

International Involvement in the Middle East

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The Middle East of 2014 might well be described as a bubbling cauldron. Voluntarily or involuntarily, the main international actors – the US, Russia, and to some extent the European Union (EU) – were drawn into the maelstrom. The seizure by the Islamic State (IS) organization of large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, along with its attempt to expand into stable countries such as Jordan and the Gulf monarchies, forced the US and some of its allies to revise their policy of avoiding military intervention in the internal events in the region. In recent years this policy was largely upheld, even when events involved the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the displacement of millions of others.

The danger posed by Islamic State's recruitment of thousands of young people from Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world, some of whom will later return to their countries of origin with knowledge and experience in guerilla warfare, compels these countries to devise a legal and military policy, including the use of force, as part of their overall strategy. While some force has already been exercised, the international struggle against Islamic State is only beginning, and membership in the international coalition against IS, which relies primarily on airpower, is insufficient. In other words, although

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in the long term the organization will constitute a direct danger to European countries, only a few countries from Europe are taking part in the military operations. Russia, for whom radical Islam is also a significant threat, like many other Western countries has thus far not taken any concerted action. Turkey, a NATO member defined as a US ally, has its own policy on matters pertaining to events in neighboring states.

On a different front, the international community continues to grapple with the Iranian nuclear issue. The three leading international actors – the US, the EU, and Russia – have managed to maintain their coordination and cooperation on this issue, in contrast to their uncoordinated actions in other international arenas, including the Middle East. If no agreement is achieved by the agreed date for concluding the talks – late June 2015 – cooperation between the powers is likely to face a serious test, due to possible disagreement about the consequences of the lack of an agreement. For Israel, an agreement reached by the P5+1 currently negotiating with Tehran that leaves Iran no chance of quickly attaining nuclear arms capability is obviously preferable.

There is no definitive answer to the question of whether a cohesive coalition is in Israel's interest, particularly since the broader the coalition, the less it may be able to act powerfully against Iran in the event that Iran continues to progress toward a nuclear weapons capability in the absence of an agreement. At the same time, the chances that the P5+1 will remain united in the absence of an agreement are not good, due to the disagreements between its members on a number of other issues, particularly the crisis in Ukraine. The disagreements between the US, Europe, and Russia are far from resolved, and ambiguous situations, such as the absence of an agreement with Iran, are a recipe for disputes and paralysis that are liable to pose difficult dilemmas to decision makers in Israel with respect to the Iranian nuclear program.

Another question on the international agenda is the late 2014 drop in oil prices. Many regarded this development as a result of sophisticated maneuvering between the various respective interests of all the relevant international and Middle East actors. Saudi Arabia plays a major role in determining oil prices. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia's willingness to allow oil prices to fall enables it to preserve its export markets, and perhaps to some extent to impede the development of alternative sources of supply

among its competitors, including the US. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's policy increases the kingdom's budget deficit. In addition, the plunge in oil prices is also perceived, certainly in Moscow and Tehran, as a Saudi Arabian and American punitive measure: as an additional sanction on Iran, due to foot dragging in the negotiations on the nuclear question, and an additional sanction against Russia, due to its policy in Ukraine. The political consequences of the sharp drop in oil prices and the implications for stability and the involvement of the world powers in the Middle East will become clear in 2015.

The problems in the region in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, principally ethnic and religious splits and hostility, combined with immense economic gaps – abject poverty versus unfathomable wealth – are not all a result of the policy adopted by the international actors involved in the region in the past and at present. However, the collapse of national political structures in the Middle East highlights the question whether there are any solutions to these problems without cooperation between international elements – states and international political, economic, and military organizations. The involvement of the international community in the effort to contain the damages generated by the regional crises and their spillover to other regions in the world is a question that also requires consideration by Israel. Ostensibly, there is no connection between Israel's conduct on different issues – the Iranian nuclear challenge, the security threat posed by the growth of radical Islamic non-state organizations, and the Palestinians problem – but it will be difficult, for example, to separate Israel's responses to an agreement with Iran on the nuclear question, or the absence of such an agreement, from other developments in the regional and international arenas relevant to Israel. Israel will be unable to ignore the effects of an attack on Iran, should one occur, on the stability of moderate regimes in the region, or on Israel's already precarious relations with the Palestinians.

Russia: A Year of Conflict

Two of the main issues challenging the international system – issues that will have major implications for the international arena in the coming years – are the crisis in Ukraine and the upheaval in the Middle East. Russia has a leading role in charting the direction of these two issues.

