RESET IN THE ARAB EAST: U.S.A VS. RUSSIA

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**Introduction**

Will Rogers a social commentator and actor, 1934 remarked “anything I don’t know about Russia I can make up, Russia is a country that no matter what you say about it, it’s true.” That statement is still relevant today. Russia’s political, social, and economic dynamics are highly complex, contradictory, and nonlinear. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia emerged as a fragmented political, economic and social entity claiming to be a partner of the United States. However, the two big powers strategic cooperation shifted as a result of the 2008 Georgia conflict.

The flows all along from a diminutive and fierce war in the Caucasus spread out to encompass the Middle East. The first step in that journey was when the Syrian president on Wednesday 20 August 2008 reawakened a strategic alliance with Moscow that had been neglected since the Cold War. The consequences of Russia's six-day war in Georgia have produced multi-manifestations every then and there since a French-brokered ceasefire was signed on Thursday 14 august 2008. While the United States and Russia initially confined their proxy war to expeditions of rhetoric, by the end of the year 2008 Washington and the Kremlin were taking real punitive steps which show no signs of fading.

The arms talks between the Syrian and Russian presidents in the Black Sea resort of Sochi three months before the end of 2008 were the most public sketch of how alliances are shifting as a result of the war. The Syrian President had shown his claimed western image to the United States allies and was a guest of honor at France's Bastille Day parade on July of 2008. Before the Georgia war, the West had high hopes of extracting Syria from its alliance with Iran, which the United States accuses of supporting Islamic militants in the Arab World. Those hopes were teared when President Bashar Al-Assad deliberated an arms deal with President Dmitry Medvedev. A diplomatic source in Moscow said the leaders then prepared deals involving anti-aircraft and anti-tank missile systems. President Bashar Al-Assad issued a clear message of support for Russia's military crackdown in Georgia, which began after Georgian forces attempted to rein in the separatist territory of South Ossetia. "We understand the essence of the Russian position and its military response," President Assad told President Medvedev.

"We believe Russia was responding to the Georgian provocation."(1)

 Washington and Twenty Six other members of NATO have condemned Russia's "excessive" retaliation, which took Russian troops deep into Georgia territories. Speaking at an emergency meeting of NATO foreign ministers at the end of the 2008, the US Secretary of State then, Condoleezza Rice, warned Russia against bidding to redesign the defenses of the Cold War through terminating by force Georgia's bid for NATO membership. It is worth mentioning that President Bashar Al-Assad in Sochi appeared to be directing a putdown to Ms. Rice, and came one day after the US and Poland inflamed relations with Russia further by signing a missile deal. The unexplainable mechanism of American foreign policy is that Washington yielded to the Polish demands for a battery of Patriot missiles to defend Warsaw in light of the six-day war. Thus in a very short time after Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's asserted that Russia has long opposed NATO membership for Georgia and the Ukraine, as the NATO states encroach on its borders. It has now shown that it is prepared to use force to prevent the NATO expansion. Russia has also fiercely opposed the United States plans to base parts of a missile defense shield in Poland, and has threatened to retaliate against Poland with a possible nuclear strike over the deal, which was signed on August 20018. Russia has always threatened to switch off gas supplies to the former Soviet satellite republic, something it has not hesitated to do in the past(2).

The Russian military operation during the Five-Day war in Georgia points to a number of lessons with strategic implications for Russia a reality that now is better understood considering Russian involvement in Syria as a key for influence in the Arab East. The deficiencies in its military performance, not least concerning C4ISR and precision strike capability, have underscored the need for a modernization of the Armed Forces and a diversification of Russia’s military capability. Russia is restructuring its strategic decisions on the priorities for the future development of its military and defense industry. Its involvement in Syria is generating new experiences in the development of Middle Eastern need for its economic support, weapons and military supplies.(3)

In an article entitled "Time to Return," published in the conservative Russian newspaper Sovetskaia Rossia, Artyom Leonov observed that: “Despite some Russian elite unhappiness over previous Soviet and Russian support for Saddam Hussein, Iraqi government officials are now calling for resuming cooperation between Moscow and Baghdad”. In fact, Iraq expects assistance from its Russian friends to further the comprehensive economic reconstruction and development of Iraq. Leonov further stated, "Similar ideas are increasingly prevalent in Egyptian, Yemeni and Algerian government and economic circles." It is worth noting that despite Russian unhappiness for having supported Gadhafi, Moscow has recently improved its relations with the new Libyan government. Some observers think that the key to all of the above is through Syria.

