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Russia in the New Middle East

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The shocks that have lately rocked the Middle East surprised Russia, along with many other international actors, and the new reality, marked by general instability and uncertainty, has left it at a loss for action. However, Russia's strong desire to maintain its status in the Middle East has driven it to seek political alternatives that will enable it to play a role in shaping the future of the region. The considerations guiding Russia are on the one hand the risk of losing all previous achievements and perhaps even suffer similar processes of civilian rebellion, and on the other hand, the possible benefits of the revolutionary changes, perhaps entailing an enhancement of its regional status. Thus Russia appears determined to promote new political initiatives vis-à-vis all regional elements, including the Israeli-Palestinian track.

Until the start of recent events, Russia's status with regard to the collapsing authoritarian regimes was fairly comfortable. These regimes appeared stable, curbed the radical elements, and were good business partners (with Libya alone Russia has an arms deal valued at \$4 billion; at the moment it is unclear what will become of it). There were also political partnerships (including anti-Western alliances) created laboriously over many years. Today, Russia's leaders feel that the revolutions in the Middle East have generated far reaching changes that will continue to affect Russia for decades. One negative ramification is the direct threat to Russia from radical Islam should the latter take control of the Middle East as a result of the revolutions. Similarly, the negative example of Middle Eastern events is liable to recur in Muslim areas of Russia and elsewhere in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Two, there may be damages at the global level should the democratic scenario prevail instead, particularly the dismantling of the anti-Western camp on which Russia had based its international policies. Similarly, a no less serious scenario depicts Russia elbowed aside by competitors (such as China).

At the same time, there are positive aspects to these events vis-à-vis Russia's interests, such as the economic angle, especially the steep increases in oil prices, assuring, at least for now, significant earnings for Russia, which is quickly becoming a leading supplier of energy sources. Should Russia also succeed in developing good relations with the new

regimes and perhaps even reshaping a bloc of supportive nations, the developments in the Middle East will all in all have been positive from Russia's perspective.

From the outset, Russian political activity in light of these events was marked by flexibility, including turning its back on collapsing regimes and supporting the rebels, even if this entailed some discomfort and vacillation between cooperation with the West and responding to domestic public opinion that supported the previous regimes. This was especially true with regard to Libya, when President Medvedev finally decided to join the UN resolution calling for sanctions against the Qaddafi regime and not undermine Resolution 1973. This decision earned him sweeping criticism, including from Prime Minister Putin (revealing, incidentally, some of the internal disagreements within the top Russia leadership). Yet despite this support, Russia continues to oppose the use of force against Qaddafi as well as against other states in the region. This typical conduct – sending conflicting messages – reflects Russia's intentions to have the best of all worlds: to maintain good relations with the West, especially the United States; not to damage relations with Qaddafi, should he survive; yet also to prepare for good relations with an alternative post-Qaddafi Libyan leadership. Russia will conduct itself on the basis of similar principles with regard to other states in the region as well, all the while trying to earn points on the international arena.

This policy reflects the Russian dilemma on the Middle Eastern crisis. It seems that Russia's preference, should it be required to part from the old regimes, is to support trends that are not readily identifiable as pro-Western or democratic, though the rise of radical Islamists is equally unpalatable. It seems that "moderate" authoritarian regimes in conjunction with Islamic elements, lacking a clear Western orientation, are Russia's tolerated preference.

Some among Russian elite have become increasingly convinced of America's decline on the international arena, enhancing dreams of opportunities to promote Russia's influence in the Middle East and on the international scene at large. Indeed, Russia is busily at work in the region and in suggesting the promotion of new political initiatives, including on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

Of mention here are the intensive contacts Russia has had with most of the region's nations. Particularly noteworthy is a sequence of visits to Moscow in late March by Prime Minister Netanyahu, the chairman of the Palestinian Authority, and the Saudi foreign minister, as well as Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's visit to Egypt. All of these were accompanied by Russian expressions of the importance of renewing the peace process particularly at present because of the positive potential it has to calm the entire region. In this context, Israel is perceived as being more flexible given the understanding that the region's events have negative implications for it. All of this suggests that in addition to wanting to coordinate positions with central states in the region in light of the new international reality, Russia is also trying to initiate activity in the realm of the peace

process. Dialogue and coordination between Russia and Israel are continuing beyond Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to Moscow. The next stage is expected to take place at the forthcoming gathering of the Quartet, for which a new European proposal is being formulated. It is not inconceivable that Russia is putting together something of its own along similar lines or at least scoring points in order to promote decisions it favors and ensure Russian participation of a more influential nature than in the past.

In any case, it seems that a Russian proposal for the Quartet will, this time too, include the familiar model with some modification reflecting the spirit of the times. As far as the Russians are concerned, this time the Quartet should make constructive decisions that can contribute positively and calmly to the situation in the region in general. The proposal being formulated refers to jumpstarting a dialogue between the sides under the aegis of the Quartet. This process would be continuous, extended, and have clear interim objectives, which if met represent achievements enabling continued progress, or if lacking, would allow for ascribing responsibility to the various parties. The process would be launched with an international conference in Moscow. The possibility of including China and India as observers is also being considered, as at a later stage they would be able to assist in advancing decisions. Although this proposal has no attractive innovations, it does give cause for some cautious optimism among its authors; it seems reasonable that it will in fact be laid on the Quartet's table at its next gathering.

Thus, in the current uncertain reality of the Middle East, Russia, after a fairly rapid rally, is trying to navigate through these complex events, while exercising damage control and examining possible future actions to maintain its status in the region. Notable is the attempt to formulate alternatives to previous relations that have collapsed with regard to surviving and new regimes, while taking advantage of the situation for its own gains. As part of Russia's political efforts to upgrade its international standing, it is also intent on shaping a bloc of supporting nations. At the same time it seems that Russia is designing a move to promote the Israeli-Palestinian political process under its direction. The picture that emerges may thus be summarized as the start of a renewed contest between the large powers for influence in a new Middle East.

