

Russia in the Middle East: The Drive to Enhance Influence

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The evolving Middle East poses a complex set of challenges for all the local and international actors in the region. Russia, whose involvement in the area is both growing and gathering momentum, finds itself having to adjust political solutions to the emerging challenges in order to take advantage of the opportunities to shape a regional order that advances its foreign policy goals. The effects of Russian involvement in the Middle Eastern dynamic were quite prominent in 2013, mostly in the context of the Syrian civil war, and in particular in the efforts to formulate an international agreement to disarm the Bashar al-Assad regime of its chemical weapons. Following the renewed dialogue between Iran and the Western powers, which concluded with the signing of an interim agreement designed to delay Iran's progress toward the attainment of military nuclear capability – a development perceived by Russia as an Iranian rejection of Russia's overtures – Russia commenced efforts at rapprochement with Sunni countries in the Middle East, while exploiting their fears of an Iranian-American reconciliation.

For the foreseeable future, Russia can be expected to continue its efforts to expand its influence in the region. As in the case of the Syrian civil war, this activity will have significance for the regional and international balances of power.

Russia and the Middle East

The stark changes that have recently occurred in Russia's international standing are the result of its efforts to regain its former superpower status,

i.e., to position itself as an important global player and to broaden its influence over the international agenda. It appears that after two decades of hesitation and fluctuation, Russia's national goals have been defined as the drive to rebuild its empire, while preserving its status as a separate civilization that seeks equal standing to the West, and above all to the United States. In order to achieve these goals while competing for influence on the Middle East and global agendas, Russia has developed a political strategy based on a concept of a multi-polar international system, in which it will act assertively to take advantage of the means of influence at its disposal. The Russian leadership regards this policy as a way to ensure Russia's future, given the challenges facing it in both the internal and external theaters, and Russia can take pride in that it has scored some accomplishments in the international theater in recent years, especially in the Middle East.

Russia attributes great geopolitical importance to the Middle East as a place where regional and global interests converge. Since the beginning of the "Arab Spring," the region has become a key focus of friction among the major powers, with escalating rivalry between Russia and the West. Intersecting international political, economic, and security processes in the Middle East can potentially threaten Russian strategic interests. Before the recent shockwaves in the region, Russia was able to consolidate its regional standing, in part by cooperating with the anti-Western radical axis, otherwise known as the "axis of evil." At the same time, however, Russia has taken measures to establish itself as a responsible international element seeking to promote solutions to regional crises and capable of conducting a dialogue with all the relevant parties. Russia has enjoyed positive relations with most countries in the region, particularly in North Africa, and has succeeded in advancing impressive arms deals (which vanished in the wake of the upheaval), and has managed to position itself as an influential international element positively involved in most of the regional crises.

Russia's primary strategic assets in the Middle East were lost or damaged following the sociopolitical changes in the region in recent years. From Russia's perspective, the accelerating process of Islamization underway in the Middle East threatens to spread to Russia itself; the Sunni Islamic axis is growing stronger with Western backing, and new regional players have appeared, Turkey among them, who are acting contrary to Russian

interests.¹ Iran, Syria, and the Shiite axis are Russia's last remaining strongholds in the Middle East.

Given this process, which threatens to push it out of the region, Russia has formulated political solutions designed to help it preserve its strongholds and reinforce its standing. Russia has taken measures toward rapprochement with countries in the region that have not been among its traditional supporters, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. There are also signs that Russia is reassessing its relations with Turkey, and calls have been sounded to avoid a confrontation with Ankara, particularly given the possibility of a political agreement in Syria in the framework of Geneva II or in some other format, although it is premature to regard this as a definite trend. At the same time, Russia is taking steps to maintain its influence in Syria and vis-à-vis Iran.