In an edition of Georgia Today on 08 March 2018, Emil Avdaliani has written on Russian geopolitical interests in Syria. He indicated that Russia increased its military presence in the country, recently receiving 49-year leases on an airbase and port facility in Syria.(4)

Russian re-involvement in the Arab East has, however, not only been limited to Syria. To be better positioned in the Middle East, Russia is probably driving itself towards active diplomatic and military moves in Syria’s neighboring countries. One of the theaters of active Russian diplomacy has long been Lebanon. Russian media has at times given hints about Moscow’s rising interests in this Mediterranean state. The base for such suppository is related to February 3 agreement with Lebanon when the Kremlin directed the Ministry of Defense to sign an agreement with Lebanon on increased military cooperation. The draft agreement according to reporters also proposes the use of Lebanese facilities by the Russian military. Both sides also agreed on a broader exchange of military information and intensive bilateral cooperation against terrorism.

The proposed draft agreement is wide-ranging as it also involves the joint training of troops, information and engineering support, military education and medicine, military topography and hydrography. The agreement which is not signed yet will be for a period of five years with a prolongation for a subsequent five-year periods.

Russian and Lebanese military contacts have been somewhat mixed in the past. A Russian military agreement with Lebanon is noteworthy and could actually signal a certain turn as Lebanon and its military have been traditionally oriented toward the West. For instance, although the Lebanese Army retains Russian weapons such as tanks and rifles, in 2008 the Lebanese army rejected Russia's offer of ten free MiG-29 fighters. In reality, the last two US administrations, according to various estimates have provided Lebanon with $357 million in military supplies.

Lebanon’s strategic location on the Mediterranean, and its proximity to war-torn Syria, make it an eye-catching local in which Russia could assign its influence.(5)

Further than a military cooperation, there is also an economic interest to increased Lebanese-Russian relations: Lebanon recently decided to begin exploiting its off-shore Mediterranean natural gas reserves. The state of Lebanon also offered exploration tenders of its off-shore seabed to Russian companies (among them Novatek). Russia have expressed interest in tapping into the Lebanese raw material resources, with the first exploratory to be drilled in 2019.

This maritime resource exploration by Lebanon has reignited disputes with Israel over their maritime frontiers. The Lebanese-Russian cooperation is expected to have an effect on Israel too, coming as it does amid Russia-Israel complications following the February 11 conduct of Israeli multiple airstrikes on Syrian-Iranian targets in Syria.(6)

While Russia and Lebanon are experiencing positive coordination in economic and military affairs, Russia will remain conscious that its position in Syria remains vulnerable and the least desirable thing would be Israel’s more forceful engagement in Syria. The Russian interest in Lebanon could distract the current status quo where Russia is allowing Israel to continue carrying out preventive strikes on Syrian soil. Russian determinations to maintain a prevailing posture on the Syrian battlefield have been shaken. The Turkish operation in Afrin, in the north of the country, made clear that Moscow is unable to prevent the evolution of Ankara’s influence. Russian mercenaries were also killed by the hundreds, according to some reports, by US forces. Additionally, diminishing Russian prestige in and around Syrian-Iranian proxy forces are now close to the Israeli border, and Russia proved to be ineffective to realize anything significant in this regard at the Sochi Conference in late January of 2018.(7)

It is well known that Russia played little or no active role in the Arab Spring that began in 2011. Syria is the one case where Moscow has provided the regime with important diplomatic and military support ever since the start of the uprising against it. The same support was a failure in Libya.

Trying to list motives of Russian interventions in Syria, the following is a brief: 1) the desire to retain Russia's naval facility in Syria (the only one Moscow has outside the former USSR). 2) The fear that the downfall of Assad will lead to a geopolitical gain for America and a loss for Russia. 3) The determination to prevent Syria from becoming "another Libya" where, in Moscow's view, Russia and China allowed passage of a Security Council resolution that called for the imposition of a no-fly zone that the United States and its western allies then exploited terms to bring down the Khadafy regime. 4) The fear that the downfall of Assad will cause an increased Muslim hostility activity inside Russia. 5) The fear that after the Assad regime falls, Moscow will no longer have any influence in the Arab world. 5) The fact that a state as small as Qatar has been acting in opposition to Russian interests is especially annoying to Moscow. Russian-Qatari differences over Syria, though, have not prevented the giant Russian natural-gas corporation Gazprom from signing an agreement in December 2012 to purchase "major volumes" of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) from Qatar or from opening a representative office in Doha in February 2013. Russia's relations with Qatar have also soured over the Syrian uprising because of the intended pipeline projected by Qatar to go through Syria. Just as it does with Saudi Arabia, Moscow sees Qatar's support for the Syrian opposition as reproducing a wish to promote Islamic radicalism in both that country and elsewhere (including Russia's North Caucasus). It is worth noting here that Russian fears that Saudi Arabia and Qatar are actively supporting Islamic radicalism, not just in Syria but also in the former USSR. This put forward that, if Saudi Arabia and Qatar could bring themselves to increase their economic ties with Russia, the prevailing level of hostility in their relations with Russia could shrink extensively. However, while the Qatari government has taken some steps in this direction, it is not certain whether the Saudi government would follow pursuit.(8)

