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## **Russian Policies in an Era of Change**

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The upcoming visit to Israel by Russian President Vladimir Putin, which is raising eyebrows among the experts as to its purpose, will take place as political changes are occurring in Russia's foreign relations, to a large extent reflecting the transformations that have recently been emerging in the international arena. Indeed, the fairly intensive Russian activity taking place in the nation's foreign relations since Putin took office is gradually creating the impression that Moscow is engaged in reshaping its policies. As such, it seems that Russia has also designated specific roles for the Middle East in general and for Israel in particular to play. These issues will undoubtedly be thoroughly discussed during the visit.

While Israel is not the main focus of Russia's current political efforts, nor is the Middle East as a whole – that focus belongs to the West, specifically the complex of Russia-United States relations – the complex of Russia's recent asymmetric moves vis-à-vis the United States is somewhat reminiscent of the events that preceded the 2009 reversal in relations between the two, known as the “reset” program. It seems that this time, too, similar developments are in the offing. The current crisis developed around the issue of the NATO Ballistic Missile Defense program and started after the unsuccessful NATO-Russia meeting in Moscow. It seems that the meeting, which for some reason took place while Putin was entering office and ended, not surprisingly, without an understanding between the sides, was used by the Russians to stage a crisis. Against this backdrop, Putin's participation in the G-8 conference in the United States was cancelled, including a planned meeting with President Obama. On the other hand, intensive Russian activities began with its regional allies (Belarus and Kazakhstan as well as with China), indicative of preparations to kick off a process to establish a Euro-Asian alliance, an initiative Putin announced in the months leading up to his election as president. At that time, in the background of the NATO summit in Chicago, rumblings of war were also heard as a new Russian ballistic missile was tested.

However, at the same time, the Russians were sending messages about their desire to join NATO in some way or another (this may be linked to the new decision about Putin's visit to Germany and France). In addition, in March, Russia joined the activities of the P5+1, where it is actively involved in dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue. It is quite possible that Russia is encouraging steps to press Iran into acceding to the demands of the international community, a sense that is growing thanks to the decision to hold the next round of the sextet's talks with the Iranians in Moscow on June 18 this year.

From all of the above one could conclude that Russia is setting up a new gambit designed to advance an arrangement with the United States and NATO. In this complex, the payment for certain concessions on Ballistic Missile Defense issues, and perhaps also for certain understandings with NATO about cooperation, may come in the form of Middle Eastern coin, i.e., on the Iranian issue and perhaps also on the Syrian one (it is already possible to discern changes in the tone Russia is using with regard to Syria); also noteworthy in this context is the fact that in the meantime a meeting between Presidents Putin and Obama has been arranged to

take place during the upcoming G-20 summit. Thus, what is emerging is a combined move fairly similar to the “reset” model familiar from 2009.

In the midst of all this, the Middle East connection to Russia’s moves in the global arena is emerging. Russia’s standing in the region was undermined by the Arab Spring, when it lost most of the strongholds it had worked hard and long to construct. Now Russia is finding itself challenged by Islam’s rising power and is feeling isolated in the Arab world. In fact, Russia has been sidelined to defend the Shiite camp given the rising Sunni pressure, backed by the West, according to Russia’s understanding. In addition, the worrisome trend – from Moscow’s perspective – of NATO’s eastward spread continues. It is further weakening Russia’s strategic situation on its southern border, in the Caucasus, challenged by an anti-Russian and anti-Iranian axis composed of Georgia and Azerbaijan, with American and Turkish backing. Turkey in particular is actively opposing Russian interests not only in the Southern Caucasus but also in the Middle East and the Mediterranean region, with regard to Greece and Cyprus, where one can discern another Russian strategic effort. The economy is also part of this nexus, in light of the disagreement with Turkey about gas production in the Mediterranean and the routes of the energy pipelines to Europe.

In this new reality, it seems that some part of Russia’s interests is also in changing its Middle East policy; the echoes of this discussion on the intra-Russian scene are loaded. Some of the questions on the agenda are the need for an alternative to the radical axis with Russian involvement in the Middle East, which is crumbling before its eyes, as well as the establishment of new levers of influence in this critical area to replace those that have been lost.

How does Israel fit into these developments? It seems that, in this new reality, Moscow senses that Russia and Israel are in the same boat, allowing the former to view the latter as a desirable partner in the region. In addition to a possible confluence of political interests, the foundation for such a view is supported by a web of close relations and the positive potential in a range of areas critical to Russia – the economy (with emphasis on gas production), technology and defense. All of these have the potential to help expand political cooperation.

Also emerging is Russia’s interest in promoting strategic cooperation with Israel, thereby establishing a new regional political axis, with the possible inclusion of other nations. Candidates mentioned in this context are Greece and Cyprus, and possibly also some of the Balkan countries. Such an axis, should it come into existence, would enable Russia to establish new levers of influence capable of upgrading its status in the Middle East and the eastern basin of the Mediterranean, challenge Turkey and promote a range of interests (also economic) connected to sources of energy. Obviously such an axis would not dissolve existing Russian cooperation with Iran and Syria; good relations with them would continue unabated. Moreover, parallel Russian reliance on two such axes would promote its status in the region and serve its ambition to reach a standing on a par with that of the United States.

Obviously, the position of the United States with regard to all of this has a crucial if not decisive effect. On this issue, some in Russia think that there has been a certain cooling in Israel-U.S. relations and that therefore it would be in Israel’s best interests to develop independent partnerships with other players, thereby affecting the regional balance of power to its own advantage.

In any case, in the foreseeable future we may observe further developments in the drama inherent in Russia’s reshaping of its foreign policy both on the global level and on the Middle Eastern one, including the Israeli arena. It is reasonable to think that at least some of the issues presented above are likely to be part of the agenda during President Putin’s upcoming visit to Israel.