In late 2014, Russia was in the throes of a deep economic and international crisis, to the extent that it threatened Russia's stability and was perceived in Moscow as being of existential significance. Beyond the internal consequences of the economic crisis, Russia was forced to cope with international criticism of its aggressive policy in Ukraine and its support for Iran and the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. Another challenge facing Russia is the threat of radical Islam, both within its territory and in the surrounding area. Russia's foreign policy is therefore directed at preserving its interests and strengthening its standing in the international arena, while containing the direct threats confronting it. Over the past year Russia managed to deal quite effectively with the constraints emerging from the tumult in the Middle East, even expanding its presence and involvement in the region. Russia has improved its relations with a number of Middle East states, thereby in tandem challenging the US and its allies, who are also trying to strengthen their interests in face of the crises in the region. Regarding Israel, beyond the existing processes of tightening the bilateral relations, there was evidence in the period under review of new political and economic cooperation. At the same time, there are still serious disputes between Moscow and Jerusalem, mainly on the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Crisis in Ukraine and Russia's Relations with the West

The crisis in Ukraine, which in 2014 was the core of the crisis between the world powers, significantly heightened the tension between Russia and the West, not only with respect to the implications for the post-Soviet arena, but also with respect to other global issues. In effect, 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 Ukraine crisis, is based on the West's perception of Russia's actions in the international arena, especially Eastern Europe, as a concrete threat. Russia's effort to bolster its influence in Eastern Europe arouses anxiety, especially among the countries in the region – the new members of the European Union and NATO. In turn, the West has aimed to find ways to deter Russia and thwart its geopolitical ambitions in the region. For their part, the states of the former Soviet Union have encouraged the West to

show determination in the face of Russian behavior in Ukraine and respond firmly to Russia's efforts to entrench its hold in the country.

Russia has adopted an accusatory attitude toward the West on the Ukrainian question, because it regards the developments in Eastern Europe as of Western making. Ukraine's turn westward threatens Russia's interests in this region, especially given the trend of NATO's eastern expansion and its inclusion of countries from the former Soviet Union. Russia perceives this trend as part of Western pressure aimed at generating instability and regime changes around Russia in the framework of the "color revolutions," in order to deprive Russia of its standing in the post-Soviet area and thwart its ambition to regain superpower status. The deployment of a NATO system of anti-missile interceptors in Eastern Europe angered Russia, which considered it a demonstration of power in a region it regards as its sphere of interest.

Russia's policy in the Ukrainian crisis, as in previous crises that occurred in the area of the former Soviet Union, was mainly responsive – even if assertive – in face of Western activism. Russia is laboring to foil Western efforts to attract countries that were part of the Soviet Union, and is willing to use force to accomplish this goal. The 2008 Russian-Georgian war highlighted this approach: Russia went to war against Georgia to prevent it from joining NATO. This action delivered a clear message to countries in the former Soviet Union that have crossed the lines, or that wish to do so. Note that there are several "suspended" crises in the former Soviet Union – in the Caucasus, Transnistria, and elsewhere – and Russia wishes to keep these areas within its sphere of influence.

Similarly, Russia's policy on the Ukrainian question was a firm step in this vein. The crisis developed out of the public protest that arose in Ukraine following the refusal of then-President Viktor Yanukovich, who was pro-Russian, to join a plan for economic cooperation proposed to Ukraine and five other former Soviet Union countries by the European Council. This refusal led to widespread – and at times violent – public protests (December 2013-February 2014). After Yanukovich was ousted and a transitional government was appointed, which was followed by Petro Poroshenko's election as president on May 25, 2014, Russia saw itself as obligated to respond in order to prevent Ukraine from joining the West. Its response included a series of rapid measures: the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula,

albeit ostensibly without use of force, combined with active assistance, although undeclared, for a process designed to destabilize pro-Russian areas in eastern Ukraine. The result was a civil war between the separatist districts of Donetsk and Luhansk and the central Ukrainian government. The ensuing violent conflict continued for some five months, exacted approximately 3,000 fatalities, and ended, at least for now, in a ceasefire agreement signed in Minsk in September 2014. The general framework of the agreement has been maintained, even though it is shaky and frequently violated.

Moscow's preferred solution to the crisis is to make Ukraine neutral, and if that is impossible, then keep it at least to some extent under Russian influence. The effort at dialogue between Russia and Ukraine, which is backed by the West, is aimed at this purpose. The autonomous status of the two separatist districts is still disputed. Russia wants an agreement that will enable it to maintain its presence and involvement in these districts as leverage for pressuring Ukraine to refrain from future attempts to join Western frameworks. Under such an agreement, Russia will also retain a base for active subversion in Ukrainian territory, and the potential to restore Ukraine to the Russian sphere of influence. In practice, however, Ukraine is disconnecting itself from the Russian sphere of influence and creating an obstacle to the expansion of Russian influence in Eastern Europe. Ukraine's intention to join NATO is regarded by Moscow as a concrete threat, and therefore Russia will presumably find it difficult to accept any development in this direction.