Russia and the Civil War in Syria

The Russian leadership is disturbed by the possibility that the fall of the Assad regime, followed by the disintegration of the anti-Western Shiite axis led by Iran, will create a contiguity of regimes under exclusive Western influence, without any Russian foothold at all between North Africa and China. Russia has therefore selected Syria as a key theater of conflict to challenge the West. Russia has a range of strategic assets in Syria, of which the port of Tartus is only one. Russia has an intelligence presence in Syria and defense systems against NATO. Syria continues to be a significant customer for Russian defense industries, and is also an essential link in the pro-Iranian axis, which constitutes an obstacle to US influence in the Middle East – and which Russia therefore is eager to support.

The method selected by Russia to manage the crisis combines direct aid to the Syrian regime with diplomacy. Russia, together with China, vetoed proposed Security Council resolutions condemning the Assad regime for the massacre of civilians. At the same time, Russia used the situation in Syria as a lever to pressure the West into changing its policy in other essential theaters where Western pressure has been exerted against Russian interests, in the form of activity in areas of the former Soviet Union, political subversion in Russia and the former Soviet Union, and deployment of military systems with strategic significance near Russia's

borders, as well as plans to station anti-missile missile systems in Eastern Europe.

Russia's method has proven itself, at least in prolonging the survival of the Assad regime and the radical axis in the Middle East. As a result of this policy, however, Russia has been trapped between the region's two rival camps – the Shiite camp and the Sunni camp. Each of these rival camps supports a different side in the global conflict: the Sunnis are aligned with the West, while the Shiites side with Russia and China. In order to improve its standing in this theater, and also in order to avoid Western military involvement, Russia has made strenuous efforts to reach understandings with all the actors involved – the rebels in Syria, the Sunni countries in the Middle East, and the West. As far as Moscow is concerned, the best solution to the crisis in Syria is one that establishes Russian influence in this country and maintains the regime there (not necessarily one personally led by Assad), and consequently the survival of the radical axis. It appears that the Russian effort to promote a settlement has yielded the desired results, at least to some extent.

In early May 2013 the US and Russia agreed on convening an international conference, which became known as Geneva II, for the purpose of bringing together representatives of the Syrian regime with forces from the opposition, and promoting a compromise on the formation of a temporary government, with elections in the following stage. From a Russian perspective, this meeting is designed to prepare the ground for an end to the civil war on terms that would protect its interests in Syria. The conference did not take place, in part due to a dispute between Moscow and Washington about who would participate: in contrast to the US, Russia wants Assad to participate (although it regards the possibility of replacing him at a later stage through elections as acceptable), along with the other parties that are influencing the crisis in Syria, including Iran.

At the same time, the crisis that ensued following the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons made it possible for Russian diplomacy to affect the situation in Syria. In order to avoid an American punitive attack in Syria, Russia proposed a plan to dismantle Damascus's stockpile of chemical weapons. The major powers signed the agreement in September 2013, with Russia scoring a significant achievement, both in the context

of the crisis in Syria and with respect to its standing in the Middle East, relative to that of the US. Not only was an American attack avoided, but the Assad regime obtained something of an insurance policy against Western intervention, at least until the chemical weapons disarmament program is concluded. At a later stage, Russia will try to leave its mark on the Geneva II conference, where the parties in Syria will try to formulate an agreement ending the bloodbath in the country.

These achievements, however, do not guarantee Russia's standing in the Middle East. Russia must continue to face three main points of confrontation between the major powers, and the crisis in Syria is only one of them. The other two are the crisis concerning the Iranian nuclear program and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Russia and Iran

Iran is Russia's main ally in the Middle East. Despite the tensions that have emerged between the two countries in recent years as a result of Russian participation in the imposition of sanctions on Iran and Russia's failure to supply the promised weaponry to Iran (S-300 missiles), the crisis in Syria has created the conditions for tighter cooperation between them. Russia has become an essential partner of the pro-Iranian camp in the Middle East, particularly through its intervention in the Syrian crisis.

