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Expert Analysis

April 2014

The Ukraine/Crimea crisis: ramifications for the Middle East

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Executive summary

The dust has not yet settled on Russia's annexation of Crimea. While the long-term ramifications may still work against Moscow, at present Russia appears to be reaping strategic benefits in the Middle East. That Syria and Iran feel newly empowered by Russia's support to achieve their strategic objectives may not be surprising. But Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, traditionally close allies of the U.S., appear to have lost an additional degree of confidence in Washington's support and regional strategic resolve. And Turkey's "zero problems" strategy has been dealt yet another blow, this time by a very strong neighbour.

The events of recent months in and around Ukraine, culminating in Russia's annexation of Crimea, have far-reaching potential ramifications for the Middle East. This expert analysis describes the Middle East regional fallout from the annexation, bearing in mind that we are addressing an international dynamic that is still unfolding.

These ramifications appear to fall into two loose, interlocking categories: firstly, the effect of developments in Russian-U.S.-EU relations on the Middle East region and, secondly, the ways in which the Russian role in the events in Ukraine/Crimea affects the actions and assessments of specific countries: Israel, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

To be sure, many recent developments in the Middle East are at most only tangentially related to the Ukraine/Crimea drama and owe far more to the Arab revolutionary wave and to dramatic local changes in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere. Also, most Ukraine-related developments affect the Middle East far less than they do Europe. Yet the Ukraine dynamic, and especially events surrounding Crimea, are too close to the Middle East not to matter.

Changes in Russia's relations with the West and their effect on the Middle East

On March 25th 2014 U.S. president Barack Obama downgraded Russia to the rank of a mere "regional power". Some international observers project that in the long term Russia will become strategically more isolated and economically weaker as a consequence of the new chill in its relations with the West caused by the Crimea takeover and that the international consensus-building policy favoured by Obama will eventually win the day. Others suggest that long-term Russian reliance on its hydrocarbon wealth to generate strategic regional clout is a losing proposition. These assessments may all make sense and should surely be kept in mind by sceptics in the Middle East and elsewhere. But for now they are also impossible to substantiate.

In contrast, in the short term the Middle East quite perceptibly sees President Vladimir Putin as the "winner" and Obama as the radically risk-averse "loser" in Ukraine/Crimea. Putin seemingly executed a successful move in his drive to reassert Russian influence in its "near abroad" and even beyond, while Obama has seemingly failed to deal with the situation aggressively and responded with relatively mild economic sanctions.

This new dynamic has reinforced a previously existing one whereby, in the course of the last year or so, the U.S. was already perceived to be reducing its presence and influence in the Middle East and Central Asia, from Afghanistan to Egypt, and was irrationally shying away from confrontation in the region in favour of the accommodation of radical terrorism-supporting regimes in Iran and Syria. It must be emphasised that these were regional perceptions in Riyadh, Cairo, Jerusalem and elsewhere. They certainly did

not correspond with Washington's own narrative regarding its actions, whereby a new "Obama doctrine" (clearly enunciated at the United Nations General Assembly on September 24th 2013) consciously reduces direct U.S. involvement in the Middle East to dealing with Iran's nuclear project and the Israeli-Palestinian issue. But from the Middle East's standpoint, at least in the short term, it is these impressions that appear to count and to affect policy considerations.

True, the Middle East is at most a secondary arena of Russian-American tensions and competition. But in view of Washington's reluctance to be involved militarily and in some ways strategically – given the "tilt towards Asia" and the rapidly declining U.S. energy dependence on the region – the logic of Russia's position could dictate a drive by Moscow to increasingly challenge U.S. interests in the Middle East through arms sales to and economic cooperation with countries like Egypt, Iraq and Iran. This could prove particularly alarming to confirmed pro-Western countries like Israel and Saudi Arabia.

(In a parallel dynamic, China is also displaying a growing presence in the Middle East as the U.S. withdraws. But this is primarily an economic rather than a political or military presence, and is in any case beyond the scope of the present inquiry.)

To what extent has this emerging Russian-American dynamic emboldened regional actors who might otherwise feel inhibited by U.S. power and influence to display greater consideration for the Russian point of view? Conversely, has Russia's power move in Ukraine provoked any Middle East states to react by adopting policies that contradict Russian interests? Equally, to what extent have events prompted Russia itself to behave differently in the Middle East?