The thrust of the West's response to Russia's belligerent involvement in Ukraine was a gradual implementation of economic sanctions. Security measures were also taken to restrain Russia, although on a modest scale. At a NATO conference in early September 2014 in Wales, it was decided to station NATO forces in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, and to establish a joint rapid response force of approximately 4,000 troops. The tangible economic sanctions, and especially the precipitous drop in oil prices (which Russia interprets as an American initiative), had a ruinous effect on the already sputtering Russian economy. Russia experienced economic distress that forced it to find solutions at almost any price. It is believed that this led to the conclusion that sanctions could bring Russia to make significant concessions. American demands from Russia, however,

extend far beyond the borders of the Ukrainian question. It appears that now, more than at any time since the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia's situation is conducive for the United States to promote its strategic goals vis-à-vis Russia, and that US willingness to ease the pressure on Russia will depend on Russia's abandonment of an assertive policy in the entire area of the former Soviet Union.

Russia and the Middle East Crises

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 turned its back on Russia. Third, the appearance of 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 the 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 the latter'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 important 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 the supply of 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 will be necessary to see whether various arms transactions discussed by Russia with Middle East states 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 it obtain 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 vis-à-vis 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 struggle by the Western-Arab coalition led by the US against Islamic State. This may

be the background to the contacts initiated by Russia starting in late 2014 with elements of 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 public criticism of Russia, 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 Russian 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.

Prospects for Russia's International Status

Russia's international situation is far from optimal, because its standing is weak in both regions where events have sparked international crises: Eastern Europe and the Middle East. These two crises share aspects pertaining to the global competition between the powers. The competition has clearly intensified over the past year, and is now posing a threat to the international order. The crisis in Ukraine, which has had the effect of escalating the ongoing global confrontation between the powers, is now in a lull, but it is not close to being solved. The shaky compromise reached by Russia and the Ukrainian government leaves Russia with some influence in the country, but Russia is liable to suffer severe damage if a final settlement is attained that leaves Ukraine outside the Russian sphere of influence. It can therefore be concluded that Russia will not rush to accept a Western-oriented policy by Ukraine.

The crisis in Ukraine is an expression of the Russian-Western confrontation. Although the sanctions imposed on Russia for its policy in Ukraine are measured and selective, they are no trivial matter. The prevailing attitude in Russia is that the initiators of the sanctions aim to cultivate internal

instability in Russia, and perhaps even a change of regime. For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin, who enjoys domestic public support, is trying to give the impression that he can hold out indefinitely in a worsening economic situation. The public's support for him reinforces the assessment that announcing the downfall of his regime would be premature.

In the period under review, the competition between Russia and the West was also reflected in the Middle East, where Russia is facing a challenge from radical Islam, which threatens Russia on its home turf. This threat has forced Russia to take containment measures, along with its effort to reinforce its standing in its competition with the West for regional influence. Russia's dire economic situation, however, detracts significantly from its ability to position itself as a powerful player in both the Middle East and the global arena in general.

The European Union: A United Policy under Fire

The crisis that befell the euro and the ensuing financial, economic, social, and political consequences for the future of the European Union, along with the crises in southern and Eastern Europe and their implications for the internal security of some of the EU member states, poses unprecedented challenges, perhaps existential, to the EU. 2014 can therefore be described as a year that saw continuation of the crises that have afflicted the continent for some time, but highlighted to an even greater extent the EU's bewilderment and lack of strategy on a series of issues – and hence its inability to formulate a consensus among its members on a policy that could alleviate the challenges facing it.

Former German Minister of Foreign Affairs Joschka Fischer argued that the internal European crisis was jeopardizing the future of the EU more than the external crises. In his opinion, if the EU member countries are unable to cope with the crisis, the future of the EU is far from assured. For him, the key question in this context is whether Germany can persuade the EU members to adopt its policy on a number of issues, or whether the EU will make Germany “more European” (indeed, one of the main tasks that two past German chancellors, Konrad Adenauer and Helmut Kohl, set for themselves was to make Germany “more European”). Underlining Fischer's question is his belief that the policy on the euro crisis dictated by current German

Chancellor Angela Merkel – comprising budget cuts, reduction of deficits based on lowered government spending, and efforts to bolster growth and labor market reforms, designed to increase profitability and competitiveness, thereby reducing the dimensions of unemployment (in itself a threat to the internal stability of a number of European countries) – will not yield the desired results.

Furthermore, the countries will have to pay a high price in terms of internal stability if this policy is adopted. Chancellor Merkel has so far been successful: the dearth of leadership in the EU and Germany's standing as the largest and strongest EU country, economically and politically, have helped her weather the financial-economic difficulties in Europe while dictating EU policy. The regional crisis, however, persists. Countries affected in the first stage of the crisis – Ireland, Spain, Portugal, and Greece – are proving unable to put it behind them, even if some are showing signs of recovery. Other countries, including Italy and France, are experiencing an economic-political crisis that, their leaders argue, they will be unable to overcome without a change in Germany's policy. The French President and the Italian Prime Minister (supported by southern Mediterranean countries) are demanding to be allowed to increase their budget deficits beyond the red line of 3 percent of GDP as a (temporary) means of bolstering their competitiveness and growth. Will the German Chancellor manage to withstand the pressure and continue to impose her views on the neighboring countries, or will she be forced to become more flexible? In view of the signs of a slowdown in the German economy, the second possibility seems more likely.

