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Between Crises: If and When Russia Fights ISIS

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Not all the countries considered potential partners in the coalition fighting ISIS are eager to take part in the struggle. Russia is one of them. Although its participation could be expected, Russia has not (yet) joined the US-led coalition, and its official spokespersons have not spared their criticism of the coalition's management of the struggle. What are the roots of Russia's policy?

Russia's current international position is far from comfortable. At this time, its leadership is searching for an honorable exit, perhaps along with political and economic achievements, from two regions heading the international agenda: Ukraine and the Middle East. Both of these crisis areas have put Russia in a prolonged confrontation against the West, and in the case of Ukraine, an especially bitter one. From Russia's perspective, the West – i.e., the US – initiated the crisis in Ukraine that has cast Russia in a difficult position. Indeed, despite its denials Russia, has played an active role in this East European crisis, and its involvement has caused it concrete damage. The ceasefire in Ukraine is shaky, the risk of renewed escalation is high, and despite Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula, Ukraine has severed itself from Moscow's sphere of influence. The last word on the matter has not yet been said, and Russia is still expected to exert more pressure on Ukraine to bring it back under its influence, but to date, Russia's plans to reclaim its influence in the area of the former Soviet Union have been disrupted.

Furthermore, Western countries have imposed punitive economic sanctions on Russia given its efforts to preserve its influence in Ukraine. The sanctions have proven fairly painful and visibly effective, and additional sanctions are expected if there is no change in Russian policy in this sphere. Particularly irritating for Russia is the continuing slide in oil prices. According to Russia, this is a result of American policy, and if the trend continues, it will cause substantive damage to the faltering Russian economy. It is therefore a significant Russian interest to find a solution to the crisis, without having to concede the geopolitical interests guiding its behavior in Ukraine and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

Along with a focus on the Ukrainian question and its ensuing ramifications, international attention is currently commanded by the crisis in the Middle East. More specifically, the accelerating radicalization of the Sunni Islamic organizations, which peaked with the ISIS offensives in Iraq and Syria, prompted the formation of an international coalition to combat that organization directly.

In the context of its efforts to upgrade its international status, Russia is seeking to play an active part in events in the Middle East and restore its status as an influential regional actor. Russia has made a fairly successful effort to demonstrate its influence in the region by establishing relations with countries that until recently were not among its supporters. Egypt is the most significant example of this trend, as well as Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and others. However, overall the various events in the “Arab Spring” have had a negative impact on Russia. Bashar al-Assad, its chief ally in the region, has been significantly weakened, and Russia has lost its strongholds in North Africa, the Persian Gulf, and Iraq. Iran is engaged in dialogue with the US. In addition, Russia regards itself as a future target for Islamic factions eager to expand their spheres of influence. Over the years, Moscow has adopted an active containment policy in this area – its wars against radical Islam in the Caucasus highlight its determination in the matter – but it is unable to eliminate this problem. ISIS is making direct threats against Russia, but the actions of the US-led coalition have made the struggle against ISIS a theater of conflict between Russia and the West.

Against this background, Russia’s policy in the Middle East can be viewed as a response to the challenge confronting it in the international strategic theater, combined with the challenge facing it in the region itself. That is, the growing competition between Russia and the West currently taking place on two fronts – Eastern Europe and the Middle East – has led Russian to create another focus of tension in order to relieve the pressure exerted against it in Eastern Europe.

Russia is exploiting the tension in the Middle East in order to divert attention from the crisis in Ukraine, and therefore refuses to support the international coalition’s activity in Syria. The reasoning used by its spokespeople to justify Russia’s boycott of the campaign against ISIS is “anchored” in international law: Russia is protesting against military intervention in Syria without a mandate from the UN Security Council, and without the Syrian regime requesting such intervention. Another argument is the failure to include Russia on equal terms with the US in making the coalition’s main decisions on regional matters. These contentions conceal the drive to raise the price that Moscow will demand of the Western countries in order for Russia to join the coalition. On the one hand, Russia expects a relaxation of the sanctions imposed in connection with the Ukrainian crisis, while on the other hand, it wants to maintain its status in Syria by protecting the Assad regime.

At the same time, Russia must continue to parry the radical Islamic challenge, which now is centered on the growing ISIS threat. In order to repel this threat, Russia must cooperate with the international parties fighting against the organization, above all the US and its allies. Moscow has yet to formulate an answer for this dilemma, and for this reason has remained aloof from the struggle against ISIS and consequently far from the events leading the current Middle East agenda. This is also the reason why at times it seems that Russia speaks with two voices. Russia maintains a belligerent image, and challenges the West with disparaging statements: Vladimir Putin, for example, has attacked the US for its inconsiderate behavior toward Russia in the global theater. In practice, however, Russia's leadership seeks solutions, mainly those that will help remove the burden of the sanctions. Indeed, it appears that its conciliatory tone calling for a simultaneous exit from the two crises – in Ukraine and in the Middle East – is growing louder.

The war against ISIS is Russia's current bargaining chip. Moscow is apparently increasingly aware that it should try to achieve an understanding with the Western powers that will lift the sanctions regime and implement an arrangement in Ukraine – in exchange for Russian participation in the struggle against ISIS. Whether a move in the direction of a tradeoff between Russia and the West is taking shape beyond the public discussion of the matter will soon become apparent. In any case, it seems that the Middle East, with the complex challenges it presents, is presenting Russia with opportunities as well as risks.

The consequences of the crises involving Russia in one way or another are also clear in its relations with Israel. Russia-Israel relations, which are generally positive, received additional reinforcement, with both countries refraining from criticism of the other: Israel did not criticize Russia at the height of the Ukrainian crisis, and Russia did not criticize Israel during Operation Protective Edge. Now, in view its growing distress caused by Western economic sanctions, Moscow is clearly interested in expanding its economic cooperation with Israel. Russia appears willing to extend its strategic coordination and cooperation with Israel as part of its effort to increase its influence on events in the Middle East.

