

The Ukrainian Crisis and the Middle East

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Introduction

The ongoing Ukrainian crisis grew out of the upheavals in Ukraine and quickly became a major confrontation in the international arena, involving all the major powers. Months following the onset of the crisis, the implications of the chapter remain at the center of the international agenda and threaten global stability. More than 1200 casualties among the Ukrainian civilian population have been reported by the UN, along with the 298 civilians of various countries killed in the crash of the Malaysian aircraft on July 17, 2014, some 40 km west of the border with Russia. From Moscow's perspective, its involvement in the crisis began as a response to a challenge issued by the West, especially the United States, seeking to harm Russia's geopolitical goals, marginalize its position in the former Soviet republics, and obstruct its superpower aspirations.

Behind this conflict of interests lies a history of Russian-Western friction,¹ driven, especially since Vladimir Putin's rise to power, by Russia's desire to restore its image as a superpower. To promote this agenda, Russia's leadership has adopted an assertive foreign policy and authoritarian domestic line, based on the belief that this will ensure Russia's survival in face of the growing internal social and economic instability on the one hand, and the gamut of external challenges threatening Russia's territorial integrity and security on the other. Russia views the West as responsible in part for the latter: the West is seen as exerting pressure for NATO's eastward expansion. This is presented as evidence of the West's deliberate

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global plan designed to refashion the world order in a form convenient to the West, a plan executed through “the color revolutions.”² The current Russian response strives to establish a renewed unification of the former Soviet states that would also include some new neighboring countries in Asia and the Middle East, to be called the Eurasian Union. In the context of these processes, the Middle East assumes an increasingly important role as another front in the conflict. This has important implications for the region and for Israel’s interests.

This analysis points at processes occurring in the international arena as a result of the crisis in Ukraine and suggests what the implications of this crisis are for the Middle East in general and Israel in particular. It focuses on Russia’s considerations and policy on the crisis and their greater connection to Middle Eastern affairs.

The Ukrainian Crisis

The current Ukrainian crisis grew out of the public protests in the country resulting from the refusal of Viktor Yanukovich’s government to join the Eastern Partnership framework of cooperation with the EU along with four other countries in December 2013.³ The fairly violent demonstrations

continued steadily for some four months until the pro-Russian Yanukovich was ousted on February 22, 2014 and a temporary leadership was formed, with Alexander Turchinov as acting President and Arseniy Yatsenyuk as Prime Minister. Elections were held on May 25, 2014, and Petro Poroshenko became President.

Russia, feeling threatened by the developments in Ukraine and seeing them as part of a Western plot to damage Russian interests, felt it had to respond. Its response was meant to prevent deterioration in Russia’s international status and harm to its vital interests, which would become harder to achieve without Ukraine’s participation in Moscow’s geopolitical project.⁴ The Russian response involved a series of fairly effective and rapid steps, including

the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, without overt use of force, and a similar initiation of destabilizing measures in regions with large Russian-speaking populations in eastern and southern Ukraine where separatists –

Russia’s efforts to establish linkage between East European issues and the Middle East is presumably in order to create a locus of tension in the Middle East analogous to the one in Eastern Europe, and thereby present it as another front in the same global power struggle.



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with Russia's covert aid – started violent protests that could well deteriorate into an actual civil war. At the same time, Russia massed troops on its border with Ukraine, broadcasting its willingness to engage in military intervention to seize control of separatist and other regions, as needed.

Russia's aim in these moves was to create enough pressure to achieve a negotiated solution. At the core of this solution was restoring Ukraine – striving to assimilate into the West – to the circle of Russian influence, preferably having the country join Russia's geopolitical program or at least keeping it from joining Western associations, i.e., the European Union and NATO. In Russia's eyes, Ukraine's conduct during the Euromaidan upheaval and afterwards was made possibly only thanks to sweeping Western support.

As of the summer of 2014, the Ukrainian crisis, which in practice is a full-fledged global conflict between the Russian Federation and the West, is still at its peak, despite a series of conciliatory steps, such as Russia's promises to honor the outcome of the Ukrainian May 25, 2014 presidential election and a summit of foreign ministers (the United States, Russia, Ukraine, and the EU) in Geneva on April 17, 2014, where the sides did arrive at concrete understandings.⁵ On June 6, 2014, after commemorating the Normandy landings, President Putin and President-elect Poroshenko

met in France. Still, none of these moves has resulted in the hoped-for compromise, though it remains visible down the road.