One of the main results of the economic situation plaguing more than a few EU members is mounting unemployment, especially among young people. In the absence of a promising horizon for the future, today's youth are sometimes labeled the "lost generation." The prolonged economic crisis has also led to an increase in anti-European trends. One expression of this lay in the results of the most recent elections to the European Parliament, which reflected the rising power of nationalist anti-European political parties with platforms directed against foreigners. These parties are denouncing Brussels, or in other words, the EU, and putting their trust in the nation state in the expectation that this will solve the problems as they perceive them. Although none of the anti-establishment parties constitute a threat to the rule

of the traditional parties (conservatives and social democrats), a continued economic crisis will strengthen this nationalist trend, with consequences for the future of the EU. Beyond economic recovery – and in any case a prolonged process is involved – the key to the future of the EU is the continuation of the Franco-German leadership. These two countries were responsible for the advancement of European integration; any faltering in their performance has been caused at least in part by the economic crisis in France and weak French leadership. These factors have created an asymmetry in this dyad's leadership that does not auger well for the EU's future.

In a discussion about the declining global status of the United States, Council on Foreign Relations president Richard Haass asserted that if the US wishes to regain its leadership, it must devote the coming years to putting its social and economic house in order. Using the same logic, it can be argued that the EU should focus on serious self-evaluation, because otherwise, its ability to be a relevant player in the international web of forces will remain as it is right now – insignificant.

The EU and the Middle East

In the more than three years since the upheaval began in the Middle East with the events of the “Arab Spring,” the EU has not managed to formulate an approach that would enable it to cope with the emerging regional challenges, let alone promote its interests of peace, stability, and economic prosperity. The popular slogans such as “more for more” (meaning more aid for more democracy, human rights, and rule of law), and “less for less,” as well as the promise to inject money, encourage open markets, and allow the movement of people, have remained mere rhetoric. The EU had no solution for the political developments in Egypt and Libya, which were inconsistent with its declared goals. It lacks the ability to bring stability into the chaos prevailing in Libya. Both France and the UK, which played a role in the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi, are unable to help. The coup that ousted Egyptian President and Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi and brought General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power was inconsistent with the principles that the EU was trying to instill. In order to preserve whatever little connections it had with the Egyptian leadership, the EU had no choice other than to accept the situation created, and to hope that democracy, the

rule of law, and preservation of human rights would one day be part of the political and social reality in Egypt. Until then, if the EU wishes to maintain its influence, which in any case is limited, it must accept President el-Sisi's leadership.

The EU witnessed two focal points of violence in the Middle East in 2014: the civil war in Syria and the deteriorating situation in Iraq, which gave rise to the Islamic State phenomenon that accelerated the collapse of the regional order created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. In response, the EU remained essentially an observer, and confined itself to issuing from the sidelines an ongoing stream of condemnations and calls for an end to the violence (even though some EU states are participating in the international coalition against IS). The number of young people from the EU who answered the Islamic State call and joined the organization is now estimated at several thousand. Their recruitment from among the Islamic community in Europe, and especially the likelihood that the veterans of the battles will return to Europe and continue their terrorist activity is now a principal focus of concern among EU governments, which are trying to cope with the challenge in democratic ways. One of many examples of the helplessness and the lack of consensus among the EU members about the response to the threat posed by Islamic State is the decision to allow each EU member to behave as it sees fit (according to its national interests) and to determine the nature of its involvement in the war against the organization. The EU, which finds it difficult to decide on a uniform policy, welcomed the decision by a number of countries – Germany, France, the UK, Denmark, and others – to contribute their share, and emphasized that the foreign and defense policy of the EU members was subject to their particular discretion. Changing the trend and having the key EU members take the lead is a difficult task entrusted to High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini. Her chances of success in this mission are slim, judging by the record of her predecessor, Catherine Ashton.

Another issue facing the EU is illegal immigration of people seeking asylum from neighboring countries to the south. Furthermore, the distribution of the refugee burden is a bone of contention among the member states. The number of refugees is not large in absolute terms, but even large countries like

Germany and Italy are not prepared to deal with this phenomenon, which is expected to increase as the crises in the refugees' home countries continue.