**On the other hand**

Preparing for challenges presented by Russia in the Arab East and the Middle East at Large, the United States is not yet clear on a steady strategy for Russia’s development and changes in its foreign policy. Withstanding, the United States claims to be prepared both to defend its national interests by using diplomatic, military, and economic tools when challenged by Russia, and to manage potential risks associated with a worsening of its socioeconomic problems.

Attempting to analyze Trump’s major switch in American foreign policy through his talks and declarations, one realizes that he forecasts the replacement of randomness with purpose, ideology with strategy, and chaos with peace. He has repeatedly asserted that his foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people, and American security, above all else. That will be the foundation of every decision that he will make. America First will be the major and overriding theme of his administration.

Trump proclaims that the United States saved the world from totalitarian Communism. The Cold War lasted for decades, but the U.S.A. won. Democrats and Republicans working together got Mr. Gorbachev to heed the words of President Reagan when he said: “tear down this wall.”

Unfortunately, after the Cold War, Trump states that: “our foreign policy veered badly off course. We failed to develop a new vision for a new time. In fact, as time went on, the United States foreign policy began to make less and less sense. Logic was replaced with foolishness and arrogance, and this led to one foreign policy disaster after another. The United States went from mistakes in Iraq to Egypt to Libya, and the irrational approach to the Middle East problems made the U.S.A. go down in the sands of Syria. Each of these actions has helped to throw the region into chaos, and gave ISIS the space it needs to grow and prosper. It all began with the dangerous idea that the United States could make Western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a Western Democracy.” Trump again repeats to proclaim: “We tore up what institutions they had and then we were surprised at what we unleashed. Civil war, religious fanaticism; thousands of live loss among American soldiers, and many trillions of dollars were lost as a result. The vacuum was created that ISIS would fill. Russia also has rushed in to fill the void.

**Hypothetical American Flaws in the Middle East**

Trump has repeatedly stated that America should develop new understandings for its foreign policy in the Middle East. Since the end of the Cold War and the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the U.S.A. lacked a coherent foreign policy. He goes on to state that, one day we bomb Libya to get rid of a dictator to foster democracy for civilians, the next day we watch the same civilians suffer while that country falls apart. The legacy of the Obama-Clinton interventions was weakness, confusion, and disarray. They have made the Middle East more unstable and chaotic than ever before. They left minorities subject to intense persecution and even genocide. Their actions in Iraq, Libya and Syria were disastrous and the United States is now at war against radical Islam, but President Obama won’t even name the enemy.

Hillary Clinton also refused to say the words “radical Islam,” even as she pushed for a massive increase in refugees. After Secretary Clinton’s failed intervention in Libya, Islamic terrorists in Benghazi took down the U.S.A. consulate and killed the ambassador and three Americans.

The U.S.A. under my administration, Trump asserts, will get out of the nation-building business, and instead will focus on creating stability in the Middle East. In this; Trump promises to be working very closely with allies in the Muslim world, all of which are at risk from radical Islamic violence. He asserts to work with any nation in the Middle East region that is threatened by the rise of radical Islam. But this has to be a two-way street. They must also compensate the U.S.A. and remember all what the Americans are doing for them.

Thirdly, the U.S.A. should rebuild its military and the economy to counter the Russians and Chinese who have rapidly expanded their military capabilities, and that of their economies in the Middle East and elsewhere. Trump justifies this on the following:

“Our nuclear weapons arsenal – our ultimate deterrent – has been allowed to atrophy and is desperately in need of modernization and renewal.”

“Our active duty armed forces have shrunk from 2 million in 1991 to about 1.3 million today.”

“The Navy has shrunk from over 500 ships to 272 ships.”