Currently the conflict is underway through unusual means and methods. According to Ukrainian and Western sources, Russian military and special forces are operating covertly on Ukrainian soil. Aside from the political plane, the main thrust of their activity, joined by mutual pressures of various sorts, is to activate local elements such as field agents, separatists, and collaborators. An important role of the struggle is played by the media and the information war in which the sides attempt to delegitimize and demonize one another.⁶ But the key dimension of the conflict is economic, where the sides tap various pressures at their disposal: the United States and Europe by imposing economic sanctions on Russia in general and leaders of the Russian establishment in particular (so far, more than 30 Russian companies and more than 100 Russian individuals are on the EU and US lists), and Russia by playing the energy supply card against Ukraine and European countries.

At the same time, the disagreement spreading in the West is particularly salient. Beneath the consensus of NATO and EU members with regard to their common challenge lies a growing internal debate about continuing the confrontation with Russia. It seems that the nations of western and southern Europe, led by Germany and France, which have pragmatic economic interests, work to reduce the tensions with Russia, whereas the central European nations – such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states – are, based on their own geopolitical considerations, determined to deepen the divide between Russia and the West.

In light of these considerations, the crisis may develop according to the following scenarios:

- a. Russia will continue to encourage destabilization in Ukraine, especially in separatist areas, in an effort to divide the country.
- b. The Russian army will invade Ukraine in the guise of humanitarian intervention for the population threatened by civil war. In such a case, one may also expect an attempt at regime change or the annexation of parts of Ukraine.
- c. A compromise allowing the partial preservation of Russia's interests will be reached. In this scenario, the basis for the compromise is similar to the understandings reached in Geneva on April 17, 2014.

It seems that the latter scenario is the most likely for Russia, because, it is in Russia's best interests to promote a compromise to end the conflict.

Clearly, Russia neither desires, nor is capable of, conducting an ongoing political and economic confrontation with the West, which is far better equipped than Russia.⁷

Russia will thus presumably concentrate its efforts on rebuilding its relations with Ukraine and the West, though without conceding its political goals in the disagreement, led by the drive to prevent Ukraine's integration into Western associations. This approach is ultimately meant to turn Ukraine into a neutral country under the banner of "Finlandization," while simultaneously constructing a federalist model of development for Ukraine. Though its implementation is highly unlikely, it could become leverage for threatening Ukraine's integrity, should Ukraine fail to remain neutral. Furthermore, this approach also sends a message to other former Soviet states thinking about crossing Russia's red lines.

This development means that Russia in any event is losing Ukraine, which is turning westwards. Even if Ukraine does not join the EU or NATO, it will not willingly become a possible future partner to Russia's geopolitical plan. Therefore, even if the compromise is reached, it is unlikely that Russia will maintain the status quo in the long run and will, rather, renew its efforts to bring Ukraine back into the fold.

The Ukrainian Crisis and the Middle East

In the course of the crisis in Eastern Europe, there was a notable increase in Russian activity in the Middle East that went far beyond Russia's ongoing efforts to rehabilitate its damaged status following what it sensed was negative fallout from the Arab Spring. As a result, in a region that already suffers from instability, new influential forces have developed and aroused the concerns of all the regional and external players operating in the area.

Russia is a veteran actor in the Middle East, experiencing alternating low and high points, though it never completely conceded its presence and influence in the region. Currently, Russian interests are at least threefold: one has to do with having a presence in the international arena so as to restore Russia's status as a superpower; another has to do with Russian national security, a direct outgrowth of the Islamic threat to Russia that emanates from the Middle East; and the third interest is geostrategic, as the Middle East is located along Russia's southern border and as such lies in the zone of Russia interests.

In the years leading up to the Arab Spring, Russia managed to rebuild its position in the region, which was seriously compromised after the breakup

of the USSR. The Russian government took a fairly assertive stance through its involvement in all the region's crises and its engagement with the radical and anti-Western axis. The revolutions in the region since 2011 undermined most of Russia's successes in the local arena and led to its withdrawal from most of the Sunni states; these trends were heightened by ongoing efforts to oust Russia completely from the region. In its struggle to survive, Russia positioned itself as an active partner on the Shiite axis, at odds with the Sunnis, who are generally supported by the West. Russia's hold on Syria, now in the middle of a civil war, and its backing for the Shiite front against its Sunni enemies provided Russia with a safety net that it has exploited to great effect: buying time for the Assad regime, which protects its own presence in the region, and enhancing its status by, *inter alia*, proposing the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons caches (September 2013). Nonetheless, as of early 2014, the Shiite axis on which Russia leaned had developed some cracks, after Iran's desertion from its alliance with Russia in favor of direct talks with the West.

