce the relations between Israel and China. In addition, Jerusalem will not be able to refuse a demand from Washington to develop an alternative for providing gas to Europe instead of Russia.

- b. It is necessary to formulate a response to the range of consequences for Israel should a new form of Cold War between the United States and Russia develop. In this respect, it is important, already now, to ensure ongoing consultation with Washington and convey a clear and binding message, even if covertly, that when necessary, Israel will publicly stand with the side led by the United States – even at the expense of its relations with Moscow.
- c. The negotiations in Vienna regarding a return to the nuclear deal are progressing, and there is an increased likelihood that an agreement with Iran might be reached in the coming days. It is recommended that Israel refrain as much as possible from entering a head-on confrontation with the administration, certainly in public, even if a new agreement is achieved in the near future.
- d. At this stage, Israel should continue to maintain channels of dialogue with Moscow – including regarding the essential ongoing need to avoid military friction in the northern arena, but should also prepare for a scenario in which the connection and the operational coordination between Israel and Russia is cut off and the IDF faces increasing challenges in this sphere.
- e. Israel should at present refrain from selling weapons to Ukraine and to countries bordering Russia, especially anti-tank weapons, as well as continue to prevent the supply of Iron Dome batteries from the US military to Ukraine.
- f. Israel must expand its efforts to bolster its relations with the region's countries and to convey positive messages to them, in order to prepare for the possibility of internal shocks and try to avert any regression in the normalization process. This will also send a message to the United States that not only is Israel on the right side, but it is also working to consolidate a regional front that supports US policy.

- g. Israel should respond positively to the renewed rapprochement feelers extended by Turkey. Turkey is an important country in NATO, and in the broader perspective, improving relation with it will strengthen Israel's strategic standing and its potential as an asset in the region.