“The Air Force is about 1/3 smaller than 1991. Pilots are flying B-52s in combat missions today which are not efficient anymore.”

Trump is organizing his administration to change the U.S.A. trade, immigration and economic policies to make the economy strong again – “and to put Americans first again.” He claims that this will ensure that workers, in America, get the jobs and higher pay that will grow U.S.A. tax revenue and increase the economic might of the nation.

Fourth, the U.S.A. must develop a foreign policy based on American interests. In the Middle East, Trump’s goals are to defeat terrorists and promote regional stability, not radical change. He claims to be clear-sighted about the groups that will never be anything other than enemies.

Trump promises to work hard to live peacefully and in friendship with Russia and through diplomatic channels settle Syrian disputes and feuds with the Russian administration. The U.S.A. has serious differences with Russia, and must regard them with open eyes. But the U.S.A. is not bound to be an adversary to Russia.

Finally, Trump verbally commits himself to work with allies to reinvigorate Western values and institutions. Instead of trying to spread “universal values” that not everyone shares in the Middle East, the U.S.A. ought to understand that strengthening and promoting Western civilization and its accomplishments will do more to inspire positive reforms in the Middle East than military interventions. Trump calls for a ''milieu-based approach.'' In essence, the U.S.A. would make itself the center of a series of new global institutions where nations could come together and solve common problems. During the 1940s, the U.S. excelled at this, Trump notes. Dean Acheson and others initiated the Atlantic Charter, the Bretton Woods agreements, the Marshall Plan and the U.N. The idea was that capitalism could be organized internationally. Problems could be addressed in common. The U.S. could leverage its power more effectively if embedded in multilateral institutions with broad legitimacy. This order has been torn asunder because the Bush administration refused to operate within it. And so it's time to update. The new global architecture would have common features that fit all nations’ interests.

**The Factual Depiction in Syria**

Here are the basics. In 2011, in the context of the Arab Spring, the U.S.A. government, in conjunction with the governments of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Israel, decided to bring down Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime. It is well understood now that in 2012, if not earlier, President Barack Obama permitted the CIA to work with America’s allies in providing support to rebel forces composed of disaffected Syrians as well as non-Syrian fighters. American policy makers evidently expected Assad to fall quickly, as had occurred with the governments of Tunisia and Egypt in the early months of the Arab Spring.

The Assad regime is led by minority groups. The regional powers behind Assad’s regime include Iran and Russia, which has a naval base on Syria’s Mediterranean coastline. Whereas America’s goal in seeking to topple Assad was mainly to undercut Iranian and Russian influence, Turkey’s motive was to expand its influence in former Ottoman lands and, more recently, to counter Kurdish ambitions for territorial autonomy, if not statehood, in Syria and Iraq. Saudi Arabia wanted to undermine Iran’s influence in Syria while expanding its own, while Israel, too, aimed to counter Iran, which threatens Israel through its ally in Lebanon, Syria near the Golan Heights, and Hamas in Gaza. Qatar, meanwhile, wanted to bring a majority Islamist regime to power.

The armed groups supported by the U.S.A. and allies since 2011 were assembled under the banner of the Free Syrian Army. In fact, there was no single army, but rather competing armed groups with distinct backers, ideologies, and goals. The fighters ranged from dissident Syrians and autonomy-seeking Kurds to Sunni jihadists backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

While vast resources were devoted to overthrowing Assad, the effort ultimately failed, but not before causing massive bloodshed and displacing millions of Syrians. Many fled to Europe, fomenting Europe’s refugee crisis and a surge in political support for Europe’s anti-immigrant extreme right.

There were four main reasons for the failure to overthrow Assad. First, Assad’s regime had backing among not only Alawites, but also other minorities who feared a repressive majority Islamist regime. Second, the U.S.A. led coalition was countered by Iran and Russia. Third, when a splinter group of jihadists split away to form the Islamic State (ISIS), the US diverted significant resources to defeating it, rather than to toppling the Syrian regime. Finally, the anti-status-quo forces have been deeply and chronically divided; for example, Turkey is in open conflict with the Kurdish fighters backed by the United States.

