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The Empire Strikes Back?

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The upheavals in the Arab world have created a situation that abounds with challenges for Russia, which has found itself sidelined in the Middle East by the Sunni coalition, working – in Russia's eyes – in concert with the West.

From Russia's point of view, the Middle East has now become a battleground for regional and global powers in their struggle over the future order. This confrontation has grown particularly acute because of the civil war in Syria between the Western-oriented Sunni camp and the Shiite camp, backed by Russia and China. Indeed, in this renewed conflict between global powers, Russia went from being a secondary player that cooperated with the West in the revolutions in North Africa to a dominant actor.

In the Syrian conflict, where it is waging a stubborn battle to defend its regional status, Russia has had some success thanks to a tactic that includes assistance to Syria. At work is an effort to isolate the battlefield (through extensive use of Russia's veto power in the UN and pressure to undermine any intentions of military intervention in Syria) and military and economic assistance to the Syrian regime, which consequently is managing to retain its relative advantage on the ground. While Russia has so far played the Syrian chapter well, it is also acting to ensure its future status in Syria, with attempts at dialogue with the Syrian opposition and preparation for the dissolution of the state. In this context, the Russians are reaching out to the various ethnic, religious, and other factions and groups in Syria and abroad.

Recently the confrontation has broadened, with Turkey increasing its intervention in the crisis, both vis-à-vis Syria and by directly challenging Russia. Turkish-Russian tensions, which surfaces in contexts other than the Middle East (such as in the Caucasus), is liable to escalate into a direct confrontation. At present, the friction between them also entails competition for influence vis-à-vis the Kurds throughout the region.

Russian-Western tensions are not limited to the Middle East. Russia feels Western pressure in regions important to it along its borders in the states of the former Soviet

Union. Turkey seeks to expand the influence of NATO and sideline Russia in the Caucasus, adding fuel to the fire of Russian-Western tensions. Apparently Russia is motivated to cling to its stubborn stance in Syria at least in part by its desire to distance the United States from Russian areas of interest along its borders and confine it to the Middle East.

Recent changes in Russia's conduct in the Middle East are evident. Moscow is becoming more assertive, moving beyond the Syrian conflict and the radical axis, and spreading to other areas. This is the conclusion from a review of several areas:

- *Iran*: Russian-Iranian cooperation continues against the background of the developments in Syria. This was reflected recently in renewed expressions of Russian support for Iran, countering the West's campaign against Iran's nuclear program.
- *Iraq*: Along with Russian efforts to regain a serious presence in the country, Prime Minister al-Maliki recently visited Russia. During his visit various agreements were signed, including a \$4.2 billion arms deals and oil production contracts. Iraq, in tense relations with its Persian Gulf neighbors on the one side and Turkey on the other, is thus repositioning itself in the region in clear defiance of the United States.
- *Egypt* is Russia's next objective. Recently Russia has spared no effort to interest the current Egyptian regime in restoring cooperation, damaged during the "Arab Spring," to its former state. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov is scheduled to visit Cairo soon, and Egypt will likely respond favorably to Russia's overtures.
- *Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states*: These nations, which since the "Arab Spring" have been battling the Shiite axis and trying to keep Russia out of the region, have ironically enough found themselves courted by Russia as it attempts to interest them in cooperation with tempting offers of military equipment. Foreign Minister Lavrov is expected to visit Saudi Arabia and other states on his way from Egypt, and some suggest that he will bring with him proposals to defend the Gulf states against the radical elements.
- *Jordan* too is within Russia's sphere of interest, also apparently as a way to promote Russian influence over Jordan's domestic affairs. The full picture is not yet clear, but one may discern Russian designs in this direction.
- *The Palestinians*: Russia was and remains supremely interested in reviving the political process in the Israeli-Palestinian channel as a convenient platform for Russia to return to international affairs in the region and divert attention away from other centers of tension in which it is involved. Its support of Hamas has never diminished, even as it has continued to maintain a dialogue with the Palestinian Authority, hoping to create an opportunity to appear as a mediator between the two.

- *Israel*: There was a recent important breakthrough in bilateral relations, concerning joint ventures with strategic significance for Russia. This cooperation helps Russia extricate itself from its regional isolation and the negative ramifications of the "Arab Spring."
- *Africa* too, is in Russia's new sphere of interest. The Russian President's special envoy to the region, Mikhail Margelov, recently visited several states in eastern and central Africa in an effort to promote ideas for joint political and economic ventures.

An examination of the gamut of Russian activities in the Middle East raises the question of their common denominator. These activities are likely part of a clearly designed program, which on the face of it seems to be a diplomatic counter-offensive intended to extricate Russia from its isolation in the Middle East and restore its former status and recover former assets harmed by the "Arab Spring" and the regional Sunni-Western alliance. If so, we are looking at a Russian framework for overcoming its marginal status by promoting direct arrangements with regional states, wooing them with tempting offers, and waiting to reap at least some success, and perhaps even reestablish a bloc of supportive nations.

At the same time, it is also possible that we are looking at a much more complex and daring program, whose objective is to jumpstart a more far-reaching process. Perhaps at work is the start of a Russian program intended as a coordinated and concerted effort to establish a new regional order. In that case, the Russian framework includes moves that cover the entire region and are intended to change the current geopolitical reality in Syria, Iraq, and the Kurdish regions and beyond. There is significant, cumulative evidence supporting this possibility.

As usual in such situations, it is too early to assess fully what may ensue from a Russian program of this sort. In any case, it is evident that Russia is engaged in a comprehensive counter-offensive, conducted in all likelihood according to a clearly defined framework, which could have the power to affect the future shape of the region. Should this occur, even only in part, there is much food for thought for Israel regarding the implications of the new international reality taking shape around it, as well as more than a few issues that must be worked out with Russia.