The assumption of the leading role in the negotiations by the five powers and Germany with Iran on the nuclear question by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is considered an achievement for EU institutions. Another significant achievement, and a surprising one, is the decision by EU members to formulate a consensus on the issue of stepping up the sanctions against Iran, beyond the UN Security Council resolution. The easing of the sanctions agreed on following the Joint Plan of Action (November 2013), a further relaxation of sanctions agreed on following the decision to extend the negotiations (January 2014), the impressive number of Foreign Ministers and economic delegations from Europe (mainly France, Germany, and Italy) visiting Iran, and the visit by the Iranian Foreign Minister to European capitals indicate the hope of reaching an agreement that will facilitate a gradual normalization of relations, mainly economic, between the EU and Iran. One possible development in this direction will be cooperation between Iran and the Western countries in solving the crises in Syria and Iraq.

The EU's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the past year was not significantly different than in previous years. The EU focused on providing aid for both institution building and security training for Palestinians; condemning Israeli construction in the Jewish settlements on the West Bank; and publishing guidelines to distinguish between the approach toward Israel in the framework of Israel-Europe agreements and economic activity conducted by Israel in the West Bank. The EU issued announcements repeating its traditional stances on a settlement of the conflict, while stressing (as it has since the end of 2013) the advantages of the "special and preferred partnership." It is doubtful if the incentive offered is sufficient for the parties to change their positions in order to accommodate a solution to the conflict.

Operation Protective Edge again put the dispute between Israel and the international community about proportionality on the agenda, following the large number of casualties on the Palestinian side and the massive destruction in the Gaza Strip caused by IDF bombardment during the campaign. At the same time, the EU recognized Israel's right to self-defense, reiterated its commitment to Israel's security, condemned Hamas for shooting rockets

at Israel, and demanded the disarmament of all the terrorist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip. In addition, the EU expressed support for the Palestinian national reconciliation government, on the condition that it fulfill the Quartet's demands as a prerequisite for dialogue. Along with its promises of financial aid in the reconstruction of Gaza, the EU expressed willingness to participate in stabilizing the security situation in the Gaza Strip area (beyond its participation in security at the Rafah border crossing).

The absence of a political process, continued Jewish settlement construction, the results of Operation Protective Edge in the Gaza Strip, and the decision by Mahmoud Abbas to seek recognition of a Palestinian state in the international arena and submit a draft resolution to the UN Security Council on the end of the occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state, have highlighted the role of the conflict on the international agenda. The decision by the Swedish government to recognize the Palestinian state, followed by a similar resolution passed by the British Parliament, emphasizes the dynamic nature of the status quo. Other European countries will likely join this trend, although the EU (which asked the Palestinians to refrain from measures that make finding a solution through negotiation less achievable) does not support unilateral actions by the two sides. This indicates that the EU states prefer actions in support of their own interests to a demonstration of unity. Two "old-new" aspects were added over the past year to the points of dispute between Israel and the EU, which were aggravated by Operation Protective Edge: expressions of anti-Semitism camouflaged as criticism of Israel's policy in the war, led mainly by immigrants from the Middle East, and the increased weight of the Muslim population in the internal political theater, which is exerting greater influence on decisions regarding Israel (in a number of countries besides Sweden and the UK).

Without underestimating the seriousness of the threat to the security of the EU countries from the south, the crisis in Ukraine (more accurately, the crisis in relations with Russia) poses a much greater challenge for a considerable number of states. To them, the Ukrainian question is more important than the political upheavals in the Middle East, the dissolution of some of the region's states, and the growth of jihad terrorism. The Ukrainian crisis, and particularly Russia's behavior in this context, has exposed the failure of the EU's policy toward its eastern neighbors and the absence of

a European strategy for dealing with Russia. Putin's decision – sparked by developments in Ukraine that were inconsistent with Russian interests – to change the European game rules set in the 1975 Helsinki Accords barring the use of force to solve conflicts, annexation of territory, and violation of countries' territorial integrity took Europe by surprise. European (and American) impotence in the face of Putin's policy, uncertainty regarding his intentions in the future (which he has stated more than once), and the unwillingness to set red lines and threaten to use force to repel aggression have left the EU countries, headed by Germany, no option other than calling for de-escalation. This call reflected the unfounded hope that Russia would do its part to calm the situation and return to the status quo ante, meaning the reversal of its annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the halting of its support for separatist forces in eastern and southern Ukraine.

In the absence of a military option, and in order to make clear its firm opposition to Russian policy in Ukraine, the EU members decided to impose sanctions gradually on Russia – and even that only after a long deliberation process. It is possible that with time, the sanctions applied to the Russian economy will leave their mark. Until now, however, they have not caused Putin to change his position. On the contrary: Russia under Putin's leadership regards the disintegration of the Soviet Union as a disaster, and therefore aims to reclaim its global status, in part by strengthening its influence in the countries bordering Russia while building up its military power and nuclear deterrent capability. Statements by members of the Russian army about possible deployment for a preemptory nuclear strike were not made even at the peak of the Cold War. In her testimony to the European Parliament, Federica Mogherini stated that Russia was not a strategic partner. This view must lead to the formulation of an all-EU policy – unquestionably a difficult task, given the EU's trade relations with Russia and its dependence on Russian energy resources. At the same time, the EU should restate its policy toward its eastern neighbors. Support for their independence, territorial integrity, and right to define their future on the one hand, and taking into account the geostrategic constraints resulting from the proximity of those countries to Russia (which opposes extension of the Western sphere of influence near its borders) on the other, requires the design of a realistic policy by the EU. Above all, the EU must disabuse its eastern neighbors