Given these developments, Russia, in early 2014, renewed its efforts to restore its regional status, while exploiting the rift between the United States and the traditionally pro-Western actors in the region (e.g., the rift with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states) because of America's fostering better relations with Iran, and because of ideological disagreements (e.g., the US and Egypt). In this reality, Russia began an all-out diplomatic outreach to every available state and non-state regional actor, expanding its circle of influence; the policy was backed by weapons-sales diplomacy and intervention in every dialogue and crisis. This has resulted in some achievements relevant to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, and others, all of which are engaged in talks with Russia on a host of issues. Russia's attempts to expand its circle of influence are also meant to challenge the West on regional matters; Russia even expressed its interest in playing a role on the Israeli-Palestinian track and in topics of a geopolitical nature. In this context, Russia expressed its willingness to use its influence to fashion a future regional settlement, which would mean drawing new borders in the region.

Still, none of these has resulted in a new reality, because – at least for now – Russia is incapable of generating a real change in the regional core issues or promoting a shift in the relationship of the aforementioned regional states with the West in a way that would favor Russia. However, since the Ukrainian crisis deepened in the spring of 2014, it is again obvious that

Russia is increasing its activity in Middle East affairs. On the declarative level, a new Russian concept was unveiled at the Moscow Conference on International Security (May 22-23, 2014), to wit, all local revolutions and wars of the most recent vintage are supported by the West, specifically the United States, this constellation being dubbed “the color revolutions.”⁸ The events in Europe and the Middle East including the crisis in Ukraine are all seen within this prism.

On the practical level, and in addition to the steps described above, Russia is expanding its involvement in Syria. Russia is also working hard with Iran, despite the latter’s decision to speak directly with the West. The Russians are formulating economic proposals, primarily connected to oil exports, that would affect the sanctions against Iran. Another realm of Russian involvement is regional geopolitics, characterized by power struggles in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere that threaten to spill over into neighboring countries. Russia is transmitting messages about its ability to exacerbate crises and create a new geopolitical reality in the region.

In addition, Russia is trying to get involved in the core Middle East regional issues, such as attempting to become part of the Israeli-Palestinian track and assume a leading or an equal position with the United States, given the failure of the last round of talks headed by US Secretary of State John Kerry. Furthermore, the issue of Israel’s nonconventional arms is again on the table, an issue Russia is trying to leverage into an international maneuver of a summit under the banner of a nuclear-free zone, preferably under Russia’s leadership. Clearly Russia strives to earn additional dividends from the region’s states.

Taken together, these steps are presumably designed to establish linkage between East European issues – which have turned into a global crisis – with the Middle East, where Russian-Western friction continues. It seems that the point of establishing this linkage is to create a locus of tension in the Middle East analogous to the one in Eastern Europe, presenting it as another front in the same global power struggle. This approach seems to result from several considerations: the Russian strategic constraint to respond to the pressure in Eastern Europe as well as to exploit the situation developing in the Middle East, which the Russians attribute to Western hesitations. A possible goal of the linkage could be to make it easier

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for Russia to apply pressure in Eastern Europe by diverting attention and activity to another location capable of challenging the West and facilitating a compromise on Ukraine. The added bonus of such a move would be the possibility of Russia scoring points in the global arena, and in particular, in leading Middle East issues.

Significance for Israel

Israel plays a significant role in the political calculations of all the actors in the Middle East, Russia included. The fact that Israel took a neutral stand on the Ukrainian crisis is significant. In terms of the media, Russia points to that as a positive development, while conveying its desire to expand cooperation with Israel, which is in part a hope that Israel will cool its relations with the United States, and hinting that it would like to see Israel become a closer partner of Russia in the future.⁹ The official Russian position is somewhat more restrained, and tries to balance its interests in seeing Israel maintain its neutrality and cooperating with it, and its interests in other regional matters, such as involvement in the Palestinian arena and enhanced activity with old and new regional partners.¹⁰

For its part, Israel has its own opinion on how best to shape the Russian-US-Israeli constellation. Many leading Israeli public, academic, and media figures are quite critical of the government's Ukraine policy, for both ethical and pragmatic reasons, including criticism of Russia's conduct in the crisis and its disregard of international norms, and the negative ramifications for Israel's relations with its allies, chiefly the United States.¹¹ Similarly, doubts are raised about Russian credibility: will it, in fact, keep its promises? If not, what benefit can Israel's neutrality on Ukraine yield? Not to mention the fact that when it comes to the leading regional problems (Syria, Iran, the Palestinians), Israel can hardly expect Russia to take Israel's interests into account.