Russia regarded the election of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran as an opportunity to take the lead in international dialogue with Iran on the nuclear question. Russia calculated that Iran would have to make concessions to the West on this issue, due to the severe economic consequences of the sanctions. In order to safeguard Moscow's influence on the process, Russian President Vladimir Putin planned to visit Iran immediately after Rouhani entered office. This visit, however, did not take place, and the regime in Iran chose to invest its diplomatic efforts in a dialogue with the West, highlighted by Rouhani's "charm offensive" in the United States in September 2013, including his address at the UN General Assembly. It appears that Russia missed its chance to lead the first round of dialogue with the new Iranian regime, although as a member of the P5+1 it can influence the continuation of the process over the coming months,

in the comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear program that has yet to be formulated.

Now that Iran and the major powers signed an agreement aimed at delaying Iran's nuclear program and renewing negotiations toward the formulation of a final agreement within six months, Russia is in an inferior position. The dialogue between Tehran and the US administration also appears to jeopardize the anti-Western radical axis backed by Russia. This turnaround in Iranian policy, however, has aroused anxiety among some of the regional players, and their frustration is reflected in their tentative overtures toward Russia. Senior Russian administration officials visited Cairo and drafted a large scale weapons transaction. Saudi Arabia, until recently also one of Russia's adversaries, has commenced serious negotiations with Moscow. Saudi Intelligence director general Prince Bandar bin Sultan visited Moscow and discussed a possible agreement on a weapons transaction. It was likewise reported that the Iraq and Jordan were making an effort to tighten commercial ties with Russia. Jordan was also considering the possibility of purchasing a Russian nuclear reactor.²

Following the attempts at a renewed rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran, Putin addressed the Israeli nuclear question by saying that Syria's chemical weapons were intended as an answer to the Israeli nuclear program, and that Israel would have to give up its nuclear weapons, as Syria had conceded its chemical weapons.³ A similar interpretation can be made of a report that the Kremlin has decided to renew the sale of S-300 missiles to Iran.⁴ At the same time, there are still no signs that Russia plans to translate Putin's statements into real pressure on Israel. In fact, the opposite is true.

Russia and Israel

Russia regards Israel as a regional power with the ability to influence most developments in the Middle East. Over the years, the Russians have therefore consistently acted to promote cooperation with Israel in a broad range of areas and to define a sphere of common interests. The fact that Israel is a strategic partner of the US was always clear to Russia, but given Moscow's "multi-directional" foreign policy, it was commonly assumed

in Moscow that Israel could, for its part, adopt a similar attitude in its selection of partners.

Indeed, in tandem with its close relations with other Middle East actors, including the members of the Shiite axis, Russia, together with the US, the European Union, and the UN, has played a role in the Quartet forum to promote the political process in the Middle East. Russia is a partner to the effort to promote the process in the belief that its role will yield important achievements in the international sphere. For that reason, a renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue under US auspices, while excluding Russia from the process, was perceived by Moscow as underhanded behavior.⁵

In addition to the US taking the lead in dialogue with Iran, this development was also the background for Putin's demand at the September 19 Valdai Forum, the reputed international conference in Russia, that Israel concede its nuclear capability. This is not a completely new position: Russia has consistently opposed Israel at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), but on this occasion Putin expressed it quite bluntly. This may indicate Russia's willingness to damage somewhat its positive relations with Israel that have developed over two decades, and to forego its image as a balanced mediator, in favor of upgrading its standing with Iran on the one hand, and obtaining an advantage over the US in the competition between them on the other.

At the same time, Russia is evidently making efforts to tighten relations with other countries in the Middle East, including Israel. In November 2013, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Moscow for the second time (the first was in May 2013). The main topic on the Netanyahu and Putin agenda was the Iranian nuclear program. Possibilities of extending political and economic cooperation were likewise discussed. As far as is known, the leaders also dealt with the issue of Israel's nuclear capability and bilateral strategic cooperation. Putin promised that he would attempt to table plans for a conference on a weapons of mass destruction free zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East, and as such would not raise objections to nonconventional weapons in Israel. Moreover, Putin declared that alongside support for the Iranian position in a final agreement on Iran's nuclear activity, he would demand that Israel's security interests be guaranteed.

