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A New Regional Order Indeed?

Zvi Magen

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Russia recently and met with President Vladimir Putin. As expected, Iran was the major issue discussed, but it is still too early to draw any conclusions about possible practical results on the Iranian topic. Beyond Iran, however, this was an important encounter for both Russia and Israel, with potential significant ramifications for the international system.

The visit took place against the backdrop of events in Syria and Iran that have given rise to important new developments in the Middle East, including Russia's attempts to forge closer ties with several nations with which bilateral relations were strained, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan – and Israel. This Russian posture does not represent a new policy, but until recently these efforts were met with limited enthusiasm. Now it seems that significant changes are at work, a fact rife with ramifications for the future shape of the regional order.

Russia, competing for influence in the region, has of late been an active presence in most of the regional processes, projecting self-confidence and looking the United States straight in the eye. This comes on the heels of an unstable period when it suffered the consequences of the Arab Spring, which eroded most of its assets in the region and sidelined it, together with Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah, its radical axis partners. Effective use of the Syrian civil war has allowed Moscow to arrest its regional regression, while in part containing the pressure from the constellation of Sunni nations operating against it with the backing of the West. The climax of this regional saga was an effective Russian maneuver surrounding the Syrian chemical weapons issue, which created the possibility of maintaining – at least for now – the Assad regime and the radical axis, while upgrading Russian's standing on the international arena at the expense of the United States.

Until recently, Russia's practical achievements in the Middle East have been fairly modest. It seems that in practice, Russia finds itself on the outside vis-à-vis most of the issues that draw the attention of the international system. This is true for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process as well as the Iranian issue, whereby Iran's recent repositioning

toward the United States threatens the very existence of the radical anti-Western axis operating under the Russian umbrella. But currently here are signs of reversals. Events in the Syrian and Iranian sectors have shifted the orientation of some of the regional players that feel betrayed and threatened by the conduct of the United States in their sphere. Since then, several moves have been made, some initiated by Russia – which since the start of the Arab Spring has been waiting for such opportunities – and some initiated by various Middle East states. These countries have sent out feelers to Russia, which has used them to renew the dialogue that was interrupted by the regional upheavals. Some feel that these changes have the potential to affect the shaping of the future regional order.

It is already possible to point to a series of developments in terms of joint ventures between Russia and several regional nations. The most prominent is the recent about-face in the Russian-Egyptian relationship. In recent weeks, various delegations have come and gone, including visits by Russia's foreign affairs and defense ministers as well as senior personnel from the security and intelligence establishments; there is even talk of a state visit to Egypt by President Putin. It has also been reported that a large weapons purchase, to be financed in part by Saudi Arabia, is in the offing.

Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia have likewise shifted. Until recently, there was palpable tension between the two, given that Russia was the principal supporter of both the Shiite axis and President Assad, and that Saudi Arabia worked against Russia's interests in the region and elsewhere. But the current American stance on Syria and Iran drove Saudi Arabia to look for new partners to balance its foreign policy. As a result, recent months have seen a volte-face in Russian-Saudi relations, and Prince Bandar Ibn Sultan visited Moscow to discuss security cooperation and promote Saudi Arabian views on Syria.

Iraq, an old-time Russian ally, has forged even closer relations with Russia since the US withdrawal, including security cooperation (a large arms deal was signed, although various pressures have postponed its execution) and economic cooperation, where there is already significant Russian economic activity. Jordan too has recently been more accepting of Russia's advances. Though not the first time, the stakes are now higher, with the purchase of a Russian nuclear reactor at issue. Other joint security ventures are also under discussion, and there has been talk of a state visit to Russia by King Abdullah in the near future.

Israel too can be added to the list. Israel has a long history with Russia, and while Moscow views it as an important regional actor, relations are frequently affected by Russia's greater regional interests. Russia now views Israel, which is seeking ways to promote its objectives on the international arena with emphasis on the Iranian issue, as an entity meriting broader close cooperation, as this can demonstrate Russia's rising status and increasingly dominant regional influence. Cooperation with Israel, itself an

influential regional player and ally of the United States, carries great weight. Moreover, Russia is interested in improving its standing with Iran, damaged when Iran turned to the West, and Russia may try to regain lost ground by promoting mediation initiatives of its own. Such a success would be a feather in Moscow's cap, similar to Syrian achievement.

The picture right now is partial only. What is clear is that there is extensive Russian political activity. The question is: given the new regional circumstances, will these efforts yield substantial results? It seems that underlying new postures toward Russia is Iran's ostensibly rising power, a direct result of a change in US policy alongside a sense of weakness projected by the US leadership. But it also seems that the wooing of Russia by regional states is a temporary phenomenon, reflecting these nations' actual desire to exert influence on the policy of United States rather than to take advantage of opportunities that Russia could provide. Russia neither purports to replace the United States, nor can it do so. But for these regional states, a relationship with Russia is important in and of itself in order to balance their foreign affairs, and in the hope that the dialogue with the Russians will impel the United States to reverse its policy. On the other hand, it is also clear that even if its image has lately become somewhat tarnished, the United States, will not cede its position of dominance in the Middle East and will work to make sure Russia does not gain strategic footing in the region. Indeed, it seems that the current US policy on Iran is not a change in direction, rather a move designed to expand its influence on all the regional players simultaneously, even if it this comes at the temporary expense of some of their interests.

In any case, Russia's attempts to forge closer relations with regional nations can reap it significant benefits, even if it doesn't change the underlying political axes and the end results are still uncertain. In a reality in which the anti-Western front established in the past by Russia is in the process of disintegration, the contact and the start of cooperation, even if limited, has the power to contribute to Russia's future establishment as an influential player in the region.

Regarding Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit was used by the Russians to transmit another message to the international community about their country's rising stature. It was also likely used to examine the possibility of Russian initiatives on Iran. On the Israeli side, the visit was an opportunity to show its interest in balancing its foreign policy as well as the drive to promote its views on Iran, assuming that Russia still has leverage in that arena. Overall, then, the bilateral topics raised during the visit are not new, but they are important to the establishment and expansion of the existing relationship.

