

# How Ukraine Will Shape the Future of the Middle East

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## By showing leadership in its response to the Russian intervention, Washington can open a new conversation with its regional allies regarding Syria, Iran, and Egypt.

**V**ladimir Putin has done it again. Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, and now Crimea; wherever there are potentially ethnic Russian areas in former Soviet republics that are not prepared to toe the Russian line, there will be separatist movements that will break away as in the case of Moldova, Georgia, and now Ukraine -- and Russia will support them. It matters not that there is an international agreement -- in this case the Budapest Memorandum -- in which Russia, along with the United States, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine are all signatories and that Russia has pledged its respect for the territorial integrity of Ukraine; that was 1994 and Russia, in Putin's eyes, was weak, and now it is 2014, and it is not, and it can impose its will with little concern for the consequences.

It is ironic that Putin, who worries so much about the territorial integrity of Syria -- and who rails against external intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states -- appears so quick to disregard such concerns when he determines that Russia's interests are involved. It seems that his principles are situational, and where he has the power to impose his will, he does.

The implications for the United States and Europe should be clear. There needs to be a price. No one is going to war over the Crimea, including the Ukraine. But there should be a political and economic price. Not going to the G-8 Summit in Sochi will not impress Putin. He will say he is protecting ethnic Russians and if President Obama and European leaders choose not to go, he will be defiant -- and most likely garner substantial domestic support in the process. But why not say that if Russia remains in Crimea, or moves to incorporate it, the Russians will forfeit their membership in the G-8? How about boycotting all financial and trade meetings with the Russians? I would favor going further and imposing targeted sanctions on the Russians. To be sure, some may worry that if we and the Europeans impose economic sanctions on the Russians, they will withhold natural gas supplies to Europe and

Ukraine and/or cease their cooperation as part of the P5+1 on Iran. Such responses are certainly possible. But Putin, too, needs to consider the consequences of such moves at a time when he is presiding over negligible growth, can ill afford to lose the revenues, and runs the risk of losing critical natural gas markets at a time when other suppliers, including the U.S., are becoming increasingly important. Similarly, does Putin really want Iran to become a nuclear weapons state?

The point is that we are not without leverage in imposing consequences, and President Obama, having stated there will be a cost, must be certain that there is one. That is especially important for those in the Middle East watching the events in Crimea unfold. Presently, they see another example of Russia's readiness to defy international norms and act in the service of its power -- a currency that is often the only one that matters to most Middle Eastern leaders. They are acute observers of the balance of power. Many of our Middle Eastern friends believe that the U.S. is increasingly reluctant to act in the face of regional challenges that are shifting the balance of power against its friends and its interests in the area. Listening to Saudis, Emiratis, and Israelis these days can be an excruciating exercise in hearing criticism of America in retreat. One can challenge their perceptions and their conclusions but one cannot deny that these fears exist. No doubt that is perhaps the major reason that the President is now going to go to Saudi Arabia and will see not only the Saudis but other Gulf leaders as well.

This week the President will see Prime Minister Netanyahu, and while Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will form the centerpiece of their discussions, Ukraine, Crimea, and Russian behavior will be a sub-text. Will Iran see in Russian behavior an example that international norms mean little? They certainly mean nothing in Syria. Will they welcome the potential for a crisis between the U.S. and Russia assuming that this will permit them to exploit division within the Perm 5+1 in the negotiations? No doubt our need for a firm response on the Crimea and the possibility of fall-out on the Iranian issue will come up for discussion between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. Israel's prime minister and his Middle Eastern counterparts will favor a strong response on Crimea precisely because they are looking for signs that the U.S. will exercise power and leadership. Regardless of how Iran may seek to exploit any divisions at this juncture, most leaders in the Middle East will take comfort from signs of American decisiveness in responding to what is seen as a Russian provocation.

Many in the region now believe that the Russians (and the Iranians) act while we only warn. The answer is not for us to be mindless in responses and to make rash statements that we cannot fulfill. But it is to stake out meaningful positions and follow through on them. For now, the U.S. should be seen mobilizing a broad set of political and economic sanctions -- and material support for Ukraine. Helping Ukraine stabilize its economy will be a huge task but becomes all the more important now -- and sacrifices may be far easier to justify now in Ukraine than at any other time. Helping Ukraine will also be one answer to the Russians and a reminder of U.S. leadership, and that will be observed in the Middle East.

Knowing the Saudis have concerns about our decisiveness at this point does not mean we cannot challenge them as well. They want us to do more to change the balance of power in Syria, and to counter the Iranians there and in the region. And the Saudis -- who so oppose what the Russians are doing in Syria -- are doing very little practically to express that opposition. True, they will argue they cannot be a substitute for the United States, but this is hardly the time for the Saudis to be financing a \$3 billion package of Russian arms for Egypt. Few things more clearly signal that the Russians pay no price with the Arabs for helping to sustain Assad's war crimes against Syrian civilians.

Ironically, showing leadership now in our response to the Russian intervention in the Crimea is likely to get the attention of our friends in the Middle East. It cannot be a substitute for what we do in the Middle East, but it can open a new conversation with the Saudis and others. One in which we focus on what we can both do in Syria; how we can both act to ensure that Egypt does not become a failed state; and what we do if there is a nuclear deal with Iran and what we do if there is not. But launching a new conversation will be far harder if the U.S. does not appear to come up

with an effective strategy that imposes consequences for Putin's act of aggression against Ukraine.

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