of the notion that they can join the Western institutions – NATO and the EU. Even if Ukraine eventually joins the EU, the EU (which bears partial responsibility for the crisis in Ukraine) should help it avoid drifting into the status of a failed country. This too is a difficult challenge, given the crisis presently afflicting the EU.

Summing up 2014, no answers were found to the question of how the EU can deal with the internal crises besetting its members, or the external challenges threatening its stability and ability to ensure the security, prosperity, and economic wellbeing of its population, while playing a leading role in shaping the world order in the twenty-first century.

The United States, Israel, and the Middle East

To paraphrase a well-known saying from Mark Twain, the reports that the US has lost its standing in the Middle East were greatly exaggerated. As in previous years, in 2014 the powers and outside actors were involved, sometimes unwillingly, in the events in the region. The implications of the regional developments for the international dynamic and the global economy forced the US, the leading power, to be more deeply involved than its political leadership anticipated. For example, in early 2015, the US found itself fighting the Islamic State organization, after having refrained from any new involvement in the Middle East since the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in Libya. The US resistance to involvement or intervention persisted in the face of the prolonged civil war in Syria – which has caused the death of more than 200,000 people and displaced millions of Syrians in their own country and abroad – and even in face of the recourse to chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. The expansion of Islamic State's area of operations into other countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, will almost certainly deepen US military intervention in the region. Although to date involvement of US ground forces has been ruled out by the US political and military leadership, it is liable to become essential if the regional and international forces fighting against Islamic State prove unable to contain and reduce the organization's operational area of influence and control.

On another key Middle East issue, following the failure of the powers to reach an agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue by the second deadline of November 30, 2014, the US will remain involved in the matter at least until

the end of June 2015 – the latest deadline set for reaching an agreement. It can be assumed that this matter will also occupy the administration afterwards, whether or not an agreement is reached. The involvement of the US and Iran in the various issues and crises in the Middle East, which go beyond the nuclear program, will obligate both countries to take into account a complex web of considerations, in light of the success or failure in reaching an agreement on the nuclear question. The agendas of both countries include the questions of Iranian support for the Bashar al-Assad regime; Tehran's link to Hizbollah; Iranian aid for Islamic terrorism in the Middle East and in the international theater; and likewise, although not necessarily coordinated between them, the common US-Iranian interest in stopping the territorial gains and influence of Islamic State. The general stability of the Persian Gulf region is also on the two countries' agenda. No problems are expected in the transfer of rule to the heirs in Saudi Arabia and Oman (even though the identity of the heir in Oman is still unknown), but intervention by external forces in these kingdoms during the transition is liable to disrupt even ostensibly simple processes.

A different question is the drop in oil prices. This development has direct consequences for other issues relating to the involvement of the US in the Middle East. It is important to consider whether the plunging oil prices, made possible primarily by Saudi Arabia's insistence on not reducing oil production, was coordinated, at least in part, with the US for the purpose of "punishing" Iran and Russia – the former for its foot dragging in the negotiations on the nuclear question, and the latter for its policy of aggression in Ukraine.

These challenges facing the US administration far outweigh its failure to bring about a positive conclusion in the round of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, led by Secretary of State John Kerry, during the nine months ending in April 2014. On the other hand, the consequences of this failure impacts on the relations between Israel and the administration and between Israel and the Arab world, now and in the future.

United States-Israel Relations

The problematic trend that marked the bilateral relations in recent years has intensified. Relations – at least on a personal level – between the leaders of the two countries and senior officials in both administrations worsened,

to the point of public exchanges of sharp criticism. Some argue that the personal relationships had no practical influence on relations. For example, security relations between the countries were unaffected. Except for a brief delay in the supply of Hellfire missiles during Operation Protective Edge – a move not without precedent, as the supply of certain weapon systems was suspended by US administrations in the past in order to deliver a message to the Israeli government about American dissatisfaction with particular Israeli positions and decisions – the flow of other military equipment from the US to Israel continued. Furthermore, arms deals between the two countries were extended to Israeli purchase of F-35 warplanes, unquestionably a significant matter in the long term relations between the two countries. The “no” vote cast by the US in the UN Security Council on December 30, 2014 on the Palestinian resolution, which if passed would have changed the rules of the game on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and US readiness to veto the resolution if necessary, could be interpreted as evidence that relations were in good condition.