This far reaching declaration has major significance for Russia's relations both with Iran and with the West.⁶

Global Significance

Bilateral relations between Russia and the US have recently grown colder, given the Middle East and global crises. Russia's image as a country that behaves according to different norms than those accepted in Western democracies and conducts an impetuous foreign policy has taken root in the West and the US. As a result of an increase in Russia's challenging activity in the international theater, it is once again posing a concrete challenge to the West. On the other hand, Russia also harbors complaints against the West, relating to the NATO presence along Russia's border and in the Russian sphere of interest in the former Soviet Union – "NATO's eastern expansion"; the dispute over the US plan to deploy an anti-ballistic missile system in the Czech Republic and Poland and renewal of the talks on a strategic arms limitation treaty;⁷ Russia's perception that American deployment in Asia and the Pacific Ocean is aimed against it; and the accusation of Western subversive activity in the countries of the former Soviet Union (the color revolutions) and in Russia proper (protest activity).

At the same time, Russia is increasingly coming to believe that the US is losing its standing as the international leader, especially in the Middle East. This perception, based on the assessment of President Obama as weak, among other issues, is regarded in Moscow as a window of opportunity to promote Russian goals in the international system at US expense (the political asylum that Russia granted to Edward Snowden, who leaked US National Security Council documents, was a provocative act in this vein). Moscow also took vigorous action to thwart Western initiatives aimed at coopting countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union into European economic frameworks. This resulted in mass confrontations in Ukraine between the public, which wanted closer economic relations with the West, and the government, which elected to maintain its connection with Russia.

Still, Russia lacks the necessary tools – both economic and military – to make it a superpower. However assertive its policy, and however intelligent its diplomacy, these are no substitutes for what it lacks. For

this reason, it cannot be ruled out that the current crisis between the major powers is temporary. Relations could recover, because Russia, like the US, has no real interest in escalation and a total break.

Conclusion

Russia has an achievement to its credit in the solution of the chemical weapons crisis in Syria. It appears that Russia's image in the Middle East improved following the role it played in searching for a non-military solution to the crisis, given the perceived weakness of the US. In the overall regional Middle Eastern picture, however, Russia's position is still inferior to that of the West. It is therefore difficult to state definitively whether Russia will succeed in completely halting the developments and shocks created in the Middle East by the "Arab Spring," which appear to have significant negative potential for Russia. As of now, Russia has persisted in its support for the radical camp in the expectation that an agreement achieved in the framework of the Geneva II conference – if it takes place – will fortify Russia's stronghold in Syria, and thereby its standing as a key influential factor elsewhere in the Middle East. There is no doubt that Russia's policy with respect to other developments in the Middle East will be significant for Israel's regional interests in general, and its relations with Russia in particular.

Notes

- 1 Turkey is promoting its economic, cultural, religious, and pan-Turkish influence among the mostly Turkish-speaking new Muslim countries in the former Soviet Union. With cooperation from NATO, it has also succeeded in establishing its standing in two key Caucasian countries – Georgia and Azerbaijan – thereby creating what Russia regards as a threat to its national security, and of course in Syria, where Turkey is playing an active role against the regime.
- 2 Radio Golos Rossii, October 23, 2013.
- 3 Asaf Ronel, "In the Poker Game with Obama on Syria, Putin Playing the Israel Card," *Haaretz*, September 20, 2013.
- 4 "Russian Source: Russia Confirms Sale of Advanced Anti-Aircraft Missiles to Iran," AP, *Haaretz*, September 11, 2013.
- 5 Zvi Magen, "Israel and Russian Foreign Policy," *INSS Insight* No. 132, September 22, 2013.

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- 6 Eli Bardenstein, "Putin Promised Netanyahu: I Will Prevent WMDFZ Conference," *Maariv*, December 20, 2013.
- 7 Emily B. Landau, "Red Light, Green Light: Establishing US Levers of Pressure on Iran," *INSS Insight* No. 119, July 13, 2009.