In contrast, different assumptions support Israel's policy of neutrality on short term, pragmatic grounds,¹² for example: the East European crisis does not directly affect Israel's interests or those of the Jewish people in the Diaspora. In addition, the future of power relationships on the international arena and geopolitical issues in the Middle East, where Russia will continue to play an influential role also in the future, is presumably also a factor. Israel, experienced in unilateral involvement in the Cold War era, would prefer to avoid a similar scenario in the future. Moreover, one may assume that there is a shared Russian-Israeli understanding about mutual interests

in the region, with the goal to avoid crossing any red lines set by the sides.¹³ The supply of game-changing arms is only one example.

Many in Russia, identifying the positive potential for Russian interests, support a closer Russian-Israeli relationship.¹⁴ But there are Russian declarations troubling to Israel made at the most senior levels, especially with regard to two key issues:

- a. The Palestinian issue, often said to be the key issue in the regional reality, with implications for all other processes.¹⁵ Here Russia rarely takes Israel's reservations into account. As a consequence of the crisis in the Israeli-Palestinian talks, Russia has resumed its efforts to have a say in the region, offering clear support to the Palestinian side.¹⁶
- b. Israel's nonconventional weapons, whose very existence – according to Russia – serves as a major locus of tension in the region and as a destabilizing factor. Therefore, Russia has recently renewed its declarations about the need for an urgent solution to this issue as well, and called for an immediate conference on a Middle East weapons of mass destruction-free zone.¹⁷

This trend may reflect the inclinations of Russian policies adapted to the reality created by the Ukrainian crisis, characterized by a growing conflict between the large powers. In that context, Russia's interests in forging closer relations with regional states are clear. One should also view this as part of Russian efforts to position itself as the leader of the anti-Western camp in the global system in general.

However, even though this policy does not deepen understandings and expand cooperation with Israel, one can discern a change in Russia's attitude to Israel. Russia identifies Israel as a desirable partner because Israel is a strong regional player given its military power and international importance, and especially because of Israel's status on the US agenda. Russia seems to assume that Israel, in its current political state, would be more open to changing its policy. To the same extent, it is possible that despite Russia's strident rhetoric and despite Israel's well known unwillingness to cooperate on the nuclear issue (which would lend support to the hypothesis that this is nothing but rhetoric) it may, according to the Russian assessment, cooperate with Russia's integration into the political process with the Palestinians.

The Russian speaking population in Israel (some 1.2 million, 37 percent of which hail from Russia and 38 percent from Ukraine) is divided on the

Ukrainian crisis, but aside from some exceptions, it is not involved in the issue and does not support Israel choosing a side.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian crisis, which began as one of the color revolutions in the former USSR, has evolved into a global crisis involving all the large powers. Russia, feeling marginalized by what it deems a well-orchestrated Western move against its vital interests, responded with a series of assertive moves of its own in Ukraine, though with minimal use of force. Still, it seems that in the end it will have to compromise. The preferred way of reaching a compromise will in all likelihood be based on understandings similar to those reached on April 17, 2014, in Geneva: on the one hand, Ukraine will remain outside Russia's circle of influence, but on the other hand, it will not be able to join Western organizations.

Yet although Russia seems to be succeeding in preventing Ukraine from crossing the line westwards, it is losing the country as a partner in its geopolitical plans for the Eurasian bloc. Thus, the end of the crisis will find Russia at a disadvantage. Moreover, it seems that the compromise on Ukraine in the offing will not bring long term calm to the region, as Russia will remain determined to restore Ukraine to its circle of influence and promote its geopolitical plans.

Since the spring of 2014, the involvement of the major powers in the Middle East has been significant, thanks to Russia's desire that the global confrontation spread as part of this constellation of processes. Russia, a veteran player of great influence in the region, is not about to concede its status in the region. After being forced to absorb losses in the Arab Spring, Russia has, since the Ukrainian crisis, once again turned more of its attention to increased involvement in the Middle East to raise its weakened position. In addition, it is also fomenting unrest in Eastern Europe so as to create another locus of tension in a global superpower showdown. This will have significant implications for the nations of the region, including Israel. Although it has so far not been in Russia's clear interest, one cannot rule out its acting against Israel's interests, causing a deterioration in relations.

In the developing reality, and assuming that the Ukrainian crisis will be resolved soon, it seems that Israel should – despite the lifted eyebrow of its Western allies, especially the United States – maintain its neutral position on the Ukrainian crisis for regional considerations, given the spreading instability in the Middle East, and so as to keep the status quo vis-à-vis

the Russians. A collapse of this status quo is liable to result in increased security cooperation between Russia and Israel's enemies.