Nevertheless, the significance of the mishaps in interpersonal relationships between the leaders and the gaps between the views of Washington and Jerusalem on a number of key topics on the agenda cannot be ignored. Since 1967, various aspects of the Palestinian question, particularly the process designed to promote an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, have been a bone of contention between Israel and the US. The differences of opinion were kept in the background during periods when the US administration was unable to deal intensively with the subject or push Israel toward a specific policy, such as until 1988, due to the inflexible positions of the PLO and its involvement in terrorism. This behavior by the PLO made it easy for Israel and the US administration to suspend action on the issue of a political settlement. Even when the government in Israel evinced a desire to promote a political process and disagreements were also kept under wraps, not only between Israel and the administration but also between Israel and the entire international system, the points of contention remained, especially on continued Israeli construction in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. When Barack Obama took office, he put the Israeli-Palestinian issue back on the agenda of the US-Israel bilateral relationship, certainly in comparison with his immediate predecessors, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The willingness of the Israeli government

to embark on nine months of intensive negotiations with the Palestinians under the mediation of Secretary of State Kerry did not materially change the negative perception of the bilateral relations. Indeed, at the end of the nine months, a campaign of accusations and personal vilification ensued between senior Israeli and American officials, with the Americans involved in the political process placing most of the blame for the failure of the talks on Israel and its settlement policy.

Following the formation of a new government in Israel after the March 2015 elections, the United States will find it difficult to jumpstart a comprehensive political initiative on the political process. The subject, however, and certainly construction in Jerusalem and the West Bank, will not disappear from the bilateral agenda. An Israeli government seeking to accelerate the pace of construction will encounter an opposing international front, not necessarily coordinated, with the EU and the US at the helm. The commencement of the next US presidential election campaign in mid-2015 is expected to affect the US position on the issue only slightly, because on the question of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the differences between the Democratic and Republican parties are narrower than on other issues pertaining to Israel.

For its part, the Palestinian leadership has already announced its intention of accelerating the momentum of joining international institutions in order to advance the political struggle against Israel and its policy in Jerusalem and the territories. While the US exerted its full weight against the Palestinian resolution in the Security Council in December 2014, the US has no veto or ability to threaten such a veto in other international organizations for the purpose of foiling anti-Israel Palestinian maneuvers. At the same time, in certain circumstances, such as an Israeli declaration on construction in E-1, east of Jerusalem, the US is liable to join anti-Israeli resolutions in international bodies. Furthermore, the Palestinian resolution submitted to the Security Council in late 2014 left the US few choices; a more sophisticated wording of the resolution will pose a difficult dilemma for the administration, particularly in the absence of a political process, and in the event of decisions by the Israeli government to expedite construction in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Despite the tough and uncompromising US policy against Middle East terrorist organizations, including Hamas and Hizbollah, a number of Israeli

military actions during Operation Protective Edge drew public criticism from the administration. The criticism was strident and acrimonious, unprecedented in previous rounds between the IDF and Hamas. There were those who claimed that the ban imposed by the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on flights to Israel on July 22-23, 2014 – the first such action of its kind – figured among the hostile US measures during Operation Protective Edge, even though there is no unequivocal proof that political reasons, rather than professional ones, caused this decision. Secretary of State Kerry's role in delivering the ceasefire proposal formulated by Qatar, in coordination with Turkey, also sparked tension and mutual public recriminations between Washington and Jerusalem. Operation Protective Edge was one of the lowest points in relations between Israel and the US. It is to be hoped that the two countries have internalized the need for coordination and bridging of differences of opinion between them, as it is likely that future conflicts between Israel and Hamas and Hizbollah could cause tension again between Jerusalem and Washington.

The Iranian nuclear question may also weigh negatively on US-Israel relations. The intimate and intensive exchanges of information between the two countries in this matter have so far prevented some of the potential damage, but there is no guarantee that this will be the case in the future. Evidently, one of the risks concerning the handling of this issue by Israel and the US is related to the political contest in the US resulting from Republican control of the Senate, beginning in 2015, and the launch of the presidential election campaign. Israel has always taken steps to achieve bipartisan support in all matters of essential importance to it. In recent months, however, a tendency in Israel to rely on the Republican majority in both houses of Congress has been evident. It is to be hoped that the Israeli interest in the Iranian nuclear issue, for example, does not turn into a political football between the two rival parties.

In 2015, the US, Europe, Israel, and other countries in the Middle East will face the ongoing need to deal with the challenge posed by fundamentalist Islam, especially Islamic State. This includes Middle East regimes whose stability constitutes an important element in Israel's national security. Israel's neighbors are enmeshed in a struggle against violent subversive organizations, some of which do not recognize the absolute supremacy of the country in

which they operate. Israel is not directly involved in the various conflicts taking place in its strategic environment, beyond exchanges of information and situational assessments, including with the US. Further success by Islamic State is liable to require action by Israel. The involvement of US and coalition forces in the campaign against IS and potential Israeli action – for example, in Syrian territory – will require prior understandings. Coordination and calibration of expectations will also be needed if Israel concludes it must act against Iran, or against Hamas and Hizbollah separately without reference to the nuclear issue, while the US and its coalition partners are operating in the adjoining areas, i.e., Syria and Iraq.