Tentative responses

We can already tentatively identify instances of interaction between the powers and the region that appear to reflect the effects of Crimea. A particularly blatant case in point is Israel's outspoken minister of defence, Moshe Yaalon, who in mid-March stated pointedly that the U.S. is "displaying weakness" on several fronts, including Ukraine, and that he no longer had faith in Washington's resolve to put a stop to Iran's nuclear project – meaning that Israel should prepare to do the job itself. A senior Russian official's hint that Moscow might now respond to Western sanctions over Crimea by withdrawing from the consensus negotiating positions of the P5+1 in nuclear talks with Iran reflects another potentially new dimension to this issue. In late March U.S. secretary of state John Kerry expressed concern lest after the Crimea takeover Moscow might evince less interest in working with Washington to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons capacity.

On the other hand, the sheer hypocrisy of Moscow supporting the Assad regime in Syria because it opposes the dismembering of sovereign states, even as it crudely detaches Crimea from Ukraine, is also not lost on the region. Did Turkey, which is concerned over the fate of Crimea's Tatars – a Turkic people with a large Turkish constituency – intend to send muscle-flexing signals to Moscow when it shot down a Syrian MiG-23 on March 23rd and moved toward further rapprochement with Israel (by resolving the *Mavi Marmara* incident)?

Changes in the behaviour of key Middle East countries

Israel's approximately one million Russian speakers maintain close relations with Russia. Israel's foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, in the past sought (unsuccessfully) to develop a closer relationship with Russia and its "near abroad" as a counter to Israel's strategic reliance on the U.S. Israel's decision to absent itself from the recent UN General Assembly vote condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea rather than vote as usual with the U.S. presumably reflects Lieberman's policy input. Israeli strategic thinkers are well attuned to Russian logic regarding the need to invoke extreme measures against Islamist terrorism – one of the rationales for a beefed-up Russian presence in Crimea. Some Israeli Middle East experts find Russian expertise regarding the region more compelling and less likely to confuse ideology with interests than that of the U.S.

Further, precisely because the Putin government in Moscow does not pressure Jerusalem over the Palestinian issue, Russia's assertiveness in Crimea – by ostensibly highlighting U.S., NATO and EU weakness there – is likely to strengthen the hand of the Israeli political right in rebuffing Western peace-process-related pressures and boycott/sanction threats. In the same context the Netanyahu government, having watched how the 1994 Western commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity was rendered meaningless by Russia, now has an additional rationale for refusing to buy into U.S. and other security guarantees regarding the West Bank and Jordan Valley. On the other hand, Israeli governments since 1967 are themselves no strangers to the concept of unilateral annexation of neighbouring territory.

Still, at the end of the day the Crimea issue cannot seriously affect Israeli strategic reliance on the U.S., which is part and parcel of the fabric of Israel's overall security orientation. Moreover, the Ukraine crisis could generate closer U.S.-EU strategic coordination on a host of issues, including two-state negotiations. Accordingly, the real issue here for Israel is whether and to what extent displaying a degree of understanding for Russia's unilateral move in Crimea could damage Jerusalem's far more important alliance with the U.S.

Turning to less political issues, by casting doubt on future energy security in the region, the Crimea crisis could conceivably encourage greater interest in Israel's

Mediterranean gas discoveries by Russia, Turkey and the EU. Israel is also following the Ukraine/Crimea drama with reference to the safety of that region's Jewish communities – notwithstanding Putin's obvious exaggerations regarding the fascist/anti-Semitic motives of anti-Russian forces.

In **Syria**, the Crimea confrontation is likely to embolden the Iran-Hizbullah-Assad regime coalition, which will take heart from Putin's boldness and the West's perceived avoidance of confrontation. Under these circumstances Russian pressure on President Bashar Assad to negotiate – e.g. at a Geneva III conference – is not likely. We might now witness new delays in the removal of Syria's chemical weapons, along with possible enhanced Russian arms supplies to Syria. By the same token, Washington may have to counter additional demoralisation among moderate anti-Assad rebel forces that are dependent on it for more sophisticated arms supplies.