Notes

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- 1 In this context, the Russians point to the following incidents: Western military intervention in Yugoslavia (1999); recognition of the independence of Kosovo; the series of "color revolutions" throughout the former Soviet Union, especially the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004); the Russia-Georgia war (2008); the stationing of the Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system in Eastern Europe; NATO's expansion eastwards (1999, 2004, 2009) and the expansion of the EU (2004); rising Russian concerns about the US "pivot to Asia."
- 2 The "color revolutions," a term that recently became official and given in Russia to Western and US-led events intended – according to the Russians – to initiate regime changes and promote pro-Western factions in a string of nations. Russia views the Arab Spring upheavals, the revolutions within the former USSR, and the current Ukrainian crisis as manifestations of the same phenomenon, and accuses the West of having planned and executed them all.
- 3 The Eastern Partnership, a program of the EU initiated by Poland in 2009, is meant to create a closer economic and strategic relationship with Eastern European nations. In 2013, it was proposed to six former Soviet states. The rejection of the EU Association Agreement by the Ukrainian President sparked the revolt and resulted in the change of leadership. Ukraine signed the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement in several stages (March 21 and June 27, 2014).
- 4 Fyodor Lukyanov, "Reverting to a Crossroads," *Russia in Global Affairs* 12, no. 1 (2014): 6.
- 5 On April 17, 2014, Geneva hosted a summit of foreign ministers of the nations involved in the Ukrainian crisis (Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and the EU). At the end of the conference, the statement issued called on the sides to dismantle any unofficial armed militias and evacuate seized sites. It also called on Ukraine to reform its constitution so that the country becomes a federation. On the same occasion, the Russians issued a call to Ukraine not to join Western associations (i.e., the EU and NATO).
- 6 The "information war" is the Russian name given to the nature of the conflict of the Ukrainian crisis, which is replete with propaganda and heated rhetoric on both sides and meant to sway international public opinion.
- 7 Russia's ability to manage a long conflict with the West is presumably limited, if only because the US economy is eight times bigger than Russia's and the EU's economy is seven times bigger than Russia's.

- 8 See footnote 2 above.
- 9 Herb Keinon, "Israel is not about to Enter Russia-Ukraine Fray," FM Liberman Says," *Jerusalem Post*, April 22, 2014, [jpost.com/diplomacy and politics/Israel-not-about-to-enter-russia-ukraine-fay-350111](http://jpost.com/diplomacy-and-politics/Israel-not-about-to-enter-russia-ukraine-fay-350111).
- 10 "Russia Concerned about Israeli Plans to Build Settlements," *Voice of Russia*, June 6, 2014, http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2014_06_06/Russia-Concerned-About-Israeli-Plans-to-Build-Settlements-9457/.
- 11 The US State Department's spokeswoman expressed faint surprise about Israel's failure to join the majority of nations voting in the UN in support of Ukraine. See "US 'Surprised' Israel did not Support UN Vote on Ukraine's Territorial Integrity," *Jerusalem Post*, April 15, 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/INTERNATIONAL/US-surprised-Israel-did-support-UN-vote-on-Ukraines-territorial-integrity-348564>.
- 12 Amotz Asa-el, "Middle East: Can Israel be Neutral on Ukraine," *Jerusalem Post*, April 19, 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Features/Front-Lines/Can-Israel-be-neutral-on-Ukraine-349814>.
- 13 An example of mutual Israeli-Russian consideration is the Russian-Georgian war in 2008. Israel then decided to avoid supplying arms (drones and launchers) to Georgia at Russia's request. So far the Russians have avoided supplying game-changing weapons (such as the S-300) to Israel's enemies.
- 14 Itamar Eichner, "Netanyahu and Putin to Get Direct and Secure Hotline," *Ynetnews*, June 1, 2014, ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4526082,00.html.
- 15 Shimon Stein, "The Ukraine Crisis: Preliminary Comments," *INSS Insight* No. 549, May 16, 2014 inss.org.il/index.aspx?+4356&articled+6989.
- 16 "Moscow Pledges Active Contacts with Palestinian Unity Gov't," voiceofrussia.com/news/2014_06_03/Moscow-pledges-active-contacts-with-Palestinian-unity-govt-7443.
- 17 A conference aimed at establishing a WMD-free zone, which cannot be convened without the agreement of all the states in the region. Israel's concern is that such a conference would be used to exert coordinated pressure on it and it alone. Russia recently announced (not for the first time) its intention to work towards the convening of this conference this year. See Russian Institute of Strategic Studies: <http://www.riss.ru/news/2218-blichnij-vostok-dolzhen-byt-prevrashchen-v-zonu-svobodnuyu-ot-omu#.U6dPYIKKBnE>.