



INSS Insight No. 513, February 3, 2014

**The Sochi-Kiev-Geneva Connection:
Russian Challenges and Objectives in the International Arena
Zvi Magen**

There is currently much international activity in three particular cities: Sochi, where the winter Olympic Games are soon to commence; Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, plagued by anti-government protests; and Geneva (Montreux), the site of the international conference underway on the crisis in Syria. Ostensibly the three cities have little in common – the timing of the events is completely coincidental – but in fact they share certain elements that are important to Russia's interests. A closer look reveals how the three are linked at the level of both Russia's current objectives and the challenges facing it in the international arena, particularly the Middle East.

Sochi, which over February 7-23, 2014 will be home to the winter Olympics, has drawn much international attention for several reasons: the unprecedented high cost of the games (estimated at upwards of \$50 billion); the fact that the games reflect differences of opinion among the powers on a variety of issues – and consequently most Western heads of state will stay away in an effort to pressure Russia on these issues; and most important, the security threat posed by radical Islam. The security threat has drawn the most attention, especially after the recent string of terrorist attacks. Sochi is near the northern Caucasus, a stronghold of Islamic elements in the Russian federation intent on disrupting the Olympics. Russia's political leadership, which views the Olympics as an opportunity to demonstrate strength in a variety of fields, is investing extraordinary efforts in security, though even these efforts cannot guarantee that the threat will be neutralized entirely.

However, the problem is not only the Olympics, but rather what Russia is beginning to realize, namely, that radical Islam poses an existential threat to all of Russia. The Islamic challenge began with the war in Chechnya, which may have been won by Russia but which marked the start of the spread of terrorism throughout the northern, Muslim-inhabited Caucasus and penetrated deep into Russia. The terrorism, carried out by Islamic local radicals as well as combatants imported from the Middle East, refuses to disappear and is gathering momentum, the overarching desire being the institution of an Islamic caliphate in the region. The Russians are equally concerned about the intensification of

Islamic trends among areas along the Volga River with large Muslim populations in Russia proper, liable – in an extreme scenario – to lead to a geographical division of the country. These trends have emerged from the global Islamic enterprise, which eyes Russia as an attractive target.

Of late, the Russians have started admitting that the source of the Islamic threat against them lies in the Middle East, currently working in conjunction with the radical Islamists in Russia. The growing strength of radical elements in the Middle East will, as a matter of course, intensify the trend within Russia too. This is one of the reasons for Russia's support for secular regimes in the Middle East, including that of Bashar Assad in Syria. This support is currently visible at the Geneva II conference.

By contrast, Kiev is the site of a different type of drama, but one that also has direct ties to Russia. The public protests in Ukraine, which are attended by significant violence, began when Ukraine rejected the plan for its future inclusion in the European system. Among the decisive reasons was the significant pressure Russia brought to bear on Ukraine's political leadership, despite the opposition of large segments of the Ukrainian public intent on curtailing Russia's influence and integrating into the West.

Beyond the issue of its image, Russia's opposition to ceding its influence (or more precisely, control) over Ukraine stems from Russia's fierce desire to refashion itself as a global superpower, a goal that is unattainable without Ukraine's integration in a future geopolitical system as currently envisioned by Russia. In order to thwart this Russian plan, the West is working to extricate Ukraine, as well as the other former Soviet republics, from under Russia's thumb. In fact, that was precisely the point of the European economic plan that was rejected. The conflict between Russia and the West over Ukraine and other countries identified by Russia as being within its sphere of influence is hardly new. The Russians view the current events as a replay of sorts of the 2004 Western-inspired "Orange Revolution." Regardless of the outcome of the current crisis, as far as Russia is concerned this is a battle for its vital interests in which it must stand strong against the Western threat to its geopolitical future.

In the meantime, Geneva is hosting a conference bringing together the warring sides in Syria. The conflict is incorrectly seen as having nothing to do with Russia. However, Russia in fact is playing one of the most important roles in Syrian affairs and the results of the conference have far-reaching ramifications for Russia's future in the Middle East. Russia is part of the inspiration for Geneva II and would like the conference to promote a resolution in Syria that will allow it to remain the most influential foreign presence there, and as such, in the Middle East. Russia acquired its current status in Syria thanks to ongoing efforts, staying by Assad's side while also supporting the Shiite axis in general and trying to thwart the combined challenge posed by the Sunni nations and the West.

The collapse of Assad's regime would force Russia out of the region; still, its successful initiative on Syria's chemical weapons arsenal has, at least for now, ensured its continued presence and influence.

Russia, a potential victim of intensified radical Islam, has a clear interest of remaining in the Middle East and operating there to contain the threat. At present it is clear to Russia that the conflict is a religious one with the potential of creating new geopolitical realities in the region. From the Russian perspective, this challenge – given the right conduct on its part – also has potential rewards that can generate new international Russian activity in the region, especially after the nuclear deal with Iran which, although it has damaged Russian interests, also offers new opportunities to forge relationships with other nations.

At the same time, Russia and the United States share some common elements at the Geneva II conference. Besides being the initiators and organizers, both have well-founded concerns about a victory by radical Islam and a shared desire to thwart it. Indeed, one of Russia's most important issues relating to Syria – beyond being a world power with significant influence in the region – is working to stop radical Islam in the Middle East, which, according to the Russians, poses a direct danger to Russia itself. The set of considerations shared by the US and Russia could provide the impetus for cooperation between them in formulating a compromise between the warring sides in Syria.

Thus, observation of the three international events, occurring in different locations and under different sets of circumstances, reveals some common denominators indicative of Russia's challenges and objectives at this time. Russia feels threatened, which prompts its defensive moves against the forces endangering its security and geopolitical interests. One source of these challenges is the West, putting pressure on Russia to curb its control in its spheres of influence and undermine its intention to reconstruct an empire on the ruins of the Soviet Union. Another challenge is radical Islam, a threat endangering Russia's security and objectives. The two challenges form a nexus in the Middle East where the West is working to curb Russia's moves as part of marginalizing it within the struggle over global status. It is also where radical Islam, which identifies Russia as a future target, continues to grow. Among Russia's solutions is securing a foothold in the Middle East and working to affect the future shape of a region both in order to contain the Islamic threat and to establish a vital basis for advancing its influence on the international arena.

In this constellation, it makes sense for Russia to foster a relationship with Israel and engage with it in multidisciplinary cooperation, including on security issues, in its struggle against radical Islam, as well as on political issues and the processes that will shape a future regional order.