All of these reasons for failure remain valid today. The war is at a stalemate. Only the bloodshed continues. The U.S.A. heatedly complains about Russian and Iranian influence in Syria. The United States government forecast the war as a civil war among Syrians, rather than a proxy war involving the U.S.A., Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Qatar. In July 2017, the United States President Donald Trump announced the end of CIA support for the Syrian rebels. In practice, though, U.S.A. engagement continues, though now it is apparently aimed more at weakening Assad than overthrowing him. As part of America’s continued war-making, the Pentagon announced in December 2017 that U.S.A. forces would remain indefinitely in Syria, ostensibly to support anti-Assad rebel forces in areas captured from ISIS, and nowadays Trump is threatening to withdraw American troops from Syria.

The war is in fact at risk of a new round of escalation. When the Syrian regime recently attacked anti-Assad rebels using chemical unconventional bombs, the US coalition launched airstrikes that killed around 100 Syrian troops and an unknown number of Russian fighters. Following this show of force, U.S.A. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis declared that, “Obviously, we are not getting engaged in the Syrian civil war.” In addition, Israel recently attacked Iranian positions in Syria.(9)

The US and its allies are still facing the persistence of de-facto Syrian regime. Much of the bloodbath that has withered Syrians during the past seven years is due to the short-coming calculations of the United States and its allies in the Middle East. Now, faced with an alarming risk of a renewed escalation of fighting, it is unclear how the United States would act?

**Back to Russia**

Russian foreign policy during the first year of Medvedev’s presidency was based on: A political system in which the state has substantial centralized control over social and economic affairs, and a political movement in Russia, formerly within the primarily Russian émigré community, that posits that Russian civilization does not belong in the "European" or "Asian" categories but instead to the geopolitical concept of Eurasia.

The strength of the Russian Federation at the international level and decision-making was fortified by serious attempts to block the spread of U.S.A. influence. However, after the war with Georgia, this course started to shift and resulted in a global and regional reset policy. The most notable feature of Medvedev’s foreign policy during this period became the emphasis on modernization of economy, promotion of technological innovations, reduction of Russia’s dependence on oil and gas sales as well as closer cooperation with the EU and the US. Nevertheless, by the end of Medvedev’s term it became clear that relations with the West are far from neutral, as evidenced by the EU's coordinated attack on Gazprom, and the growing rivalry between pipeline projects and policy differences over Libya and Syria.

Russia now under the rule of Putin is countering the foreign policy strategy of the United States. That was evidenced in the two wars on Afghanistan and Iraq: First, it has shifted the anti-West confrontation from the U.S.A, soil to U.S.A. targets abroad. Second, it has secured U.S.A long time desired geopolitical strategic influence in the Caspian Sea region and the Middle East.

The Caspian Sea basin composed of Russia and Iran, as well as several former republics of the Soviet Union – Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan has “captured worldwide attention due to the phenomenal reserves of oil and natural gas located in the region.”(10) Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan possess large reserves of oil and natural gas. Uzbekistan has oil and gas reserves that may permit it to be self-sufficient in energy and gain revenue through exports. Although many states hope to benefit from the development of these reserves namely Japan, Turkey, Iran, Western Europe, China, and Russia, “the future development of the Caspian Sea region is clouded by ethnic and political turmoil within the region and the emergence of a new power struggle between the U.S. and Russia.”(11)

The potential for conflict derives from contested boundaries and territorial disputes, the prevalence of authoritarian regimes, severe economic disparities, long-standing regional rivalries, and ethnic and religious strife.

Global demand for many key resource materials is growing at an unsustainable rate, and specifically, the United States economic stability depends on securing enough supply of resources and raw materials considered vital for its economic welfare and development. Therefore, Central Asia would seem “to offer significant new investment opportunities for a broad range of American companies”,(12) which, in turn, will serve as a valuable stimulus to the economic development of the U.S. and the region. Taking over Afghanistan, U.S. policy goals in Central Asia include breaking Russia’s monopoly over oil and gas transport rules; promoting Western energy security through different suppliers; encouraging the construction of East-West pipelines that do not transit Iran; and denying Iran dangerous leverage over Central Asian economies.