It is not yet clear whether President Obama's administration has been enervated sufficiently by its most recent attempt to rejuvenate the political process between Israel and the Palestinians to convince it to abandon the issue. Even if such a decision is taken, developments in the Middle East may force the parties involved – Israel, the Palestinians, and the international actors relevant to the political process – into another attempt to revive the negotiations. If renewed interest in the political process arises on the part of the new government formed in Israel, or as a result of developments in the Middle East, Israel and the US should jointly consider the causes of the previous failures and thereby enhance prospects for a successful process. Regardless of the political orientation of the governments formed in the two countries following their respective elections, they should attempt to find a new paradigm to the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, without abandoning the ultimate goal, that of two states for two peoples.

US-Israeli cooperation is not a cure for all the problems in the Middle East, nor even for all the disputes in the bilateral relations. Still, closer coordination can make it easier to cope with common challenges. Cooperation will certainly help improve Israel's standing among the emerging sectors of US society, whose political acquaintance with Israel is limited and not based on full awareness of the values shared by both countries. Cooperation will also help overcome the discomfort regarding Israel in the Jewish community in the US, especially among young people, on issues such as conversion to Judaism according to Jewish law and the extreme attitude of certain groups toward the Palestinians.

To sum up, the complex events and challenges in the Middle East also pose a challenge to the relationship between Israel and the US, and may usher in a critical period in the bilateral relations. Any Israeli government formed following the March 2015 elections, whatever its composition and political orientation, will have to reach new understandings with the current US administration on the urgent questions on the Middle Eastern agenda. It will have to identify the issues where there is disagreement, in an attempt to reduce their negative consequences. The government formed in Israel would be wise to avoid the temptation to assume that the US Congress can decide every dispute between the governments, political or otherwise, in Israel's favor, especially in the final period of President Obama's term.

Conclusion

The challenges produced by the Middle East that will confront the global actors in the near future are beyond the ability of any one of them to handle alone. The US is obliged to conduct the negotiations with Iran on the nuclear question with the other Security Council members and Germany. In the absence of an agreement, however, it will have to face its allies on the Security Council, who will almost certainly exert pressure to refrain from military action against Iran. It will stand alone in taking the decision how to navigate the pressure from Israel and the Republican-controlled Congress at a time when the presidential election campaign is starting to gather momentum. Russia, which is bearing the heavy burden of economic sanctions imposed on it as a result of the invasion of Ukraine and the precipitous drop in oil prices, will search for ways to preserve its strategic assets, such as the ability to conduct a dialogue with Tehran and Damascus, as well as ways to ease its internal economic situation. For this purpose, Russia will be required to undertake a series of measures and gestures that will enable the international community to revoke at least some of the sanctions. For its part, Europe is still licking its wounds from the economic crisis that has afflicted it for the past decade. The terrorist events in Paris in January 2015 have highlighted the problem of the minorities on the continent, the problem of political extremism, and the rising force of those parties challenging the very idea of the EU.

Ostensibly, an opportunity for a grand bargain has been created, from which all parties can benefit. One such deal, albeit on the small scale, was the agreement to disarm Syria from its chemical weapons. In the wake of this agreement, the US avoided the need to embark on a military campaign, and Russia worked to maintain its standing as a senior partner of Syria. Still, the dilemmas facing each of the actors, including Israel, are difficult. President Obama, for example, will have to decide whether he is foregoing the military option in the Iranian nuclear context, and how to act vis-à-vis Israeli activity aimed at drawing the US into a military campaign. He will have to consider making concessions to Russia if Moscow can help the US remove Assad from Damascus without military action, or allow an agreement with Iran that Israel will not find agreeable but that will be accepted by moderate Republican legislators and certainly the Security Council, which will give it official international approval.

Against the possibility of a multinational deal, Israel needs to maneuver wisely – all the more so at a time when it is on the defensive against an international attack by the Palestinians. Israel cannot afford to ignore the US administration in office, and even if it believes that the US is willing to make too many compromises in the negotiations with Iran, it must exhaust the ways that will achieve the maximum result, not only on the subject of the nuclear agreement itself, but also on a number of other security and political issues.

The difficulty facing any Israeli government, regardless of its ideological banner, in making unequivocal and final decisions on the Palestinian issue, is understandable, particularly during an era of changes, upheaval, instability, and the rising power of subversive forces in the region. On the other hand, eliminating the option of a two-state solution, an option acceptable to both the majority of Israeli society and the international community, will hamper Israel's ability to influence relevant developments and achieve desirable strategic results.