

# The Ukraine Crisis and the Middle East

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**The Ukraine situation will affect Washington's Middle Eastern priorities, but not to such a degree that it will stymie a strong U.S. response to Russian actions, since America has the power to act in the region without Moscow if necessary. Ukraine could well make it necessary.**

**G**iven the importance of Ukraine, the clash of interests it represents, and its inherent instability, the latest crisis there will undoubtedly have fallout in the Middle East. The nature and scope of this fallout will be determined in part by the direction the crisis takes, but certain preliminary observations are possible. At present, the U.S. and Russian regional interests most likely to be affected center on Syria, Iran, and the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. Over the longer term, the greater the situation's impact on U.S.-Russian relations, the more Washington will need to review its entire approach to the Middle East.

## BACKGROUND

**T**he Ukraine crisis is still developing; Russia's intentions are not yet known and could be influenced in one direction or another by Western decisions. That said, even the most modest Russian goal -- de facto occupation of the Crimea along the lines of Moscow's 2008 intervention in Georgia -- would throw into question Russia's commitment to the current international order. Furthermore, regardless of what one thinks of recent U.S. foreign policy, it is difficult to see how the Obama administration could have materially shaped Russia's response to the dramatic events in Ukraine any more than President Bush could with Georgia.

In the eyes of President Vladimir Putin and many other Russians, their country still exists in a realpolitik nineteenth-century world where maintaining influence over the "near abroad" and blocking the influence of others is job one. Given this mindset -- along with Putin's willingness to take risks and his country's improved financial position after a decade of high oil and gas prices -- a Russian move to exert dominance in Ukraine was in the cards regardless of anything the Obama administration could have reasonably done. In theory, the European Union could have played a

more active role as Ukraine's partner and Russia's neighbor, especially since its population is almost four times larger than Russia's and its economy eight times larger. But the EU is in crisis, has not thought geostrategically since the Balkan wars, and mainly serves to inhibit a more active U.S. role by asserting primacy.

That said, the Ukraine situation has made the naked face of Moscow's imperial drive impossible to ignore. Accordingly, the crisis stands to have a broad impact on global relations, beginning in the Middle East.

## **IMMEDIATE IMPACT: SYRIA, AFGHANISTAN, IRAN**

**R**eporters have already quoted the administration expressing caution about any bold American response to Russia's intervention, with officials citing the need for cooperation with Putin on Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran. Of the three, the least to shed tears about would be a formal breakdown in U.S.-Russian "cooperation" on Syria. Apart from the chemical weapons agreement, whose relevance is increasingly uncertain, there is no real cooperation. The failure of the Geneva talks showed once again that Russia and the United States are on opposing sides in Syria, and Russia's side is winning. The Ukraine crisis makes this all the more obvious; its only immediate impact on Syria policy will be to make the administration's argument for inaction against the Assad regime look even more threadbare.

The situation in Afghanistan is different, since Washington relies on Russia to provide some transportation routes and not interfere with the facilitation efforts proffered by other governments in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This is immediately important given the planned withdrawal of considerable U.S. and NATO equipment this year and the difficulties of dealing with Pakistan. Nevertheless, Afghanistan is a declining trump card for Moscow -- with or without a residual force, major U.S. and NATO operations there are heading for a close, and Washington has ample financial and diplomatic clout to persuade or press Central Asian states and Pakistan to facilitate equipment withdrawal.

Iran is the most important issue given its ongoing nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States). Three considerations come to mind. First is the longstanding assumption that Moscow shares the West's interest in halting Iran's drive for nuclear weapons, despite international concerns about Russian arms sales to Tehran and assistance with the Bushehr nuclear plant. This shared interest may well persist given Moscow's general nonproliferation concerns and its desire to "work" certain international security problems through the UN Security Council rather than see the United States act unilaterally.

Second, while the Security Council -- with its Chapter VII condemnation of Iran, multilateral sanctions, and direct participation in the P5+1 negotiations -- is helpful in taming Iran's ambitions, what brought Tehran to the table was the threat of unilateral U.S. or Israeli military action and the bite of U.S. financial sanctions on Iranian oil exports. These tools remain viable with or without Russian cooperation.

Third, while these tools are strengthened when embedded in a multilateral legal structure involving Russia and the Security Council, Washington's calculus about the value of said structure could change were Russia to compound aggression in the Ukraine with a flip on Iran. Despite overwhelming regional support for action against Iran's nuclear ambitions, the United States has opted for UN involvement for two reasons. First, following the less-than-successful and politically unpopular intervention in Iraq, Washington has been leery about launching new interventions on the American nickel without strong international -- read Security Council -- support. And since the early 1990s, it has attempted to "coach" the international system, explicitly Russia and China, to support collective security approaches to international problems as part of the long-term American goal of a cooperative global political system.

Again, were Russia to compound its errors (from Washington's standpoint) in Ukraine with noncooperation on Iran, the administration would have no choice but to go it alone in confronting Tehran. This is obviously not the best

situation, but as noted above, the United States has significant unilateral capabilities to pressure Iran, including risky military action and oil import sanctions. These capabilities benefit from international buy-in, but that buy-in is not completely tied to Russia and the UN. If Moscow continues its bullying tactics and a critical mass of the international community concludes that it just cannot do business with Putin, then the door will open for a new "coalition of the willing" -- one similar to Kosovo 1999, not Iraq 2003.

## LONGER-TERM ISSUES

**B**eyond the immediate concerns, the Ukraine situation could have a long-term impact on U.S. Middle Eastern diplomacy. Three months ago, Walter Russell Mead made a prescient observation in the *American Interest*: "Sometime in 2013, we reached a new stage in world history. A coalition of great powers has long sought to overturn the post Cold War Eurasian settlement that the United States and its allies imposed after 1990; in the second half of 2013 that coalition began to gain ground...From this point on we will have to speak of that situation as contested." Of course, the "coalition" to which he was referring includes Russia.

As described above, American policy since the late 1980s "Tanker War" with Iran has been based on integrating former foes Russia and China, and most of the rest of the international community, into a collective security regime. The assumption was that such a regime was good not just for the United States, but also for everyone else, and that if Russia, China, Iran, and other Middle Eastern actors did not understand this, it was the job of diplomacy to persuade them. The Obama administration appears to have embraced this view wholeheartedly. Yet if we are dealing with the Russia on display in the Ukraine and Syria, then we are entering a new situation that could sound the death knell of the hoped-for post-1990 order.

The Middle East is not the Ukraine or Georgia, however. America's interests in that region -- namely, defending U.S. allies, combating terrorism, curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and securing oil routes, as President Obama put it in his September speech at the UN -- will remain valid, as will its ability to carry them out even if U.S.-Russian cooperation on certain issues dries up. With global energy trends undercutting Moscow's temporary surge in ready cash and its ability to use gas pipelines as blackmail, Putin does not have the economic clout, diplomatic leverage, or power-projection capabilities to seriously stymie Washington in the Middle East. China remains a question mark, but unlike Russia, it is hydrocarbons importer, not exporter. For this and other reasons, Beijing's interests do not necessarily coincide with Putin's, either on the Middle East or when it comes to invading neighbors.

*Ambassador James F. Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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