Putin is working in the direction of blocking the American intended strategy in Central Asia by developing renewed influence in the Middle East budgeting on the old Soviet Union investment. Oil is what the modern Middle Eastern geopolitics is all about. Given the vast energy resources that form the backbone of western economies, influence, and involvement in the Middle East, it has been of paramount importance to the United States and recently to Russia.(13) To maintain superiority, control and influence over the region, the West, mainly the U.S., have helped in the perpetuation of Arab leaders into their incumbent positions of power and continue to support the overthrow of those that are not seen as favorable. Protection of the Saudi regime has been a basic feature of U.S. security policy since 1945, when President Roosevelt made an arrangement with Ibn Saud. At the core of this arrangement is a vital agreement, that is: in return for protecting the regime of Al Saud against its enemies, American companies are allowed continuous access to Saudi oil fields.(14)

The Middle East, mainly Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq, have a dominant status in world energy exportations. It has about 64% of the world proven oil reserves and 34% of its gas reserves if Qatar is included. Algeria, Libya, Qatar, Oman, and the U.A.E. play an important role as world suppliers. The U.S. economy is dependent on the health of the global economy and on energy imports from Asia and the Middle East. But the question is: Will the Middle East act as a stable supplier of oil and gas? How often the exports will be disrupted impacting the market driven prices? This is not easy to predict in a region that has many domestic crises, regional conflicts, economic, and major demographic problems. In addition, Russia has developed consistent political and military leverage in the Arab East thus; the potential is high for future feud with the United States.

The Middle East is the most militarized region in the world. And, with the U.S.A. geopolitical aspirations in a globalization swiftly progressing, stability is not yet foreseen. Competition between the Middle East regional powers is often conducted indirectly or in the territories of third countries. Regional and major power states implicitly dash the need to politically, economically and militarily intervene in third party and often distant districts of neighboring countries, and to project force on non-bordering regional competitors. That was not intended for in the structuring and development of the regional powers' traditional force buildup. This phenomenon has received more attention in recent years, and focuses, interchangeably, on establishing military bases in territories of third countries and on expanding the use of non-state proxies. These trends give expression to deeper issues, including the challenge facing regional powers in acquiring operational access to their areas of interest by using an extended military arm to coarse opposing and rival powers. This is calling on other states in the Middle East region for growing need for force projection far from their borders and protection of interests in the competition for regional influence, inter-coalition against the framework of the serial collapse of Arab states that has left an extensive power vacuum in many territories.(15)

With the existing Syrian regime apparently winning its stay, Syria is turning into an arena for three new proxy conflicts. In the south, Israel is facing off against Iran; in the northern region of Afrin, Turkey is fighting the Kurds. Meanwhile, in the eastern provinces, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is pockmarked against the Russian-backed Syrian armed forces.

If and when the Syrian conflict dilemma comes to a close, the practice conducted during the messy civil strife by major powers is likely to become ever more pronounced. Together, they indicate that the future of Middle Eastern security is still bitterly contested by major players with potentially irreconcilable interests.

**Russian Manipulation of Israel versus Iran**

High noon in Syria: Iran vs. Israel is an article by Thomas Friedman that originally was published in April 16, 2018 and updated April 16, 2018, the writer stated: “Stop me if you’ve heard this one before: Syria is going to explode. I know, you have heard that one before, but this time I mean really explode. Because the U.S., British and French attack on Syria to punish its regime for its vile use of chemical weapons - and Russia’s vow to respond - is actually just the second-most dangerous confrontation unfolding in that country.”

Even more dangerous is that Israel and Iran, at the exact same time, seem to be heading for a high-noon shootout in Syria over Iran’s attempts to turn Syria into a forward air base against Israel, something Israel is vowing to never let happen.

However and despite of the above mentioned statement, the latest in April 2018 the U.S.A., British and French cruise missile punishment attack appears to be a one-off operation, and the impact will be contained. Russia and Syria have little interest in courting another Western raid and raising the level of involvement in Syria by the three big Western powers. And these three Western powers do not want to get more deeply involved in Syria.

In the wake of the past two decades of acrimony between Iran and Israel, it may be hard to imagine that the countries ever had friendly relations and cooperation on multiple levels. Yet they were once friends and allies. And even after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when Iran abruptly severed diplomatic ties with Israel, military cooperation continued for several years as Iran turned to Israel to arm it during its devastating war with neighboring Iraq.

Even today, as the tension between the two countries continues to mount and the danger of a direct confrontation appears genuine, one can reasonably say the two countries were never meant to be enemies. They share no common borders and have no territorial disputes. Moreover, Jews have lived in Persia (as Iran has been known through history) for some 2,700 years, and their tradition remembers it as a place of refuge.

When the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, held up what he said was a piece of a downed Iranian drone at the 2018 Munich Security conference, he raised the risks in an escalating proxy conflict with Iran.