We have already mentioned **Turkey**'s concerns regarding the welfare of the Crimean Tatars, whose plight under renewed Russian rule – given Moscow's hyper-sensitivity to Islamist activism on its territory – is likely to be seen by critics of the Erdoğan government as yet another failure of its "zero problems" policy. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has spoken of a potential "domino effect" of a Russian drive for hegemony or even territorial takeover in Azerbaijan and Georgia – both key strategic neighbours of Turkey. Accordingly, Ankara is likely to evince a renewed need, as during the cold war, for NATO reassurances concerning an expansionist Russia. Ankara can also conceivably anticipate new agitation by Turkey's Kurds, based on the Crimea model, for greater autonomy, self-determination, or political proximity to Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. Finally, Turkey might feel more free to occupy territory in northern Syria in the current "permissive" atmosphere.

Egypt's Field Marshal al-Sissi visited Moscow last February and agreed to a reported $3 billion arms deal, primarily to demonstrate that Cairo had alternatives to its troubled strategic collaboration with the U.S. Now, still under heavy criticism from the U.S. and EU over democratisation and human rights issues, al-Sissi might feel even more attracted to Russian offers of arms, strategic coordination and a free-trade zone than prior to the Crimea crisis. Russia, after all, is not particularly concerned with al-Sissi's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition figures, and openly shares his aversion to Islamists. Thus, Putin may now feel emboldened by his success in Crimea to woo Cairo more generously.

Egypt's dilemmas are no longer a declared U.S. strategic priority. Yet in view of Egypt's centrality to the entire Arab world, the region will be closely observing U.S.-Russian interplay in Cairo. Israel, especially, will be watching closely: the concept of close Egyptian and Israeli security alliances with Washington has been a lynchpin of the Middle East peace process for more than 35 years.

Like Israel, **Saudi Arabia** is concerned over the dangers of Iranian "encirclement" and perceived U.S. negligence or indifference – concerns exacerbated by the events in Crimea. Yet the Saudis, like the Israelis, do not really have or want a Russian strategic "option".

Still, the Saudis have volunteered to pay for Cairo's arms purchases from Moscow. Together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), they have organised a sizeable financial bailout to enable Cairo to at least temporarily avoid U.S. pressure. And despite American displeasure, they have backed Egyptian persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood, have themselves labelled the Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, and have fragmented the Gulf Cooperation Council over the Iran and Islamist issues. Might the Saudis now use their financial clout to demonstrate even further their concern over Washington's receding regional profile? Obama's meeting with King Abdullah in late March appears to have been intended to assuage Saudi and UAE concerns.

Iran, like Syria, can only feel encouraged by the Crimea-generated increase in Russian-U.S. tensions. In Iran's case, this could improve its manoeuvrability in the P5+1 nuclear negotiations. Iran appears to share the Russian goal of curtailing U.S. influence in the Middle East, but will remain declaratively neutral regarding current Russian-U.S. tensions, in keeping with its traditional "neither East nor West" policy. We can, however, expect Iran to be more open to Russian offers of arms and civilian nuclear investment, as Tehran reaps profits at the strategic level from the Ukraine crisis.

But Iran is also capable of playing a seemingly anti-Russian card, at least in its discrete strategic calculations: it can now cite as justification for its own nuclear project the lesson of Ukraine's inability to deter Russia in Crimea due ostensibly to Kiev's post-Soviet Union decision to forego its nuclear weapons – not unlike the ramifications of the 2003 decision by Libya's Muammar Qaddafi to dismantle his nuclear project.

Conclusion

In the short term the Ukraine/Crimea crisis adds momentum to Russia's drive to reassert its superpower presence and influence in the Middle East, and reinforces the regional perception, whether justified or not, of U.S. withdrawal and hesitation. These developments cannot but influence the strategic calculations not only of pro-Russian countries like Syria, but of virtually every other major Middle East player. If Russia now proceeds to take over additional parts of eastern Ukraine and possibly Transnistria without provoking a more forceful U.S./NATO response, the ramifications in the Middle East of the crisis could become more acute.

THE AUTHOR

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