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Russia's Linkage between the Ukrainian Crisis and the Middle East

Zvi Magen and Udi Dekel

Although the official topic of the international security conference held in Moscow on May 20-23, 2014 was Middle East regional security, the conference actually dealt with the Russian perspective on the linkage between the crisis in Ukraine, where elections were held two days after the conference ended, and the upheavals in the Middle East. Top Russian political and security officials (including the defense minister and his deputy, the foreign minister and his deputy, and the chief of staff) attended the conference, and countries important to Russia – Iran (represented by its defense minister), Syria (the deputy chief of staff), Egypt (the deputy chief of staff), China, Pakistan, and India – were among the prominent participants.

Presenting their perspective on the crises in the international system, the Russians pointed an accusing finger at the West, led by the United States. In their view, the West has initiated and driven the “colored revolutions” directed at changing the existing regimes and expanding the West’s spheres of influence while creating a zone of instability around Russia.

The senior Russian officials presented a comprehensive position on the connection between the events and processes in the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, (Egypt), and Syria, allegedly all the result of Western use of “subversive” tools in those countries. The results are also similar: (a) bloody civil war; (b) billions of dollars poured into unnecessary wars; (c) a financial crisis; (d) a weakening of the sovereign state to the point of dissolution; and (e) a strengthening of terrorist elements, as they fill the vacuum created. All of these phenomena have negative implications for the global system and generate instability, exacerbate geopolitical conflicts, and deepen disputes among states, ethnic groups and religions.

The Russians identify the events in Ukraine as yet another link in the chain that sparks regime change, unrest among the population, increasing domestic struggles that could potentially deteriorate into civil war and loss of stability, all in order to undermine Russian influence. They likewise interpret the expected withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan as another component of this chain, which will have negative security consequences for Russia.

The attitude toward the Middle East was presented through a similar prism. In the Russian view, the upheavals of the Arab Spring were driven by the West, based on the formula and outcomes presented above. From Russia's perspective, the only positive example of the processes of the Arab Spring is the counter-revolution in Egypt, which exemplifies the desired formula involving the strengthening of traditional state actors. Russia sees an important role for itself in this process, and as such, is strengthening its ties with Egypt in the days after the counter-revolution and supports the Syrian regime; it has also shown that it is the only country that can bring about the dismantlement of the chemical arsenal in Syria.

As for Israel, contradictory messages were delivered at the conference. On the one hand, Israel's policy on the Ukrainian issue received favorable mention. On the other hand, Israel figured at the center of the region's problems. The senior Russian speakers discussed the centrality of the Palestinian issue and its important influence on regional processes. They claimed that the failure of the latest round of the peace process (the negotiations mediated by Secretary of State Kerry) stems from US dominance in managing the negotiations and determination of their format. They also reiterated the traditional Russian position regarding the Israeli-Palestinian process. In their understanding, the format of the process must be changed, with Russia assuming a central role and with an international conference held as an integral component of the process.

At the same time, the issue of Israel's nonconventional weapons was raised and an accusing finger was pointed at Israel for preventing the establishment of Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction. This argument was presented in a well orchestrated manner by the high ranking Russian speakers and supported by representatives from the Middle East and questions from the audience. On this issue, as on the issue of the political process with the Palestinians, Russia urged the convening of an international conference – in this case, the conference on a WMD-free zone, called for by the 2010 NPT Review Conference – as a preferred model and emphasized that it was essential to convene a conference this year.

Conclusion and Assessment

There is little that is new in the Russian arguments and positions; what stood out, however, was the connection forged between the processes, along with the coherent strategic approach that assigns blame to the United States and the West. The conference was used as a platform to create linkage between the Arab Spring and the crisis in Ukraine. In Russia's eyes, both have negative consequences for the stability and security of the international system.

Regardless of the debate on the validity of this approach, its presentation at the conference should be seen as a message to the West that Russia is considering a change in its policy, by switching to a proactive policy in the international arena, beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. Russia is making it clear that the Middle East could be an area of confrontation with the United States, in order both to challenge and harm US interests and to establish Russia's standing as a global power.

The implicit threat of adopting an activist policy while harming US interests in general and in the Middle East in particular is intended partly to restrain Western involvement in Ukraine. However, at the same time, President Putin has also hinted at willingness to compromise. He has conveyed that he would accept the results of the Ukrainian elections that he intends to promote an agreement. The emerging foundations of a future settlement are the understandings reached at a conference held in Geneva on April 17, 2014, where it was agreed that Ukrainian independence would be preserved, the governmental structure would be altered to create a federation, and the principle of neutrality would be upheld, with Ukraine refraining from joining Western organizations (NATO and the European Union).

It appears that Russia prefers to reach understandings with the West on the issue of Ukraine because it lacks the ability to sustain a prolonged economic and political confrontation with the West. It is therefore interested in a compromise that will enable it to have a degree of influence in Ukraine and will prevent Ukraine from joining the Western circle of influence. However, at least in the short and medium term, Russia will have to forfeit Ukraine in its geopolitical plans to rehabilitate its power and influence to create an area of influence along its borders. At the same time, it is doubtful that in the long run Russia will be able to live with this situation, and it will likely seek opportunities to restore its full influence in Ukraine.