Israel sees Iran’s presence in Syria as part of a bigger puzzle of Iranian military arm presence in Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. Israeli administration knows that the Trump administration is fully in line with Israeli foreign policy here: both are intent on containing Iran with all available means short of direct military confrontation. In this sense at a time when solutions in Syria are not ripe yet, Russia has ample of time to perpetuate its influence in Syria and the region at large and to forecast its needed services in any future conflict.(16)

**Russia Treads Carefully**

Russia’s military role in Syria is changing as the Syrian regime makes strategic gains. These speculations have intensified since U.S.A. forces killed Russian hired militant groups in clashes near the eastern city of Deir ez-Zor in mid-February 2018. The Eastern region of Syria is likely to remain a contested territory for a blatant reason and that is it contains the country’s major oil and gas fields.

Away from the battlefield, Russia has also sidelined the U.S.A. and the U.N. in diplomatic initiatives. While Moscow brought Turkey and Iran on board for peace talks in Astana to discuss a post-conflict political settlement for Syria, the Russian-Iranian-Turkish “Astana format” has not proved as cordial as many hoped, thus leaving Russia at a leverage of having the power to exploit the Syrian situation even further in time and scope.

**Russian Pressure on Turkey and the Kurdish Factor**

Russia does not recognize the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Kurdistan Workers Party and the People’s Protection Units (YPG) as terrorist groups or organizations. Turkey considers any recognition outside of labeling the above organizations as terrorist is a dangerous encouragement of Kurdish nationalism. Sure enough, when Russia invited the PYD to the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi, the invitation met with a diplomatic rejection and rebuff from both Turkey and many of the factions within the Syrian opposition.

Turkey has always been strongly determined not to allow the creation of an autonomous Kurdish territory anywhere and specifically in northern Syria. Hence its Operation Olive Branch against the PYD in the Afrin region is marked as a highly self-assured military initiative that Turkey announced it will continue regardless of a 30-day ceasefire agreed upon by the UN Security Council on 24 February, 2018.

Russia rejects attempts by external forces to solicit for the promotion of a Syrian and regional agenda that has nothing in common with the legitimate interests of the Kurdish people. Likewise, Iran shares the same view thus cornering Turkey against the American Kurdish alliance.

However, Iran and both Russia have refrained from criticizing Turkey’s incursion on the open and kept that for inner circles and in domestic press. Russia and Iran’s acquiescence are a source of fear for the Syrian regime on the issue of Kurds. Syria fears the consolidation of pro-Turkish Syrian rebels in the country’s north. With pro-Syrian government forces dispatched to the north to stand-up against the pro-Turkish offensive, the risk of outright Syrian-Turkish clashes is to escalate in the future.(17)

**Conclusion**

Russia’s’ role as second protector of the Syrian regime has become first. This can’t be explained by religious or ideological affiliation but by Russian ambitions in expending their influence in the Arab East to safeguard their leading role in the surrounding of the Caspian Sea basin. Yet Russian backing of the Syrian regime has been essential to Russian promotion of its interest in the Middle East at large. It is worth noting that though the support that Russia retains among Syria’s other non-Sunni minorities, the latter are fearful about their future should the radical Sunni Islamists in the anti-regime insurgency prevail, is sometimes obscured in press reports. Russia and China have used their veto power repeatedly against the Security Council resolutions aimed at condemning the Syrian regime or imposing sanctions.

Russia has insisted that the Gulf monarchies and other states aiding the anti-Assad insurgents are intervening in a civil war in violation of Syria’s sovereign rights. This may be a minority opinion, but Russia has made the case consistently and forcefully, insisting that the only hope for peace in Syria is a political settlement where it could take credit to spread it outside Syria to the whole Middle East.

So long as the United States believes that the Syrian regime is doomed and would soon fall, it did attract much attention to the Russian line. But now, the Trump’s administration, having witnessed the re-growing power of the Syrian regime and the divisions within the Syrian opposition, is compelled to work with Russia to be able to seek a solution with the other parties involved in the Syrian predicament.

Even if this assembly gathers, it’s unlikely to produce a deal that ends the bloodshed in Syria. But what’s significant is that the Russian position, once recognized as extremely essential, the Russians could claim a solid gained ground in the Arab East and in the Middle East as buffer zone to their interests in the Caspian Sea basin.

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**إعادة الضبط في الشرق العربي: الولايات المتحدة الأميركية مقابل روسيا**
كانت سياسة روسيا الخارجية خلال حكم مدفيديف في السنة الرئاسية الأولى تقوم على نظام سياسي يكون للدولة فيه سيطرة أساسيّة مركّزة على الشؤون الاجتماعيّة والاقتصاديّة، وحركة سياسيّة في روسيا سابقًا، ضمن مجتمع المهاجرين الروس في الدرجة الأولى، الذي يفترض أنّ الحضارة الروسية لا تنتمي إلى الفئات "الأوروبية" أو "الآسيوية"، بل إلى مفهوم أوراسيا الجيوسياسي.
وقد عزّزت قوّةَ روسيا الاتحادية على المستوى الدولي وفي مجال صنع القرار، محاولات جديّة لعرقلة انتشار تأثير الولايات المتحدة الأميركية. مع ذلك، وبعد الحرب مع جورجيا، بدأ هذا المسار يتبدّل ونتجت عنه سياسة إعادة الضبط على المستوى العالمي والإقليمي. وأصبحت أبرز سمات سياسة مدفيديف الخارجيّة خلال هذه الفترة التشديد على تطوير الاقتصاد، وتعزيز الابتكارات التكنولوجية، وتخفيف اعتماد روسيا على مبيعات النفط والغاز، وكذلك على توثيق التعاون مع الاتحاد الأوروبي والولايات المتحدة.
رغم ذلك، ومع نهاية عهد مدفيديف، أضحت العلاقات مع الغرب تبعد كل البعد عن الحياد، كما تبيّن من خلال الاعتداء المنسّق للاتحاد الأوروبي على شركة Gazprom، والتنافس المتزايد بين مشاريع خط الأنابيب والاختلافات السياسية حول ليبيا وسوريا.
فروسيا اليوم، تحت حكم بوتين، تظهر في موقع المواجهة مع استراتيجية سياسة الولايات المتحدة الخارجية. وقد اتّضح ذلك خلال الحربين على أفغانستان والعراق. أوّلاً حوّلت، المواجهة المعادية للغرب من أرض الولايات المتحدة الأميركيّة إلى أهداف أميركا في الخارج. ثانيًا، ضمنت تأثير الولايات المتحدة الأميركية الاستراتيجي الجيوسياسي المنشود لفترة طويلة في منطقة بحر قزوين والشرق الأوسط.
إنّ حوض بحر قزوين المؤلّف من روسيا وإيران، فضلًا عن عدّة جمهوريات سابقة في الاتحاد السوفياتي، وأذربيجان، وجورجيا، وكازاخستان، وقيرغيزستان، وطاجيكستان، وتركمانستان، وأوزبكستان، قد حظي باهتمام عالمي بسبب الاحتياطات الهائلة من النفط والغاز الطبيعي في المنطقة. وبخاصة في كازاخستان وتركمانستان هناك احتياطات كبيرة من النفط والغاز الطبيعي، كذلك في أوزبكستان حيث تسمح لها بالاكتفاء الذاتي في مجال الطاقة والحصول على إيرادات من خلال الصادرات. أمّا التطوّر المستقبلي لمنطقة بحر قزوين فهو مغمور بالاضطرابات العرقية والسياسية داخل المنطقة، ويرافق ذلك صراع جديد على السلطة بين الولايات المتحدة وروسيا، يمتدّ نحو الشرق العربي وتحديدًا إلى سوريا.
من خلال السيطرة على أفغانستان، تظهر أهداف السياسة الأميركيّة في آسيا الوسطى، منها القضاء على احتكار روسيا لقوانين نقل النفط والغاز؛ وتعزيز أمن الطاقة الغربي من خلال موردين مختلفين؛ وتشجيع بناء خطوط الأنابيب بين الشرق والغرب التي لا تعبر إيران؛ وحرمان هذه الأخيرة من نفوذها على اقتصادات آسيا الوسطى.
يُعتبر النفط محور الجغرافيا السياسية الحديثة في الشرق الأوسط، ونظرًا إلى موارد الطاقة الضخمة التي تشكل العمود الفقريّ للاقتصادات الغربيّة، والنفوذ، والمشاركة في الشرق الأوسط، كان بغاية الأهميّة بالنسبة إلى الولايات المتحدة، ومؤخرًا بالنسبة إلى روسيا في المحافظة على التفوق والسيطرة والتأثير على المنطقة. لقد ساعد الغرب، بخاصة الولايات المتحدة الأميركية، على إدامة القادة العرب في مواقعهم الحالية للسلطة، ويواصل دعم الإطاحة بتلك التي لا تعتبر مؤاتية. وكانت حماية النظام السعودي سمةً أساسيّةً في سياسة الأمن الأميركية منذ العام 1945.